—Patreon-exclusive copy—
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FATHER OF MONSTROSITY

I

She was gone and he was all alone, trapped in a maelstrom of people. People who were so tall, compared to him, that it was like a sea of moving trees with shoes clapping against the pavement in an ear-splitting cacophony.

He whirled around, trying to catch a glimpse of the blue skirt with flowers and the white-laced sandals that his mother had worn, but he could not see her at all. Tears ran down his cheeks as he realised that he was lost forever and would never feel her warmth again, but then he heard it, a voice calling his name.

"Jakob! Jakob, where are you!?"

"Mother! I'm right here!" he screamed back at the top of his lungs.

Suddenly he heard the sounds of someone running towards him, and the maelstrom of people within which he found himself started breaking apart, as his mother came to find him.

Just as he spotted her white-strapped sandals and bare legs amidst the forest of towering people, Jakob felt the ground drop away from under his feet and saw a darkness coalescing around him, robbing the world of light.

He seemed to fall for a long time in the pitch-blackness. The pull of gravity grew stronger-and-stronger, robbing him of the air in his lungs and threatening to tear him asunder. He would have cried out, had it not been impossible.

Jakob gasped in surprise as his feet found solid ground beneath them, and his knees buckled with impotent fright.

His vision returned, awakened by the dim light that met him. It stung his eyes as though he had been in that all-consuming dark for days.

With hooded eyes, he scanned his surroundings, immediately overwhelmed by the things that he saw. The scents and stenches of many things pleasant and abhorrent assailed his nostrils. The light that scarcely illuminated his surroundings seemed to grow directly from the walls, as though an invading fungus left to fester in the cracks between the large stones from which the room had been built.

Beneath him, where his knees rested on the cold and rough stones, was a slick and viscous black water that ever-so-slightly reflected the green, purple, and blue fluorescent hues of the fungus lights.

Then his ears seemed to regain their sense and he realised he was not alone, as a powerful rhythmic breathing came from a colossal shadow at his back, as well as the rare wheeze of something hidden in the darkness ahead. Too terrified to turn and confront the barely-perceived shadow behind him, he tried peering into the darkness beyond where he knelt.

It took a moment to notice, but then he saw that two big eyes reflected the fungus light back at him, like some enormous cat staring into his soul.

"*Heskel*," the voice intoned. "*Make sure the boy is not like the others*." Its strange magnanimous cadence made Jakob stiffen, though the meaning of the words were lost to him. The thrum of the words also left a strange ache in his chest.

A grunt of acknowledgement came from the shadow behind Jakob. Suddenly, two hands, powerful yet careful, lifted him from the ground, inspecting first his head, before moving on to his limbs and torso. When the hands turned him around to inspect him from the front, Jakob came face-to-face with his shadow.

A face like that of a man stared back at him, frozen in an archaic smile with closed eyes and a small nose. It took Jakob a moment to realise that what he saw was a mask, and he only noticed it in the dim light because of the small holes for the eyes, nose, and mouth.

Fresh horror flooded through his body as he took in the appearance of the hands that gripped him. There were five fingers, but each were covered in long spiralling patterns of stitched scar-tissue, and, though it was hard to tell in the dark, they had the colour of a bruise. The arms were worse, as they ranged from black to frost-pale, with greys and rotten-purple in-between. Each coloured segment of the arms seemed as though it had been sewed on to the previous bit, and, though they were proportionally similar, Jakob thought they looked like they might belong to many different people.

Heskel's torso and shoulders were covered in a sleeveless poncho of sorts, though it was made of a leathery material. This fabric too was stitched and multi-hued, as though created from a similar method as his arms.

Strangely, he seemed to Jakob to smell like a flower field. It was such a calming scent that it slowed Jakob's pounding heart and dispelled his gooseflesh.

"**Healthy,**" the masked creature gurgled.

With almost affectionate consideration, Jakob was placed back onto his feet gently and spun around to face the darkness and the reflective cat eyes within it.

"*At last,*" stated the voice, letting out a wheezing breath that clouded the air with particulates.

A mummified hand emerged from the dark, into the little light that Jakob had. It had seven fingers, two of them thumbs, and seemed utterly devoid of flesh.

"*Come forward my son, let me see you*."

As Jakob mindlessly obeyed, despite failing to comprehend the words, he heard the splash of the black water under his small shoes, tiny droplets spattering onto his lower legs where his shorts cut off. The fungus lights seemed to follow him with their faint illumination, and the pleasant scent of flowers left him.

When Jakob reached the many-fingered and enormous hand, his nose was stuffed with the cloying and heady scent of death and putrefaction. Vomit and bile raced up his throat as he took in the monster that hid in the dark. He screamed as four over-long mummified arms with seven fingers each grabbed hold of him and lifted him closer.

While his terrified shrieks echoed off the walls of the room, the mummified four-armed monster said in a comforting-yet-off-putting voice, "*You may call me Grandfather.*"

The next seven years in the tutelage under Grandfather were cruel and abominable, each fresh lesson under the *Fleshcrafter* taking with it a piece of Jakob's humanity.

Grandfather told him that he had been summoned from another world to become his apprentice, so, that when he eventually passed, his knowledge and laboratorium would not be lost. With the *Wight*, Heskel, as his constant shadow, Jakob was not given a choice in the matter and thus had from the age

of seven been taught how to perform Grandfather's Fleshcraft, in order to create purpose-built creatures for servitude, menial labour, and even combat.

Grandfather had first taught him how to dissect the creatures found within their private kingdom: the sewers of the metropolis known as *Helmsgarten*. These creatures ranged from the smallest critters like mice and rats, up to the child-sized abominations of Grandfather's previous experiments, and culminating in the vagabonds and outcasts that had been pushed off the metropolis' streets and forced to live in the highest reaches of the complex and multi-layered sewer canals.

Jakob's first successful creation, at the age of eleven, had been dubbed 'The Rat King' by Grandfather. It was an amalgamation of three rats, chosen specifically for their cannibalistic tendencies, their flesh bonded together to create one being with three separately-functioning brains within an enlarged cranium. It had four front legs and three tails, and quickly culled the nearby nests outside the lowest part of the sewers where Grandfather kept his sanctum and lab. The Rat King had proven to be incredibly unstable and feral, however, despite Grandfather's insistence that the bonding was perfect, and they eventually let it free to roam the canals, as it had twice escaped its enclosure and Grandfather wanted Jakob to move on to a new project.

Not long after his first success, he was pushed to experiment with the roaming abominations, but every time he tried to create something new from them, it seemed to fail. Though Grandfather was displeased, he said there was little that could be accomplished from tainted samples.

Occasionally, he was also sent out on hunts with the Wight and some of Grandfather's other creations and constructs. Their targets were most often the abominations too powerful to let roam but too unstable to control, but once they were also tasked with exterminating a sub-human species that Grandfather had left to breed unchecked.

Alongside the study of anatomy and how best to handle a knife when performing a dissection or disassembly of organic material, Jakob was also taught archaic magics, such as those that controlled blood and flesh or those that called upon Outer Beings for a drop of their power.

When he reached the age of thirteen, he encountered the first human of this new world. Heskel had captured one of the Vagabonds that lived in the upper sewers, and Grandfather oversaw Jakob's vivisection of the man. Though he performed every technique that he had been taught with perfection, the Vagabond died to traumatic shock before the operation could be completed.

Five more outcasts died in similar fashion, until Jakob successfully vivisected and reassembled a living person. Grandfather had one of his rare moments of praise, and declared that Jakob was finally ready to begin his practice in earnest.

He turned fourteen some months before the day when Heskel escorted him out of the sewers and into the slums of Helmsgarten. With no food, tools, or even money, Grandfather wanted Jakob to set up a laboratorium in the metropolis, with the goal of creating a creature equal to that of Heskel. The Wight was also given to Jakob as his *Lifeward*, to ensure his safety.

Heskel was the closest thing to a companion and friend that Jakob knew, and part of him even considered him somewhat of a father figure. His real parents, and the memories of them, were naught but mist in his recollection, as all his formative years had been spent mostly under the observant eye of Heskel as he practiced Grandfather's Fleshcraft.

The Wight, although crude in appearance, was one of Grandfather's greatest creations. He had been constructed from the corpses of seven different people and possessed an obedient disposition, a superhuman strength, and a quiet intelligence. Jakob had never seen what kind of face lay beneath Heskel's serene mask, but his curiosity had also not compelled him to find out. Some things were

better left unknown after all. What he did know from their constant companionship however, was that the Wight never ate, slept, or tired. He was more akin to an automaton than a person, though Jakob did not see it that way, nor did Grandfather, who shared more traits with the Wight than with his 'grandson'.

Emerging from a large outlet of the upper sewer canals, Jakob and Heskel came wading out of knee-deep muck and effluvia. The buildings surrounding the river of filth were four stories tall, and though Jakob had spent seven years secreted away in the bowels of the metropolis, the sight sparked some recollection from his childhood prior to being summoned by Grandfather. However, it was clear to his adolescent mind that this world was vastly different than the one he had come from.

With his tall Wight as a shadow, Jakob emerged from the sewage river, his stitched human-skin trousers shedding all that attempted to cling to it. Heskel wore only his sleeveless leather poncho, so the filth clung to his legs, though the stench was masked by his perpetual scent of flowers.

All around them, people milled the streets and tight alleyways with a strange sort of aimless wanderlust. It was the rare few people who did not appear as though they regularly bathed in the filth river. Rarer yet were the ones who even seemed to notice their passing.

"Tainted samples," Jakob muttered in disgust. Such creatures would be near-impossible to elevate to a higher lifeform, as their vitality seemed inadequate to survive beneath his knife. He had learnt this lesson well when he had worked on the sewer vagrants, however, he was appalled to find that those vagrants seemed far more vigorous than the denizens living above them.

Likely noticing Jakob's dismay that he would have to work with such terrible samples, Heskel grunted and said, "**Slum: tainted. Upriver seek.**"

Caught off-guard by one of Heskel's rare moments of advice, Jakob hesitated for a moment, before going over to one of the dismal stone bridges that spanned the filth river of the Slum. Tracing the path the river took upstream, he saw that far in the distance an entirely-different part of the metropolis existed. It was as vibrant as the Slum was filthy, and though he could not see any of its people, it seemed a sure thing that they would be possessed of more vigorous souls.

Jakob breathed a sigh of relief that there yet was hope for his nascent undertaking.

"Thank you, Heskel. Let us seek people more worthy of my knife."

After some hours, the sun had set as Jakob reached a wide section of the river where a large bridge, manned with people in leather-and-chainmail and armed with swords, blocked the passage into the metropolis beyond the Slum.

His eyes long adjusted to the darkness of the sewer, he did not need a torch to see his surroundings, but it seemed the guards were not like him, as his appearance into their torchlight elicited surprised gasps from the lot of them.

He was not self-aware enough to realise that it was not his sudden appearance that caused them alarm, but rather his attire of bruise-hued flesh-wrought hooded apron, trousers, boots, and gloves. Certainly, the red scent-mask, crafted and gifted to him by Grandfather, which covered the bottom-half of his face, two tube-pumps diagonally situated in the underside and venting his condensed breath in rhythm to his breathing, did not help.

"Halt..!" one of the men commanded uncertainly.

It took a second for Jakob's mind to register the different language to what Grandfather and Heskel spoke, but he had been taught well enough to have a grasp of its limited complexity.

"Do not bar my passage," he replied.

The guardsmen, of which there were five, exchanged glances, before the leader drew his blade from its scabbard. The rest followed his example.

Having already warded off several abominations and vagrants within the sewers, Jakob was not unused to such a situation, though his foes were better equipped. It mattered little however.

"Heskel."

The Wight emerged from the darkness, eliciting terrified gasps from the guardsmen, who seemed to not have noticed his presence until then. To their credit, they steeled themselves and charged towards the towering figure, blades held high.

Heskel was a musclebound giant compared to the guardsmen, as he stood almost two heads above them. With a single punch, he pulped the head of the lead guard, before blocking a slash with his left forearm, the blade not digging very deep. He grabbed his attacker's neck and snapped it with a simple twist, then took the blade from his forearm and carved through the third and fourth with such terrible strength that they fell into pieces.

"Disable the last, but leave him breathing!" Jakob quickly commanded, and Heskel stopped himself from decapitating the remaining guard, instead dropping the sword and grabbing the man by his arms and crushing the bones with his hands. The guardsman let out a sobbing scream of pain, but Heskel wasn't done, as he grabbed the man by his legs, flipping him upside down, before twisting both of his ankles so he could not run away. At this point, the guardsman had passed out from the pain, and the Wight laid him on the ground, knowing he could not escape.

Jakob pointed at the two men who had been carved into pieces, and said, "Throw those two in the river, we're bringing the rest."

From the cloth the guards had possessed, Jakob made a gag to shove into the mouth of his captive, lest his screams draw too much attention.

It had taken a while, but Heskel had brought the two corpses and their captive to an abandoned shed further into the residential area beyond the Slum gate-bridge.

When the captive guard came to, he whimpered in terror at the sight of Jakob carving into his dead friends to harvest their skin and organs.

"Do not fear," Jakob said in the man's tongue, "I will make you better."

His work complete, he stood up from his subject. Blood and effluvia lay in thick layers on the rough stone floor of the modest shed, but none stuck to Jakob. After all, his attire was purpose-made for such a task as he had just committed.

"What do you think?" he asked.

Heskel grunted in response.

"Quite right. It is far from my best work, but the sample is healthy enough and he will prove his worth I am sure."

With the materials provided by his dead comrades, the captive guard had been modified by Jakob. He had grafted two additional sets of bones and muscles onto the ruined man's arms and legs, using the improvised tools that Heskel had created from the items and materials they had harvested from the guards: sewing needles from bone splinters; string from interlaced and twined hair; rough, though not entirely dull, blades of various sizes from the broken fragments of two swords; as well as a small amount of magic.

The magic was a relatively new addition to Jakob's skillset, as Grandfather had not taught him the pertinent spells until he had turned ten. Mostly, the spells were of Necromantic tomes and Demonological ritual scripts.

Using *the Rite of Prolonged Life* Jakob had ensured the man's body would last far longer than naturally possible, as the kind of shoddy combination of materials drawn from incompatible donors as well as the terrible work conditions, would result in eventual rejection, necrosis, and sepsis.

To ensure a firm and instantaneous bonding of the forced grafts of bone, skin, muscle, and flesh, he had employed *the Amalgam Hymn*, which was a spell Grandfather had created himself through his long study of chimera creations and spell tomes so ancient that natural light would erase their writing.

Without needing to be commanded, Heskel had gathered the blood of the captive man in an improvised waterskin crafted out of the guards' leather armour. Jakob took the proffered leather satchel, the blood within sloshing about merrily, then he pulled out a necklace he had been allowed to bring from under his apron. It was a simple chain cord, though it had been crafted well, and was connected to a long and slender glass vial. The vial contained a tar-like substance that was so dark that it seemed to draw in light.

With practiced ease, Jakob pulled free its stopper and teased a tiny droplet from it and into the captive's blood. Then he put it away and took off his scent-mask, savouring the flavour of the stagnant and copper-tangy shed air. He bit down on his lower lip, until blood welled forth, and then let it fall freely from his chin and into the blood mixture as well. He wiped his mouth and chin, before putting the mask back on.

Stirring with a frayed bit of a leather strap, the mixture suddenly grew thick to a thick treacle-like consistency, and the red seemed to intensify.

Jakob knelt before the still-unconscious man, whose arms and legs bulged with newly-wrought potential. On the skin of his hollowed-out stomach, wherefrom liver, intestines, kidneys, and other non-essentials had been pulled, he painted with the frayed leather strap like a brush. With the blood mixture, Jakob drew the twin pentagrams and the twin signs of the Obedient Squire within them so that they overlapped. Given its usefulness for instilling a simple obedience within a subject, this was

a Demon sign that Jakob had already drawn many times before, to the point that he didn't need to check any of his linework.

"Was it the symbol of the Lord next?"

Heskel grunted disapprovingly.

"You're right. I forgot about the Contract symbol, didn't I?"

He moved on to the captive's bare chest and drew the Eye of the Watcher, which symbolised the unbreakable covenant between two parts. Grandfather told him that none could lie or cheat under the gaze of the Watcher, and thus its likeness was oft invoked in many Demonological rituals. It was drawn as a symbolic eye within two triangles that overlapped each other so that they formed a hexagram.

The Sign of the Lord he drew on the forehead of the man. Unlike the other two symbols, this one was quite simple: a trident with a circle halfway-down its length. Its simplicity was becoming of the irrefutable and undeniable power of the Lord.

Jakob stood back and observed his work.

"Heskel, if you wouldn't mind?"

The Wight grunted his assent and knelt before the captive, ensuring each sign sat where it should and was drawn with proper linework that showed no deviations nor breaks. After all, such errors could have devastating effects, with a backlash affecting the Invoker whose blood infused the paint.

After a few minutes, he stood back up and gave an affirmative nod.

"Excellent."

Jakob took off his skin glove and brought out the knife he had used to part the flesh of the subject prior. As he drew it slowly across his outstretched palm, he chanted in the lilting tongue of the Hellspawn.

"*Watcher, I beseech thee observe this rite. I beseech thee ensure its claim.*"

"*With this rite I lay claim to what I am owed as Lord. With this rite I enslave this soul to me.*"

"*Drawn in the blood of the Lord, the Watcher, and the Squire, render this my subject absolute.*"

Standing above the captive, Jakob felt the blood getting sucked out of the cut on his palm. Not a single drop hit the dirty stone floor as the Blood Toll was exacted. Though it felt like a spiked tongue was slithering up through his entire arm within, he bore the act with little issue, knowing that the ritual would not require more than a cup's worth of his lifeblood.

When the Toll had been exacted, the symbols drawn on the captive lit up in turn, starting with the sign of the Lord, then that of the Obedient Squire, and finally the Watchful Eye.

The very moment the glow subsided and the signs vanished, the captive spasmed awake.

"Your name," Jakob demanded.

As though some demonic entity lived within his throat, the freshly-wrought servant croaked out: "**...CALLUM.**" The bassy timbre of his new voice made gooseflesh ripple across Jakob's skin. It was an uncontrollable yet automatic response, as it recalled to him the guttural monotone of Raleigh, Grandfather's first successful grafting of a Demon soul to a human corpus.

Keeping his momentary discomfort from his voice, he continued his interrogation.

"Where do you live?"

"…**SLUM.**"

Jakob sighed. He had planned to use his new servant's home as his temporary base, until he secured a better foothold in Helmsgarten.

"If you live in the Slum, why do you work guarding it?"

"…**MONEY.**"

"Do you think it is too late to find another?" Jakob asked to Heskel, who, despite wearing the timid mask shared Jakob's body-language of frustration.

The Wight grunted indifferently.

"No, you're right, it would be a waste of time already invested… Callum. You will help me find a place nearby where I can work undisturbed."

"…**YES.**"

The servant immediately started out the door of the shed, Jakob and Heskel followed close behind.

Still dark out, the trio worked their way through the residential district, until suddenly they were hailed by a large group of guardsmen, numbering twelve in total.

"Who goes there!?" yelled the frontmost one, raising his torch above his head to cast its light towards them.

"**Too many,**" warned Heskel before Jakob could even give the order to attack. Without questioning the Wight's judgement, he made a quick decision.

"Callum, you can repay me by ensuring none may follow us. If possible, drag their attention away from us and towards the Slum."

There came a grinding and gnashing sound from the Servant, before he acknowledged:

"…**KILL.**"

As Callum charged the dozen guards, Jakob and Heskel hurried away down a nearby alleyway.

The Wrought Servant strode with thundering steps towards the guardsmen, each of his strides shattering the cobbles underfoot with their powerful tread.

As the naked monstrosity drew fully into their light, the guards drew back with muttered curses and prayers, before quickly recouping and meeting the stitched-up-and-twisted former guard with their swords. Some might even have recognised his disfigured face.

Striking one of Callum's reinforced arms, the first guard's blade bounced off on contact with the enlarged bone-mass that lay just beneath the tightly-wound skin. As the Wrought Servant flung out its other arm, one guard immediately collapsed with a shattered ribcage.

Without needing to communicate, the guards ringed around their foe, even as more of their numbers fell to its devastating punches, swings, knees, and kicks. Though the guardsmen only served the lowly Residential District, they had trained beyond Helmsgarten's walls, and fought sewer monsters before. Granted, they had never seen one so alike a human and yet so alien all at once, and the hesitations *that* caused led to the deaths of over half their group, before the Monstrosity lost its head to a well-timed sword swing.

Only an hour later, many Adventurers' Guild officials were on the scene, and guards from the Noble Quarter and Newtown were sent to reinforce the nearby barracks, as well as locking down all river crossings and gates leading out of the district.

"It seems I underestimated the city and its resources," Jakob considered, from their vantage on a nearby belltower of a modest church. Steam vented from his scent-mask, casting a stagnant smell of nutmeg and pine-resin into the wind, as he put away the telescope. He had swiped it from the windowsill of a nearby fisherman's house, demarcated as such by a sign that was halfway flaked off, but still legible read "*Siber Str… Fishmonge… Karl*", as well as by the tools of the trade strewn about his porch.

"Who do you think those people with the hats and capes are?" he asked Heskel, as he handed him the telescope. Though looking like a brute and certainly having the strength of one, the Wight was intelligent enough to operate tools and had an eidetic memory that made him the perfect attendant for navigating the city, not to mention as a laboratorium assistant.

"**Adventure Guild.**"

"What do they do?"

Instead of replying, the Wight pointed to a building beyond the river and gate-bridge leading north of the sewers and residential district. Jakob did not need a telescope to spot it, as it stood three stories tall with four large spires, each adorned with a green banner.

"So, they're an organisation of some kind?"

Heskel grunted affirmative.

"Why didn't Grandfather warn me of them?"

Another grunt, this time a disapproving one, returned to him.

"You're right. This is of course part of my training. Grandfather didn't warn me, because I need to learn things the hard way."

The pair sat in the belltower and watched the streets below and the commotion the Guild and new shiny guardsmen were causing within the district, as they tried their best to root out other creatures like Callum.

Half a day passed, until the sun was past its zenith, before some sense of normalcy returned to the streets of the Residential District, though, from keeping track of the gate-bridges with his spyglass, Jakob could tell they would be unable to leave this part of town by conventional means.

They eventually climbed down from the tower and church roof, in search of food, as Jakob's stomach was starting to hurt. He was not unused to the sensation, as part of Grandfather's training had been withholding food until he completed a certain task or as punishment if he erred in some way and earned his scorn. Nevertheless, he felt it imperative to nurture his body, lest its worsening state distracted him at an inopportune moment.

Heskel, being his superior in terms of not only physique but also the senses, easily steered them towards a part of the district that served as a large marketplace. Jakob took off his scent-mask so that he could register the smells on the wind, stowing it under his bruise-hued apron, where he kept the makeshift blades, as well as some choice materials he had harvested, as well as a few curious finds looted from the guardsmen the night before.

Letting his nose guide him, he eventually found his way to a stall outside a brick building wherein foodstuffs were made. On offer were both warm bread with a thick helping of jam, as well as some sweet-smelling hardtack-like crackers.

Jakob helped himself to a slice of warm bread, biting into it immediately, while grabbing a couple of the hardtack and stowing them away under his apron. The sweetness of the jam was almost too much for him, as he was more used to eating the bitter fungus that grew underground, as well as the fatty-and-spiced flesh of overgrown rats, and the bland corpse-meal which was the basis of his diet.

"Hey! You have to pay for that!" yelled a man in the crude *Novarocian* tongue with all its plosives and rough pronunciations.

Jakob looked to Heskel, hoping for an explanation. The Wight got in front of him instead, holding out an arm to stop the large baker from reaching Jakob. Even tall and fleshy, the baker was still a head below Heskel, and the large, scarred, and discoloured giant made him halt immediately.

Poking his head out from behind his Lifeward, Jakob asked the baker, "What do you mean by *pay*?"

The baker sighed, but then explained. "I don't know where you're from, kiddo, but we use *Novarins* here. They come in four variations and sizes, with their value on the face of the coins."

This sparked a realisation in Jakob, and he quickly withdrew a sack from under his apron. It jingled with the metal bits inside. As he held out the blood-spattered sack to the man, he reached in with a meaty paw and withdrew four coins, three of which were small and one a bit larger.

"The bread is four Novarins, the hardtack is two. Since you took one slice of bread and two hardtack that makes eight. These are three Ones and one Five value coins." He then held up the coins, pointing at them, and repeating, "Eight."

Jakob nodded thoughtfully. "What an amusing system," he said to Heskel in *Chthonic*, startling the man before them. It was a forceful language, so the reaction was to be expected from a lowborn creature such as the baker was. The man ought to consider it a privilege to hear it spoken before him, but alas its greatness was lost on his simple mind.

Grandfather had taught him many things, least of which were the many languages he could expect within the Metropolis and beyond. The common Novarocians apparently only spoke their own language, but people of higher standing could be expected to speak as many as four, as they often had to deal with the peoples beyond their nation's borders. Chthonic was however considered to be a dead language, but Grandfather had insisted he learn it first and make it the core of all the others, as they stemmed from its roots. He had been fluent in it since the age of nine. By the age of ten, he could speak twelve additional languages, as all were like child's play when compared to the Chthonic tongue. If learning the languages of this world were like solving puzzles, then Chthonic was a skeleton key.

Jakob did not give much thought to the fact that his mother-tongue had been lost to him. It seemed an easy compromise in the face of survival, and he had learnt quickly that adaptation was paramount to endure Grandfather's lessons.

They wandered through the market, taking in the many stalls. To Jakob's chagrin, none dealt in the sort of wares he sought most: demon's blood; bloodsuckle root; bones; organs; slaves; or anything even remotely useful. There were crude trinkets aplenty however.

"How fitting," he said acidly.

Heskel grunted in amusement.

"The metal is worth more unworked than what they reduce it to. Rings, necklaces, earrings, and so many other meaningless baubles. What worth is there in such items when they have not a spec of magic to them?"

"**Blame not the beast**…" Heskel intoned, as though reciting some poem. But it was not a poem he was reciting, rather, it was a phrase that Grandfather was wont to say.

Though momentarily wrongfooted by Heskel's talkativeness, Jakob finished the sentence: *"…for its beastly flesh and beastly ways.*"

Jakob woke up, curled within the embrace of Heskel, who had moved them to some alleyway when he had suddenly become too tired to function. Though he had long since learnt the skill of staying awake for days on end, the new environment and excitements had worn him down quicker than anticipated.

He stood up, stretching his spindly limbs, then looked at his Lifeward as he adjusted his flesh robes.

"We need to find a place where I can operate in quiet. The first Wrought Servant clearly did not live up to my expectations, but I take the blame for it, as my workmanship was rather hastily done."

Heskel arose from the cobbles as well, grunting in agreeance.

"**Shelter seek,**" he replied.

"Indeed we must."

Jakob had only been walking down the street for a few moments, when a large woman, with brown hair in a bun and a flour-stained grey apron, called out to him.

"Hey, *Boy*! Are you an Alchemist?"

He immediately halted and turned towards the woman.

"How did you know?" he asked her incredulously. Alchemy was one of the many vocations Grandfather extolled and it had been required learning since Jakob had been seven.

"So you are an Alchemist then? Follow me, and be quick about it."

Heskel grunted a warning, but, with a single glance, he was mollified and followed as Jakob accompanied the woman into the bakery from where she had appeared.

Inside, two other women, skeletal when compared to the large apron-wearing lady, were leaned over a man with a face void of colour and a purple swelling all up his right arm and shoulder. From the colour, which was a reddish-purple akin to the *Loathsome Leecher* toadstools that grew in the middle layers of the sewers, Jakob could tell that some manner of infection or poison was in his system, and had been for a long while.

Without needing to examine him further, Jakob told them, "He will die when it reaches his brain. Perhaps he will live another day, or maybe two."

One of the women immediately fainted upon hearing this, while the large one pleaded with him.

"You must be able to fix it!"

"I can fix it," Jakob replied, "but I do not have the facilities to do so, as I am without a laboratorium."

"The only available space I know of, is our basement. We mostly keep flour and yeast down there."

"How big is it?"

After having Heskel move around the sacks of flour, as well as the miscellaneous stuff the bakery had stored there, Jakob had a decently-sized workspace. Using some of the discarded planks and broken chairs, Heskel quickly constructed a surface on which to lay the sick man. It was in essence just a low table.

While the Wight continued setting up the various things that were needed, Jakob bent over the man on his worksurface, cutting away his grimy blouse to reveal his torso and arms completely. On his forearm were a few distinct, yet barely perceivable, punctures, like those from a rodent bite.

"When was he bitten?" Jakob asked the large woman, who was the only one that had remained to watch him and Heskel set up the laboratorium.

"Bitten?" she asked, confused. Then recollection seemed to come to her. "Oh! It was four days ago. He came in to work complaining that some kind of cat with barely any hair had nipped him when he tried to pet it."

"What is a cat?" he asked Heskel.

"**Big rat: hunt small rat,**" he replied, also in Chthonic.

Jakob nodded thoughtfully. "A bigger rat, but with smaller and shaper teeth. Peculiar. Why would anyone try to pet one?"

The Wight grunted indifferently.

The large lady, whom Jakob had learnt was the owner of the bakery, looked between them. "Are you out-of-towners?"

"I need vessels," he replied, not deigning her question with an answer. "Big ones, either metal or ceramic. They need to be water-tight. And bring the other two back with you."

Not questioning this demand, the owner left with waddling steps, going up the stone steps to the ground floor above, yelling at the two other women.

"Should I actually bother to save him?" Jakob asked the Wight as soon as they were alone.

"**Keep as cover: fool guards.**"

"Do we have enough for four *Rituals of Abeyance*?"

Heskel grunted in the negative.

"Three?"

The Wight nodded.

"Just barely enough then. We shall have to find more Demon's Blood in the city. I am loathe to summon a demon like Grandfather is wont when supplies run low."

Just then the Lady came back down, with her two assistants in tow, all of them carrying bowls of cast-iron and crude ceramic. One balked at the sight of the man lying shirtless on the impromptu table, dropping a small vessel that shattered into many shards.

"Get a hold of yourself, Lisbeth! This young Alchemist has assured us he will cure him."

The girl, Lisbeth, nodded meekly. This was the same woman who had fainted earlier.

Jakob pointed to Lisbeth with a finger.

"That one we strip for parts, the rest we submit to the ritual."

Heskel nodded in command, while the three women looked between them in confusion, not recognising the danger they were suddenly in. If Jakob had not been a sheltered boy raised by monsters and a mad Fleshworker, then perhaps he would have blamed them for the situation they now found themselves in: after all, they had let in a masked boy dressed in off-putting clothes and a giant with abnormally large muscles and discoloured-and-scarred skin. As it were, Jakob did not think of much beyond his goal. When Grandfather asked, he obeyed. Everything else was inconsequential.

The trio barely had time to react as Heskel strode across the stone floor of the basement, grabbed Lisbeth's neck in his enormous fist and snapped her spine. With skill borne of experience, he palmed first the owner in the temple, then the other assistant. Both immediately fell to the ground, unconscious. Heskel was a monster of supernatural strength, but his true talent lay in his ability to utilise everything from a minute fragment of that strength and up to steel-bending power. Thus, he

was capable of knocking unconscious a person with the most limited amount of trauma inflicted on their brains and skull structure. Granted, it was never a sure thing, but so far Jakob had not witnessed Heskel accidentally kill someone when he intended to subdue them.

"Before we begin, tie them up and secure the upstairs area so no one will disturb us."

The Wight assented, and they set to work.

After finalising the first two rituals, Jakob had Heskel undo the restraints on the owner and the assistant baker.

"What are your names?"

"Ehlo," said the owner.

"Katja," followed the assistant.

Jakob noted the lack of vocal interference, like what he'd experienced with Callum upon his recreation.

"Why are their voices normal?" he asked Heskel. It was not that it disappointed him, but being of a curious mind, such abnormalities needed proper examination lest they go unaddressed and lead to future problems.

The Wight shrugged, much to Jakob's chagrin.

"I will have to conduct more tests then."

He returned his focus to the two Wrought Servants, ensuring he properly intoned his following command in Novarocian.

"Ehlo, Katja. You will return to your normal functions within this store above, making sure none may learn about my laboratorium down here. If necessary, you will give your lives to allow myself and Heskel to make good our escape, should we be discovered."

"Yes, my Lord," both immediately replied.

Jakob smiled humourlessly behind his scent-mask. It was a strange quirk of the Ritual of Abeyance, and any other type of subjugation spells he knew of, that the individuals internalised the subservient bond in terms that they themselves could comprehend. The rats of the sewer viewed him as their Broodlord when he had first tested the ritual on them. The vagrants of the upper sewer saw him more as a Demigod however. It seemed to the working peasants of the residential district that Jakob was some sort of aristocrat or royalty deserving of unquestioning obedience.

If such a thing as a subservient Demon was a possibility, he wondered what form its adulation would take. Even Raleigh, Grandfather's longest-serving Demonic servant, viewed himself as an equal to his creator, and above the station of Jakob. Demon's were not controlled, only bartered and dealt with through thoroughly-written contractual bonds.

"Now for the last one."

Opting for a different approach to that of Callum, Jakob remade the poisoned man as an unassuming monster. It seemed quite obvious in hindsight that blending in was a prerequisite to going unnoticed within Helmsgarten. Though it minimised the maximum potential strength, he redesigned the man's new shoulder and right arm with hollow compartments hiding blades that could be released with the use of certain additional muscle groups, such as with his right hand, where flexing the pinkie finger and thumb would release claws from within the back of the hand. Ultimately, these new organic weapons would not stand up to fighting against blades nor armour, but their discreet nature insured that the fight would be over before the opponent had the chance to adequately defend themselves. At least that was thought.

"What do you think?" Jakob asked the Wight.

Heskel nodded thoughtfully.

"Better?"

"**Creative,**" he replied.

It was a rare compliment of a servant who had served his Grandfather and first-hand seen the brilliant Fleshcrafting Master perform his figurative, and literal, magic.

Jakob was about to begin the Ritual of Abeyance, when the reformed man started suddenly coming out of his induced coma.

"Restrain him," he ordered, and the giant quickly placed his hands on the thrashing body.

While the subject stirred violently under the grip of Heskel, Jakob did his best to draw out the three necessary signs for the ritual.

Without warning, the air started vibrating, and a sickening purple light grew from Heskel's fingers where he gripped the man by the forehead.

"***Shackle!***" he roared in a distorted voice, and the struggling man fell still in an instant, as though the life had been snuffed from him.

The Wight looked up at him, blood leaking from under the timid mask he wore and the tips of his fingers vomiting thick tendrils of smoke from the magical backlash.

"**Hurry,**" he said.

Jakob immediately wiped out the signs and started redrawing them with the utmost haste, though without compromising the lines nor proportions. As he worked, he could not help but wonder at the Wight's hitherto-unknown knowledge of incantations. He doubted that even Grandfather was aware of *this side* of Heskel. The thought of it made his head throb.

After he finished the symbol of the Lord, Jakob triple-checked every line. Heskel still had his hand on the forehead of the subject, and the other on his torso. As Jakob checked the sign of the Lord, he saw that the tips of the Wight's fingers were quietly smouldering as though touching burning coal. The stench they gave off were like burnt hair and ash.

Jakob stood back, grim determination on his sweaty brow, and prepared for the ritual. Just then, the man started stirring.

Closing his eyes and hoping his lines were true, he began the ritual.

"*Watcher, I beseech thee observe this rite. I beseech thee ensure its claim.*"

The man started shaking violently.

"*With this rite I lay claim to what I am owed as Lord. With this rite I enslave this soul to me.*"

Shaking turned to trashing, and Heskel had to force the subject back down on the makeshift table as he tried to reach for Jakob, the claws in his arm springing forth.

"*Drawn in the blood of the Lord, the Watcher, and the Squire, render this my subject absolute.*"

As Jakob finished the last syllable and opened his eyes, the man freed himself from under Heskel's grip and was a hand's breadth from Jakob's throat with the claws of his remade arm. Then he simply retracted his weapons and sat back down on the table edge.

"**COMMAND ME…**" he said, eye-to-eye with the diminutive Jakob even sitting down.

"What is your name?"

"**HOLM…**"

"This one has the same voice as Callum," Jakob remarked.

Heskel let out a tired grunt of acknowledgement. It seemed the ordeal had quite spent his reserves.

"Holm. I command you find me a man of lithe build who is past adolescence. Once you find one, report to me. Use only the power I have granted you when deemed absolutely necessary. Ensure that

you do not capture the eye of the guards, though if you do, eliminate any that try to follow you. Lastly, stay within this district."

"**YES LORD…**" Holm obeyed, then stood up and went upstairs after putting on the discarded tunic they had removed from Lisbeth before dismembering her to rebuild his arm and shoulder.

IV

The following week, Jakob worked diligently in his laboratorium. At night, he and Heskel would venture out of the basement in search of materials to add to their steadily-growing supply of flasks, alembics, needles, saws, knives, vessels for storing organs and other harvested material, miscellaneous parts, plants for alchemy, and, most importantly, new subjects.

All while bolstering their new base, they awaited the return of Holm. They knew from observing the guards and utilising their servants in the bakery, that the Wrought Servant had yet to be caught. Thus far, Jakob was pleased with his ingenuity, though he grew restless waiting.

In the meantime, he experimented with new ideas. He was limited by his lack of Demon's Blood, as it remained the core catalyst for most Demonological rituals and spells. But working around such limitations was something he had long since learnt under Grandfather's tutelage. At the age of twelve, he had been sent out into the sewers alone to find a place for a new laboratorium that he had to build from what he found within the sewer. He had been at a loss for the first couple of days, until he came upon the idea that, in the absence of wood and other building materials, he could scavenge the local wildlife and utilise their bones and hides. Though crude and wretched-smelling, Grandfather had been quite pleased with the result.

Jakob thought back fondly on that moment. Praise was hard-won from his surrogate parent, so every instance was one he cherished.

Suddenly, he was pulled from his reverie by a commotion upstairs.

"Unhand me, you cretin!" came a voice slick with conceit.

There followed a bustle, as the *whatever-it-was* came down the stairs to the basement.

A man in fancy clothes was tossed before Jakob's workstation, where a half-dissected cat lay open, its skin pulled aside on needles hammered into the tabletop.

"Holm." Jakob was simultaneously furious and elated at the development. "I told you that you should first see me, before you acted!"

The Wrought Servant looked him in the eyes, then down at the man slowly lifting himself off the floor. The bone blades and claws sprung out of his right arm, but, before he could act, Heskel put a firm hand on his shoulder. Though Holm was tall, he was still beneath the towering Wight.

"Thank you, Heskel. Holm, you may leave us. Ensure that we remain undetected, and then stay within the bakery until I call on you again."

"**YES LORD…**"

As the Wrought Servant retreated upstairs, Jakob regarded the man kneeling before him. Though Holm had failed to fully comprehend his instructions, he had brought him exactly what he was seeking. The man, though haughty by the looks of him, had a build that spoke of untapped acrobatic potential.

"Who are you! I demand you let me leave!"

Jakob let out a puff of spent breath from his mask, his eyes sparkling with ideas.

With a simple nod, he bid Heskel prepare the subject.

After the lengthy dissection and dismantling, where Jakob took care not to ruin the superb sample he was dealing with, his final concept had formed in his mind's eye. He had never thought to use the captured man as yet another servant, but rather to utilise his physique and innate litheness to aid Jakob as a sort of semi-living tool. Grandfather was quite fond of his repertoire of self-thinking additional

limbs, and Jakob, ever the aspiring student, sought to imitate this, while still retaining his own flair. After all, Grandfather extolled ingenuity and individuality, viewing plagiarism and copying as the death of creativity.

With reverent care, he laid out the skin that he had purposefully cut and stitched to produce a long sleeve, even before his final idea had formed. Within it, he lined up bones from his subject, starting with the femur, the largest and thickest of the lot, and continuing down the length of the skin with continually-smaller bones, ending in all three phalanx bones of the subject's index finger. Afterwards, he artfully recreated the ligaments between each of the joints, ensuring minimal rotational stress and maximal flexibility. He was fortunate that his subject was such a perfect specimen, since, with a normal corpus, the rate of deterioration with such a flexible semi-living appendage would require near-daily maintenance.

He considered how, despite failing to accurately comprehend his commands, Holm had indeed brought him exactly what he had required. As Grandfather always said, you could not blame a beast for its beastly ways. A Wrought Servant was limited by its capabilities prior to subjugation, meaning an illiterate person turned servant would remain as such. It was of course possible to improve on the knowledge and comprehension of a Wrought Servant, but the time spent doing it would make it ineffective, when a better subject for subjugation could be found instead.

The alternative to a servant like *that* was to insert the soul of a demon into their body instead, as these were superhuman creatures of boundless wit and inventiveness, who would accrue knowledge and grow all by themselves. Granted, this trait also made such servants unpredictable and dangerous, requiring dozens of warding spells to limit just how free they were allowed to be. Raleigh, Grandfather's Demon servant, was covered from scalp to sole in runes and sigils, all to prevent him from escaping his bond of servitude. And yet, the creature retained much of his independence and personality. The prospect of such a servant terrified Jakob quite a bit.

After laying the final tendon, Jakob moved on to inserting the muscles. He was generally more proficient with splicing flesh than muscle, but with Heskel's oversight, the result was near perfection. It took close to half the afternoon, but when he finally stitched shut the skin around his creation, he felt an immense sense of accomplishment. To date, it was his most intricate creation, but though the fleshwork was over, it still needed several spells to become functional.

As Jakob stared at the two-and-a-half-metre-long appendage on his worksurface, he considered the order of the spells he needed, before proceeding with the necromantic *Reanimation Rite*. The new limb had no veins, as *such* were not required for an undead limb to function, but, in the future, he considered trying to recreate the appendage with a fully-living brain, heart, and digestive system to sustain itself. Even Grandfather struggled with such creations, so he would surely praise him if he could pull it off. That being said, aside from the appendage before him, Jakob's knowledge only really extended to modifying and combining creatures and humans, not making them from scratch or forcing unnatural life to occur. Such an undertaking would require a level of skill he did not yet possess, but with enough practice and experimenting, anything was possible.

Eventually, he settled on the order of spells, starting with the *Rite of Prolonged Life*, and, though it was a common staple of nearly every single one of his creations, he did not require the *Amalgam Hymn* for his creation, as Heskel had helped ensure the stitching and bonding of the many joints of bones were flawless.

Using a cup of his own blood, which he poured over the appendage as he moved down its length and sang the *Hymn of the Safeguarding Dependant*, he enforced within the appendage the bond between them and made it view him as its heart, which it must protect at all cost. Even though it was

not yet unliving, the limb immediately started twitching and squirming with every tiny impulse he sent it. It was quite possible to already use the appendage in its current state, but it would require a lot of concentration and mastery, and Jakob wanted a tool to assist him without his need for supervision.

Like the *Amalgam Hymn*, the *Hymn of the Safeguarding Dependant* was another of Grandfather's spells. All of his unique and purpose-made spells centred around a lost technique of magic, *Chthonic Hymnals*. The songs of the ancient language were longwinded and complex, as opposed to the more traditional magic spells featuring fairly-simple incantations and ritualistic symbols, but they could be easily adapted to all manner of purposes. Using them in any combat setting was a terrible idea though, even despite the fact that Grandfather's Hymnal repertoire included a few quite destructive songs, like *Implosion*, *Unravelling*, *the Hymn of Devouring Madness*, and quite a few other ones that Jakob had yet to learn.

He finished his preparations with two Necromantic rites, *Ironflesh* and *Unbreakable Bones*. True to their names, they ensured the skin of the appendage was resistant to damage and that the bones would not easily break. The combination of both ensured that, if necessary, the new limb would be quite useful in a fight, should Jakob need it. Their drawbacks only really extended to living beings, as Ironflesh could cause living flesh and skin to necrose and tear, and Unbreakable Bones tended to cause things like bone spurs that were debilitatingly painful, according to Grandfather, who, decades prior, had made the mistake of assuming a living body could also benefit from Necromancy.

After a short break, where they ate some of the baked goods Jakob's new servants had created, Heskel showed him how to set up the *Reanimation Rite*. It would be his first time ever performing it, so he had to rely on the Wight's extensive knowledge of Necromancy.

They had to move a lot of the flour sacks to create ample floorspace for the hexagram. Using bonedust and charcoal, Heskel outlined the six corners and lines between, after which he drew within its confines first a circle, then the *Eternal Serpent* along its insides, and then another circle within which they curled up the appendage, like a massive snake imitating the iconography surrounding it.

Though often associated with skulls, the being whose power was invoked for Necromantic rituals, was the ever-growing and ever-self-devouring Eternal Serpent. Its continual existence was the foundation upon which undeath was made possible, as well as the inherent magic of certain demons. Jakob did not fully comprehend how such a thing made sense, but he had never worked up the confidence to ask Grandfather for a deeper explanation.

The Eternal Serpent was one of the few *Great Ones Above* that did not belong in the fold of the Watcher's vassals. Such was its tremendous power and influence that it stood alone besides the Mightiest of the Entities to whom humans and their planets were but motes of errant dust.

Heskel continued and drew three words along the circle that confined the serpent, and which in turn confined the appendage. Each was written in the phonetic Block-Script of the Necromantic Cult, from whom Grandfather had long ago obtained the many rites and spells he had passed on to Jakob and which Heskel had naturally absorbed in his long service to the Fleshcrafter. He wondered just what sort of price Grandfather had paid in return.

The Wight stood up from his task, and then pointed to each of the strange words in succession:

"**Servant. Protector. Extension of Self.**"

To Jakob's knowledge, *Necroscript*, as was its shorthand, was similar to Chthonic Hymnals, in that it could be modified to suit very specific tasks, though, in Necromantic rites, this was in the form of adding the block script to the ritual circles or vessels for the spells. He knew that, if he became

proficient with the script, he would be able to modify many of his most-commonly-utilised rites. It was on his list of things he still needed to learn, though it seemed to be a list that grew exponentially with every new fragment of knowledge he obtained.

After the Necroscript came the tallow candles of human fat. These were candles that, just by their heretical nature, contained potent magic, though they were arduous to produce. Fortunately, they had prepared several in the previous week. Without needing the Wight to tell him, Jakob placed one at each of the six corners of the hexagram. He first assumed that he needed to light the candles, but Heskel stopped him with a hand.

"**Kneel. Repeat spell.**"

A bit confused, but compliant nonetheless, Jakob knelt before the hexagram, the stitched-flesh apron cushioning his knees on the hard stone floor. Heskel then took Jakob's hands, placing them on two of the six corners, so that the candles there sat between his thumbs and index fingers.

Then the Wight started chanting, with Jakob repeating in a sort of canon-singing. The words were meaningless to him, but he made sure to enunciate them clearly, and, before long, the air became charged with potential energy. Suddenly, the six candles all lit up with a pale flame that was a hazy blue at its fringes and a pure white within.

The flames of the candlewicks grew-and-grew, reaching near to the ceiling and then curling inwards, like serpents seizing the still-laying appendage within. The flames struck the coiled appendage the exact moment Jakob intoned the final verse. Immediately, the flames disappeared, leaving not even smoke nor the smell of burnt tallow. Shortly after, the appendage within unfurled like the imitation snake that it was, squirming anxiously, before slithering to where Jakob knelt and coiling about his body.

"It's perfect."

After sewing the new appendage to the back of his flesh apron, he now had a tail that moved around and could hand him tools with a single thought, or helped hold whatever he needed it needed it to. It was easily the single-most important thing he had ever created, though much of its design had been possible only with the help of Heskel.

"What do you think?" he asked the Wight, as the tail coiled around his waist, which seemed its preferred resting place when not in use.

Heskel nodded solemnly. "**A man is no more than the tools in his belt.**"

It was yet another of Grandfather's many sayings, but Jakob knew it was meant as a compliment.

"Now. How about we try to find some way out of this district?"

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

That night, Jakob left the bakery basement with Heskel and Holm in tow. As they traversed the district, they kept well-clear of any guards, by relying on Heskel's superior sense of hearing and by keeping well clear of any light sources. It made the going slow, but was well worth it when they reached the gate-bridge uncontested, as fledgling sunrays stained the dark sky.

Leaving his servants out of sight, Jakob slowly started to approach the guards stationed on the bridge and in front of it. He had already decided what approach to take, hedging his bets that it would make it unclear what had happened, as opposed to the obvious signs a normal attack would leave. And while the guards and the Guild tried to figure out the cause, he would hopefully already have a new laboratorium underway.

But part of it was also because he wished to try *this* particular spell. So, while it was a decision calculated prudently, it could simply be called an experiment as well. Efficiency was one of Jakob's fortes and his ability to exploit a situation to its fullest potential was why Grandfather had thought him ready to leave his sewer kingdom.

The spent condensation of his scent-mask sprayed to either side of him as he took it off. The stagnant smell of nutmeg and pine-resin hung like a fog about him, while he ran the back of his hand over his moist nose and mouth. Then he raised his right hand towards the guards, beginning his Hymn.

"*All eyes avert thy gaze from the Great One Above!*"

The guards clearly heard him and though they at first looked ready to draw their weapons, they quickly stopped and began laughing at the strange boy with his strange robes singing in his strange language.

"*Look not upon its visage, burn not thy eyes on its glare, flay not thy skin to escape its grip, bite not thy fingers to flee its temptation, fling not thy soul into its maw! Do not look above!*"

More of the guards came from the bridge itself to view the performance by the strange boy. Some had stopped laughing, while others found it to be the pinnacle of hilarity. Some thought it had a quaint sort of charm to it, others found it grating on the ears.

"*Feel its gaze bristle thy skin, feel its glare burn the hairs on thy scalp, feel its tempting snare. Grab hold of its offering!*"

A million pinpricks stung every microscopic section of Jakob's skin and a heavy pressure fell on his shoulders, threatening to force him to the ground. Suddenly they all fell silent, a dull look to them. Perhaps they felt what he felt or perhaps they experienced something entirely different.

Jakob drew in a deep breath, and then shouted the final verse.

"*Behold! The Great One Above bears witness!*"

As one, the assembled guards, some twenty men in total, tilted their eyes to the sunrise-stained sky. Jakob looked at the ground instead, knowing that even he, as the Invoker of the spell, was not beyond the powers he had called upon.

Screaming and wailing rent the air. Despair, sadness, anger, guilt, and more; all of these feelings were evoked in the guards as they beheld the Great One Above, in the short moment it trained *one* of its uncountable and terrible eyes upon them; upon the entire district and its environs.

The Watcher of Worlds was almost exclusively invoked as an observer that would ensure the claim made in ritualistic contract, but for such proceedings it was only drawn with a single eye, despite the fact that it had as many eyes as there were motes of dust in all the many realms combined.

Grandfather said that each eye of the Watcher served a different function, but most could be invoked to cause a profound madness in all that took in its visage.

Though it was the first time Jakob had ever used the *Hymn of Devouring Madness*, he had observed Grandfather perform a similar spell on a smaller scale, and the subject it was inflicted upon had quickly torn itself apart to escape whatever it had seen.

As he looked up from the ground, knowing that the Great One Above was gone from the sky, he froze in terror of what he had caused, the realisation hitting him so profoundly that he felt as though he had powers he could never hope to deserve. It seemed to him to be the ultimate hubris that a mere mortal like him could manifest an impossible being such as the Watcher in *such* a way.

Jakob was not a squeamish person, hardened by the sights he had seen and the things he had endured under Grandfather's tutelage, but he had never before witnessed such utter devastation. The guards had become abominable beings. Their eyes were smoking and bleeding, a couple even burning with fat yellow flames. Arms and legs all had broken, repaired themselves, and broken again, to such an extent that the limbs were so misshapen and alien that it was difficult to look at for more than a few moments. Some had gone the route of the subject Jakob had seen Grandfather inflict madness on: biting off their fingers, flaying their own skin with their nails, gouging out their smouldering eyes, or bashing their heads against the stone of the gate and the bridge. Others turned their madness on each other, laying in with savage swipes of distended fingers adorned with claw-like nails that had in an instant grown to four times their usual length.

Blood, intestines, organs, skin, flesh, fat, and effluvia all coated the bridge, as the guards continued their destructive behaviour, all the while screaming and wailing incoherently, with vocal cords turned to demonic instruments by what they had seen.

"**Hurry.**"

Jakob snapped out of his reverie and quickly followed behind Heskel, who was dragging an unconscious Holm by his hair. One of the Wrought Servant's eyes was melted away, but it seemed Heskel had managed to prevent Holm from going entirely into the embrace of madness. He realised that he had never told the Servant to avert his gaze, but had just assumed he would follow the example of Heskel. It was a lesson in not expecting the unsaid to be obeyed.

With a few strikes and throws, Heskel cleared the way for them. Jakob's new tail quickly proved its worth as it kept at bay the few mad guards who leapt for him, slapping them so hard their skulls caved in and their spines snapped.

Holm's head had been bound with some cloth, to prevent his eye from developing an infection, as the three moved through the Market West District. Its location next to the Residential District and the Slum, meant that it had far seedier traders and clientele than some of the more upstanding parts of the city, but *this* was exactly what Jakob was after.

He was still quite shaken by the Hymn and its aftermath, and he could tell that even Heskel was bothered by it. Unlike most other offensive spells and invocations that Jakob knew, the *Hymn of Devouring Madness* could not be utilised in the sewers, as it depended upon the open sky. Lesser versions of the Hymn could manifest the Watcher in the mind's eye of the target, but a physical manifestation required a visible sky above. When Grandfather had taught him the Hymn, he had never mentioned the devastation it would conjure up, but had instead focused solely on stating its requirements and Toll.

Like most spells, Hymns required a Toll of one form or another, though they were generally quite bizarre and esoteric, such as: the saddest memory of the target; two-thirds' of the air in the invoker's lungs; or a three-day-long coma with mind-shattering nightmares.

With *Devouring Madness* it was straight-forward, however, as the Toll was the turmoil it caused. This meant that if nobody was affected by it, the Invoker would incur the backlash and no doubt kill himself as a result. Grandfather had been quite clear in ensuring that Jakob knew this fact, as well as that he knew not to look upon what he invoked, as, without proper protection, he too could fall victim to it, even if the requisite Toll was paid.

While Grandfather was harsh and ensured Jakob made his own mistakes, so that he may best learn the lessons and imprint them on his soul, he was not so callous nor uncaring that he would not warn his apprentice of mistakes that could only be made once. If he had not cared, he obviously would not have gifted Heskel as a Lifeward to Jakob, to ensure his apprentice would have ample room to err, without suffering greatly as a result.

They continued deeper into Market West, passing a dozen people who had looked to the sky at the same time as the guards and suffered similar fates. Unsurprisingly, all but one were dead, the remnant being restrained by four guards while his wife and kids looked on in horror.

"**Hymn dangerous.**"

"You're right. I wonder just how widespread its effect was felt. That said, did you see the instant transformation?"

Heskel grunted affirmative.

"If I could harness that power somehow…"

Before he could finish the thought, his sense of smell drew him towards a little flower stall. His scent-mask hung behind his flesh apron, as he had been too distracted to put it back on after the gate-bridge.

He continued sniffing the air, tasting the scent that called to him. As he inspected the various flowers on display, the man behind the stall focused mostly on Holm and Heskel.

"What happened to your friend?" he asked in Novarocian. "Was he attacked by *one of them*?"

Heskel grunted.

"Terrible thing that was," he went on. "I won't easily forget those screams, I tell you that."

Jakob looked up from where he was crouched, holding the stem of a grey-blue flower in-between the fingers of his glove. Its petals curled slightly inward like a half-made ball of blue. "What is this flower called?"

"That there is a *Misty Reminiscence*. Strike your fancy does it?"

"I'll buy them all," Jakob said, hefting a bouquet of the flowers in his left glove and offering up his coinpurse with the other. It was still spattered with blood, but in the week's time that had passed since he had acquired it, the blood had turned from a dark-red to a rusty-orange.

If he thought anything about the disturbing sack of coins, the Florist said nothing of it. Instead he gleefully dove his hand in and withdrew several of the big coins.

"I get it now!" Jakob exclaimed in Chthonic, startling the Florist into dropping a coin to the cobbles underfoot. "It's like the Blood Toll!"

Heskel nodded sagely.

Holm bent down to grasp the coin as it rolled between his boots. As he lifted it up between his fingers, he stared at it longingly for a moment before putting it back into Jakob's coinpurse.

"**FIVE…**"

"Yes, it's a five coin," Jakob replied.

The Florist cleared his throat. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Jakob, hands full of flower bouquet and coin-sack, looked the man dead in the eyes.

"Do you also have seeds for this *Misty Reminiscence*. For my laboratorium."

"I don't know what that is, but yes, I do have some seeds. Wait here a moment while I get them."

Jakob watched him scurry off into a nearby house, then Heskel grunted.

"What?"

"**Bad business. Take many coin.**"

"I suppose I should have asked for a price." He peered into the coin-sack. "We still have plenty left though, and if we run out we will just take what we need."

Heskel nodded.

After getting the flower seeds, Jakob and his entourage went into an alleyway, so that he could properly appreciate his purchase.

The scent of the flowers made a strange warmth fill his cheeks and seemed to ease the tension from him. He thought it reminded him of something, but he was unsure what. It was possible it was a memory from before being summoned into Grandfather's lab, but he was unsure.

He took a few of the flowers and crumbled up their petals and stems, then pressed them into the little recess in the nose of his scent-mask. It normally held a greasy ball of nutmeg-and-pine-resin suspended in an odourless fat, which released the scents within whenever a bit of heat activated it.

Once he got the flower seeds back to a laboratorium, he could grow his own and begin making a similar scent-ball for this new smell that he had instantly grown to favour.

Jakob attached the scent-mask to his face and took in two deep breaths before expelling the spent air through the vent-pumps as condensate.

Holm bent low to grab the coinpurse that Jakob had set down next to himself while fiddling with his mask. As the Wrought Servant lifted out a coin to stare at longingly, a wind seemed to whip through the alleyway.

Acting purely by reflex, Jakob's new tail unfurled itself from his waist, dragging him upright as it whipped through the air in front of him, nearly taking off the head of a guy who ran past with the speed of the wind that had preceded him. He knocked Holm aside, grabbing the coin sack in his hand, leaving the servant behind with the one five-coin held aloft between his fingers.

Heskel eyed the thief as he rounded a corner and disappeared with all their money.

"What was *that*?" Jakob wondered out loud. Holm was still just staring at his coin, not seemingly bothered by what had just transpired.

"**Thief.**"

"Thief? What's that?"

"**THIEF…**" Holm repeated angrily, finally looking away from his coin and down the alleyway.

"**Take thing not theirs.**"

A puff of the new scent stained the air as Jakob had a revelation. "Just like the rats in Grandfather's storage and lab!?"

Heskel grunted affirmative. Much of Jakob's initial work as an apprentice had been as much about fostering his talent as it had been about finding solutions to the ever-present infestations they suffered in their sewer hideout.

Jakob narrowed his eyes. "Do you have his scent trail?"

The Wight nodded.

"We'll follow him then. Rats are easily eradicated once their nest have been found and they think themselves clever and hidden, comfortably-ignorant of what wrath they have summoned."

About an hour later, the trio found their way to a secluded courtyard that lay overshadowed by taller buildings all around it. It was accessible only through the narrow alleyways, and before its modest fence gate stood three men, eagerly talking about women and the stuff they would do to them. Jakob did not fully comprehend what was so exciting about the topic, but there were also quite a few phrases he did not even comprehend, despite his mastery of Novarocian.

"In there?" he asked Heskel.

The Wight nodded.

"Holm, if you would? And keep it silent."

"**KILL…?**" the Wrought Servant asked.

"Yes, kill."

As soon as the command left his mouth, Holm leapt across the uneven stones that blanketed the alleyway, the claws from his right hand extending fully, followed quickly by the blade within his forearm, which was the length of a steak-knife or a dagger.

Before the first of the three men had finished looking up, his two fellows were reduced to bleeding rags and he soon followed, as the forearm-blade gutted him from shoulder to navel.

Jakob and Heskel came over as Holm finished cleaning his bone-made weapons, retracting them into his arms. At a slight gesture, the Wight shattered the primitive lock on the fence gate and they walked through.

"Bring the bodies in," Jakob told the Wrought Servant. "Then stand guard outside."

"**GUARD…**"

"Lead the way," Jakob then told Heskel.

Instead of going into the building itself, the Wight led them down a basement staircase in the corner of the courtyard, next to the wall of the house. With what seemed like a light tap, Heskel broke down the door at the bottom of the stairs, and they walked into a room where five men were gathered, the Thief amongst them.

The basement was dimly-lit by just a couple of candles on a central table, and the spoils of several robberies lay strewn about atop its marred wooden surface. One man remained seated, while three rose to defend him with shortswords and knives. The Thief hung back, recognition stark on his young face. Compared to his mates, he seemed quite young, though he still easily had four years on Jakob.

"Look *what* you've dragged in, *Veks*."

"I wasn't followed, I swear!"

"It doesn't matter. Gut 'em boys!"

The three men charged Jakob, and Heskel stepped forward to meet them, tearing off the arm of the firstcomer before he even got the chance to swing his knife, and, as he fell screaming to the floor with blood squirting all about, Heskel punched the next man so hard in the throat that it left a permanent indentation. As the man bent forward and whimpered in pain, the Wight hammered his fist down on the back of his skull, making his head bounce up off the stone floor when he hit it, before he finally settled and blood drippled from ears, mouth, and nose.

The third man managed an impressive dodge of a swing from the Wight and came right at Jakob, shortsword held aloft. Without even giving the prompt, his tail unfurled, dragging Jakob with it as it whipped around and caught the attacker by the wrist, wrenching him off-balance. As the man

staggered forward, the tail released his wrist and grabbed him by the ankle, spinning him around so that he landed flat on his back and all the air was knocked from his lungs in a loud grunt.

His breathless scream was cut short by the tail slapping against his skull, shattering his cranium like an egg, the brain yolk spilling all about.

The leader stood up in sudden realisation that he was about to be next, but before he could say anything, a hand reached around from behind and dragged a blade across his throat, letting out a pressurised blast of blood, before he collapsed face-first on the table, upending it in a loud cacophony of coins spilling everywhere.

"You got what you deserve, Toby," the Thief said. Then he lifted his arms into the air, letting his blade plonk to the floor.

"I surrender," he said with a fake smile, terror quite evident on his face.

Heskel looked to Jakob for command, but he shook his head.

"This one we'll keep."

Veks wondered if perhaps he had made the wrong choice when he heard the young Boy's words.

It seemed quite a fortuitous event to have been robbed, as the Thieves' Den presented Jakob with a perfect place to set up a laboratorium within Market West. He had also acquired what seemed a very swift subject, and his mind was racing with the possibilities. Unfortunately, he was all out of Demon's Blood, so subjugation was out of the question for now, unless his experiments with his *Charming Hymn* bore fruit. Thus far, all it had borne were piercing headaches, temporary memory loss, and sleepless nights, not to mention dozens of ruined subjects.

The *Charming Hymn* was a pet project that Jakob had been working on for years, having started on its creation when he realised that Demon's Blood was a rare commodity and not without side-effects to its subjects, such as the strained speech and intellect seen in Holm. But making a spell from scratch was arduous and came with significant risks. Fortunately, Jakob was fluent in Chthonic, so he was somewhat shielded from accidentally invoking some Greater Entity or spontaneously exploding, like with the *Implosion* Hymn that Grandfather had created on accident, when he tried to teach one of his creations a simple Hymn. Additionally, the trial-and-error process of finding the right combination of words and inflection and tempo, meant that it could take decades before his experiment bore fruit.

He let out an irritated sigh. In hindsight, it had been a foolish move to spend Demon's Blood on Callum, especially considering how great of a failure *that* had turned into. Katja, Ehlo, and Holm were all thankfully still alive and functioning as per his directives, but as he stared at the Thief, Veks, he had nothing but regret. How could he ever hope to tame a wild spirit such as his without the prerequisites for his subjugation spell?

"You don't have to kill me, I can be useful to you, I'm sure!"

"Should we keep him caged?" Jakob asked Heskel.

The Wight shrugged.

Veks looked from one to the other as the strange Boy spoke with words that shook his organs with their awful cadence. The muscular and giant Freak was clearly just a guard, and it was the Boy, in his weird hooded apron and with his gloves and tail, who he truly feared.

Jakob looked at him. "Do you know where to find *Demon's Blood*?"

The Thief blinked twice in surprise, then shook his head. He instinctively knew that lying would not serve him well.

Then the Wight spoke, its voice ominously deep. "**Mage Quarter.**"

"I know where that is!" Veks said immediately.

"Find me some Demon's Blood there," the Boy said. "And return here again when you have it."

Veks stood up from where he had been kneeling, his knees aching from the hard floor.

"You got it, boss!"

Jakob was surprised by the Thief's willingness, though he knew that he no doubt only said what he thought Jakob wanted to hear, so that he would be allowed to leave with his life intact. He thought about how to ensure his return, then came up with an idea.

The Thief stared at Jakob's gloved finger, as the bruise-hued stitched-flesh-covered digit pointed to the overturned table and the scattered coins.

"You may keep those coins as a *Toll*."

"You mean, I'll get *all of that* as payment??"

"That is what I said," Jakob replied flatly. He spoke Novarocian with the clipped tone of someone who had only practiced it from books.

Veks nodded eagerly. Suddenly, his thoughts were not on escape, but rather on the task at hand, though he had no clue how on earth he was supposed to find a Demon, let alone drain its blood. But he was sure that the Mage Quarter would have such oddities, though he had yet to set foot there and was only going off of rumours.

Jakob did not switch to Chthonic as he told Heskel, "Lead him outside, and make sure Holm doesn't kill him. Then bring the bodies down and have Holm remain guard. I want the laboratorium set up and running by the time the Thief returns with the Blood."

Veks felt a chill run down his spine at the words, wondering if the Boy had spoken his language to unsettle him. It was in many ways similar to the how Toby had treated him, using terror as a leash, but his former boss now lay dead, and the Boy before him seemed uninterested in coin, which meant that Veks would make a fortune if he could deliver whatever he sought. And if he failed, he would just avoid Market West and hope they would not find him again. The latter seemed a dubious thing, considering the ease with which the brute and the boy had located the Thieves' Hideout.

Heskel looked at Jakob inquisitively, while he leaned over one of the corpses that he had put atop the makeshift workstation in their new lab.

"What?" Jakob asked without turning from his work, his blade perfectly separating skin from meat and bone.

"**Concern?**"

"No, I'm not worried. Just puzzled by *this* Thief I've acquired. I was not aware that subordination could be gained in such a simple way."

"**Blame not the beast…**"

"Truly."

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

VI

Veks thundered over the rooftops of Market West, aiming for the one part where the terrace of one of the big merchants' residences overhung the wide sewage river, three stories below. It was a shortcut he had taken many times before, so he cleared the five-metre gap with ease, landing in a tucked roll, scattering the tiles of the tall building within Uptown West just next to the river.

He continued his mad dash from roof-to-roof, then leapt to an alley two stories down and quickly vaulted the stone railing into the sewage river below, landing flawlessly atop one of the wooden measuring stakes planted solidly in the middle of the river. From there he leapt to the grime-coated wall of the next district over, scrabbling for purchase before managing to climb up-and-over, the bridge guards none-the-wiser to his illegal passing.

From Breadbasket, he went north, snagging lunch from an unattended cart, then crossed the unguarded bridge into the Crafting District, north again from there to Smogtown, then west through Westgate, where he gave the namesake gate out of Helmsgarten a wide berth, before he reached the bridge-gate that led to the Mage Quarter.

The bridge was massive compared to the bridge from the Slum to the Residential District and similar to the ones that linked Smogtown and the Crafting District with Westgate. Esoteric and strange materials were constantly carted back-and-forth across the bridge into the Mage Quarter, but the guards there looked quite vigilant, so Veks doubted he could sneak a ride on one of the carts. Looking at the river, it also seemed to be a suicidal way to cross, so he resorted to a shortcut he did not like to use, for obvious reasons.

Just like the sewage river was omnipresent throughout Helmsgarten, so too were the tunnels that flowed into it, depositing their waste and water from the buildings within each district. These tunnels were not guarded, though some had locks and grates, but it was considered impossible for anyone to use these to cross districts.

Veks knew the truth of it, however. It was not impossible to use the sewer tunnels to move between districts, after all, the smugglers in Helmsgarten made their living this way. The issue was with what thrived and endured in the muck and effluvia. He had only ever used the tunnels once, and he still had the scar on his calf to remember it by.

Rumours abounded of monstrosities, and he had not given such stories credence until he had seen one such creature himself. A giant rat with six legs and three tails, as well as a hugely distorted and overgrown skull, had flown at him, breaking his right forearm and carving a deep channel into his calf. He had only escaped alive thanks to a fellow thief, who had lost his life to protect him. He thanked the Eight Saint for the miracle that his injuries had not become infected and had healed well.

Veks took a deep breath as he removed the heavy lid to the maintenance manhole and the smell of waste and noxious gasses vented out into the air. Then he quickly descended the primitive ladder, leaving the cover ajar so a tiny beam of light would guide his way down.

As his bare feet dipped into the warm current, he shuddered with disgust. But he quickly steeled himself and started wading towards the river ahead, following the eager flow as it washed over his legs, at times swelling up to his waist.

"I should've just run…" he said to himself. But he knew he was too committed now, and the distant promise of hundreds of Novarins was too much to let go of, so he continued onward, keeping his ears open to any sounds of the tunnel denizens.

Where the tunnel poured its contents into the river below, a large grate covered its façade, perhaps to prevent birds from entering, or, more chillingly, to prevent something from leaving. To emphasise this latter fear, gouges were visible on the thick iron bars.

Veks stared out through the large holes: below, where the effluvia gleefully rushed between his legs and fell into the filth river; and beyond, where a twin grate and tunnel stared back at him. Even without the grates, no human possessed the ability to leap from one side to the next, as it spanned more than seven carriages in length. Besides, even if he had possessed such supernatural agility, the threat of the rapidly-flowing river below seemed too daunting for him to even make the attempt.

Reaffirmed that he had to go the path he least wanted to travel, Veks turned around and made the arduous return back to the manhole shaft, the rush of brown water trying its damnedest to push him back.

When he returned to his place of ingress, he continued upstream for several more metres, until a side-tunnel presented itself. Veks had no clue why these additional tunnels had been built, as clearly the majority of the sewage travelled into the river, which itself flowed down to the Slums, where it was filtered into the sea beyond by kilometres of labyrinthine tunnels. Regardless, such side-tunnels presented the opportunity for the daring to traverse below the filth river and cross districts unnoticed.

With his heartrate climbing, he followed the rapidly-darkening tunnel, where the effluvia seemed hesitant to flow, despite a large channel carved in the floor to encourage it.

After only a few steps, he came across another grate, which, to his building dismay, was bent so aggressively to the side that it seemed as though a team of four had brought sledgehammers to it.

"Maybe smugglers did this…" he muttered to himself, unconvincingly.

He climbed through the gap and continued along, until the tunnel bent again and started leading down. Rather than wait to be found by whatever lurked within these foul halls, Veks upped his pace and quickly descended the filth-slick ramp, steading himself against the curving wall to avoid falling.

At the foot of the ramp, dim lights came from a handful of small fungus sprouts in the floor near the channel. With the scarce illumination, he saw that, rather than another ramp leading up to the Mage Quarter tunnels, they bent again and led even deeper.

A shuddering breath left his lips, but he followed the new ramp deeper into the bowels of the sewers.

As Veks descended deeper, the fungus lights grew exponentially, and, at one point, carpeted a corner of the floor and curving wall, letting off enough light that he could see all the way to the other end of the tunnel where two paths presented themselves. Near the fungus patch a third path also lay, situated perfectly in the middle of the tunnel and leading even deeper.

What troubled him was not the many options, as he knew the Mage Quarter sewers mostly mirrored those of Westgate, rather, it was the fog of spores the fungus lights emanated. With a hand over his mouth, he ran to the other side, his feet slapping against the stone and causing overlapping echoes that seemed to radiate outward through the entire tunnel complex, however far it stretched.

Just when he reached the ramp that led up, a distant rumble caused him to slip and land painfully on his elbows. Following immediately after was a distant scurrying, as though a hundred clawed feet were coming closer.

A long string of expletives flowed from Veks as he scrambled up the ramp, digging his nails into the narrow gaps between the stones in the wall to avoid slipping. With his ascent, the fungus lights once again retreated, until he reached the second ramp and could hardly see the stones underfoot. But the distant sounds spurred him on, making him throw caution to the wind. His nails chipped on the stones as he hurried upwards to where the noise of the sewage stream called him.

After what seemed a long time, but were only just a panicked few minutes, he reached the top of the second ramp. His celebration was cut short however, as, before him, an intact grate stood.

With bleeding and filthy fingers, he grabbed hold of the iron bars, shaking the whole thing with all his might. And though it seemed loose in its grip on the wall, it hardly moved. The panic reached an all-time peak, as now sounds of shuffling feet came from beyond the grate, while the distant clamour of scratching claws below grew louder with every passing moment.

Slamming his shoulder into the bars, Veks kept trying to dislodge the barrier, but to no avail.

Then, a figure emerged into view, the dim light from the tunnel beyond backlighting the person.

"Help me get this open!" Veks yelled to what he assumed was one of the sewers many vagrants.

The figure shuffled closer, but did not seem to be in any sort of rush.

"Hurry!"

When only a few handspans separated them, Veks finally got a good look at the man before him, and a chill shot through him, seizing the air in his lungs. He took a few steps back, suddenly finding the grate before him a saving grace rather than an obstacle.

The vagrant huddled even closer to the grate, his one good eye staring right at Veks. The left half of his face was hugely distended and malformed, as though moulded like clay by an amateur's hands. The left eye had no eyelid and a yellow-green pus ringed its blood-coloured and unseeing form. Blocky and square teeth filled the creature's mouth, and its left leg and arm were strangely bulked and elongated, while what seemed like scales rippled across every visible section of skin.

As slobber fell from the being's jaws, it scented the air with its twisted and broken nose.

It gurgled and slobbered some more, as it said to him, "You have met h-h-him, h-h-haven't you? *The Divine Offspring of the One Who Rules Below*?"

Before Veks could reply, the malformed vagrant seized the grate in its bulked-out over-long three-fingered pincer-like hand, and with a simple pull tore it loose from the wall, the metal screeching loudly in protest as it was bent in on itself.

Veks eyed the opening suspiciously for a moment, when suddenly-way-too-close sounds of things ascending the ramp behind him made him rush forward and leap through the opening in the grate, landing deftly on the slick stones and not sparing a moment as he rushed for the nearest manhole shaft out of the hellish sewers.

Veks did spare a single glance back over his shoulder, and saw that the monstrous vagrant was climbing through the opening in the grate to face whatever evils Veks himself had brought up from the depths.

With his back on the uncomfortable fired-clay tiles of a four-storey, Veks let the sun bake the filth that covered him from head-to-toe, while he forced his heartrate to stabilise. He pondered the vagrant's cryptic words, and wondered if perhaps his encounter with the strange boy was what the creature had sensed. He quickly shook the thoughts from his mind though.

"There's no way," he mumbled to himself.

Besides, *the One Who Rules Below*, known more commonly as the *Underking*, was just a rumour. A bedtime horror-story told to children who misbehaved.

Scores-upon-scores of adventurer parties had ventured into the bowels of Helmsgarten, and none had ever found as much as a scrap of evidence suggesting such a being existed. It made far more sense to attribute the monstrosities of the sewer kingdom to the vile influence of filth on the local wildlife and wayward vagrants. After all, the Eight Saint himself was attested as saying that filth corroded the soul of those it touched. It did not escape Veks' notice that he himself was likely in the position he was in, because he had grown up in the Slums, while all those high and holy lived where the filth river was unseen in the highest districts of the metropolis.

Although, he would be lying to himself if his encounter with the strange Boy did not spark some fear in him that the Underking could be more than just an urban legend. After all, his Bodyguard was a being of disturbing strength and terrifying visage, while the Boy himself was covered in what Veks had correctly assumed to be robes of human flesh. And if that did not convince him, the Boy had a tail! A tail!

Though Thief by trade, Veks considered himself as pious as it was possible for someone in his situation to be, so he was wary of the corrupting influence the strange Boy might possess. But then again, if he was truly pious, he would exorcise such an evil.

But first, the job. It would be easier to deal with the Boy if he was considered an ally. And then, he could contact the local church and be rewarded for his devotion to the Saint of Purity. Besides, the money he would get from this job could not hurt.

After pinning a servant against a wall with a knife to his throat, Veks discovered that the Mage Quarter had a resident Demonologist, and if anyone was to possess Demon's Blood, surely it would be one who studied Demons.

When the servant ran out the alley, Veks headed towards the house that he had indicated: a towering seven-storey building near the heart of the Mage Quarter. It stood like a strange edifice to architecture, as it was the rare few buildings that survived being built to such a height. The building was one of the more peculiar in the district, which already made itself distinct from all the other places he had seen in the metropolis thus far. It had the appearance of an uneven stack of books, as each floor was shifted slightly off-centre from the ones below, forming an almost-spiral, if not for two central floors that broke the pattern by being stacked perfectly atop one another.

It seemed odd to Veks that a building standing seven stories tall was even allowed, given its obvious associations to the *Septet Sinners*. *The Unholy Septology*, the shame of Helmsgarten and the eternal enemies to morality and the ideal of purity incarnate in *Olemn, the Eight Saint*, whose worship was omnipresent throughout the entire metropolis and who served now as the Patron Deity of the Royal Family.

He suddenly did not find it so difficult to justify his robbery of a place that profaned the city upon whose soil it was built. This would just be yet another addition to his inculpation of the strange Boy and his slave-men. Veks already could imagine the praise gifted upon him by the church clergy and how handsome his reward for piety would be.

A loaded smile sat on his lips as he stalked nearer the tower of sin, within which he would find the Demonologist and the strange Boy's sought-after material.

Given the bizarre construction of the seven-storey tower, it had been quite simple for Veks to scale the first three floors from the outside, and, using his trained grip, he even climbed up the fourth and fifth floors, which deviated from the strange pattern of the first floors. As he scaled up the sixth floor, he finally found the entryway into the edifice that he had been seeking: an open window.

Veks climbed through in a hurry and fell into a crouch as he took in his surroundings. It seemed to be a sort of library perhaps, and, surprisingly, it was connected to the seventh floor, although the mismatched floor placements meant that strangely-placed ladders were necessary to ascend to the above bookshelves within the seventh floor. While looking through the area nearest his ingress, he distantly wondered if the other floors were linked in similar ways. It seemed an almost otherworldly way to construct a place of study and experimentation, but then again, a Demonologist lived within these walls, so perhaps it was not so farfetched an idea to believe such man touched.

Stranger still were the floating orbs that cast a strange purple-and-red light across every section of the interior. He treated them with caution, making sure to stay as far away from them as possible, while they flitted about on their own predetermined paths through the tall library.

He quickly found his way to a strange stone pedestal upon which sat a book draped in blood-red rags, as though to stem the bleeding from within its pages. The thought made him shiver, but he took it nonetheless, sticking it into a satchel bag he had found discarded on a chair. He spotted another pedestal on the opposite side of the floor, as well as one above, accessibly only after climbing two rickety-looking ladders propped up by twine alone.

The second pedestal held a book that shared an uncomfortable similarity with the Boy's robes of flesh, but worse yet was the fact that a man's face was visible on its front, and a child's face on the back, as though it had been bound with the skin from the faces of a man and his offspring.

Veks gritted his teeth in disgust and anger, but put the book into the bag nonetheless. Such strange trinkets might fancy the boy and make him add even more coins as a reward. Else, he could sell them. Market West had no shortage of disturbing baubles for the profane dwellers in Helmsgarten's underbelly, so a book of human skin would fetch a good price, regardless of its contents.

As he was about to ascend to the pedestal above, he spotted a shelf on the back of a row of bookcases, which held various dried meat, skin and hides, herbs, indescribable tools, and a stack of half-metre-tall clay amphorae. The latter immediately caught his attention and he went to work trying to identify what liquids they held.

Two seemed to have a sort of odourless oil; one had rose-blonde wine; another foul-smelling alcohol that seemed to evaporate into gas as soon as he opened the stopper; and finally two full of a thick tar-like substance that flowed like honey.

The latter two amphorae gave off a strange scent, like wet soil, burnt hair, and astringent copper combined. Veks carefully dipped a finger in one and when he withdrew it, it did look like what the strange bodyguard had described: black, thick, pungent, and emanating a strange buzzing when touched. Stranger yet, as it coated one of the fingers where he had chipped and ripped his nail earlier, the pain lingering in the tip faded and was replaced with a strange soothing feeling.

He quickly wiped the demon's blood on his trouser leg and capped the amphorae, then stuffed both of them into the satchel bag, which was now almost impossible to clasp shut. His task complete, he was ready to leave before his intrusion was discovered. However, he was inexplicably drawn to the third pedestal above. He left the satchel bag on the floor and quickly scaled the shaky ladders that were linked together and held to the floor above by twine and string.

The air burning in his lungs, he collapsed onto the floor in front of the pedestal, but quickly composed himself to see what kind of book it held. However, it held no book at all, rather, it held a peculiar shortsword, the shape of which was chiselled into the stone top of the pedestal, allowing it to be fully recessed into the stone. With some difficulty, Veks dug out the blade, leaving behind the hollow imprint of the weapon.

While holding the sword reverently in his hands, he let out a contented sigh. Such a beautiful work it was: a straight blade like polished silver, reflecting his image perfectly; an S-shaped crossguard; and hand-and-a-half long handle, wrapped in the softest silk he had ever felt, and yet providing a sturdy grip; and finally, the pommel, which was shaped like a serpent with its jaws agape, two glinting jewel fangs in its upper mouth.

The odd buzzing, which the demon's blood had filled his head with when he touched it, returned to him again as he held the sword. It was followed with a feeling of joy and anticipation, flowing like an ocean wave through his body, wiping away his worries and his pain. Distantly, he heard something like a muted whisper, but before he could concentrate on it, a door burst open below and a man in crimson robes emerged onto the sixth floor below.

Veks leaned over the railing next to the pedestal and tall shelves of books that lined the entire wall on this floor. The newcomer stared right back at him, the strap of the satchel bag in his left hand.

"What do you think you're doing here!" the man yelled, then he raised a palm towards Veks.

Shifting the blade to his left hand, he grabbed the handle of the railing and made to vault it and leap for the man below, but just as his hand had gripped the wood, a beam of concentrated light shot through his right hand and the railing, continuing through the wall above and leaving behind a hole that shone with the light of the sun outside.

It took Veks a moment to realise that where his index finger and thumb should be, remained nothing but charred flesh now. As though he could not feel this disturbing wound, he continued vaulting over the railing, and as he leapt, from the seventh floor to the sixth below, mirror-polished blade held aloft in his left fist, the second light-beam went wide and a third never came.

An awful *crunch* sounded as Veks landed, blade spearing the forehead of the robed man, but he heeded not the broken toes and fractured shinbone, and instead quickly stole the satchel bag back and made to leave. Before he vaulted out of the window however, he stole the man's crimson robe too.

One of the Mage Quarter's high-and-mighty strode over the vast bridge leading to Westgate, and the guards dutifully cleared the way for the man to pass, his blood-red hood dipping curtly in thanks.

Before the robed figure had made it halfway across though, one of the guards called out to him.

"You're bleeding, sir! Sir!" He had spotted the trail of blood left in the passing of the shuffling Magister.

Then he turned to his fellow and they came to a quick decision, but, before they could give chase, a runaway oxen rampaged towards them and all chaos broke loose.

When order was restored, no trace remained of the red-robed Magister, save for a few drops of blood on the cobblestones.

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VII

Heskel looked up from the work he and Jakob had been engrossed in.

The young boy noticed this. “Has he returned?”

The Wight nodded.

Four days had passed since the Thief had gone on his errand. Jakob was not sure which part surprised him most: that he had returned at all, or that he had taken so long. By now, he already knew something had happened in the Mage Quarter, given that it was all people talked about when Jakob snuck out under the cover of dark to observe the Market.

Limping through the door into the former Thieves’ Den, came Veks, left arm swollen and purple, and right leg and foot no better. But the Thief wore an uncanny grin and patted the satchel slung over his shoulder.

“I got you your Blood, *boss*.”

“You did well to bring me this,” Jakob said with a pleased smile, hidden beneath his scent-mask. Not only had the Thief brought him over four litres of the rare Demon’s Blood, he had also brought two tomes of immeasurable value.

The first, a blood-rag-bound piece, was a nameless in-depth thesis on high-level Demonological summoning rituals, and it also contained many useful spells that surpassed the Ritual of Abeyance in terms of complexity and efficacy, such as one aptly-named *Ritual of the Loyal Spawn*. There were also some quite peculiar rituals and spells that he yet had no use for, as well as an extensive list of named Demons.

Named Demons were those that had been summoned and bound by a name, giving the Summoner direct control over them and allowing them to resummon the Demon, should they be slain or banished. There were a rare few Demons who, from birth, had been named by the Seven Saints of Vice, such as Karrmeig, Duke of Devastation, whom Raleigh often talked about in the past, given that he was subservient to him. Raleigh had seemed to take pride in serving a Demon born with a given name.

The second book, a flesh-bound tome, was what really made Jakob grateful to his Thief. Branded onto the skin, above the forehead of the face that covered the front, was the blocky letters of Necroscript, and after a quick study through the pages of the tome, with the aid of Heskel, he could actually decipher what the title said.

The scent of Misty Reminiscence vented from his mask, the floating particulates swirling about his face before vanishing into the air.

“*Of Undeath and Bone*,” he muttered in reverent awe.

Heskel grunted approvingly.

“You have done well indeed,” Jakob repeated to the Thief. “The coins are yours, as well as anything else you might desire of me.”

The Fleshcrafter looked Veks up-and-down.

“I can fix those injuries. I can even make you stronger. Remake you beyond the limits of your beastly flesh.”

Gripping the mirror-blade tightly in his fist, Veks’ face distorted into a huge grin.

“I have some ideas in mind.”

Any thoughts of going to the Church of the Eight Saint seemed quite distant now. Veks' mind was too preoccupied by the whisperings and buzzing of the strange sword in his hands to remember which direction his moral compass ought to point.

To prepare for Veks' transformation, Jakob needed several things, such as specialised tools, healthy samples, as well as a new assistant. To this end, Heskel and Holm had been sent out on errands, while Veks lounged in the laboratorium, observing him assembling bones, ligaments, and tendons with practiced efficiency. The Thief seemed to Jakob to have changed some, though it was perhaps due to his windfall, but he did not behave very subservient anymore. However, it was not that Jakob minded, rather, he preferred someone who did not waste time on platitudes, as many ritualised subjects were wont to do. And the Thief might do as he pleased, for all that Jakob cared. He had already returned thousand-fold what any other servant had been capable of, so if he saw it fit to lounge around, it was his reward by right, even if Jakob naturally abhorred laziness. Also, he supposed that his bound-up leg and arm warranted his restful state.

"What are you making?" Veks asked.

Jakob paused and looked at the man where he balanced on the back-legs of a stool. "I was unaware that you spoke Chthonic," he replied, curious.

The Thief put a hand to his lips, as though he had not even noticed himself suddenly fluent in the dead language. Before he could try and excuse himself, Jakob simply waved a hand to stop him. It did not matter, after all, it made things easier when he did not have to mindfully switch to Novarocian to address the man.

"To answer your question," Jakob started, in Chthonic, "I am making a bone construct. The Necromantic tome you brought me has given me not only the inspiration, but also the means, particularly the section concerning giving life to the inanimate and dead."

"What do you need a construct for?"

Jakob pointed at him. "I need it to remake you as you wished of me."

At about sundown, Jakob had finished his assembly, his creation laid out in front of him on a long operating table. It sprouted about forty legs, each made of a set of finger bones, with the two bones of the various thumbs he had collected going towards the four large mandibles it sprouted near its head. For its central spine, he had simply combined five human spines, rearranging the sections so that it was widest at the head and thinnest at its tail.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Necromancy did not have anything quite as handy as Grandfather's *Amalgam Hymn*, as all the instructions from the tome seemed to indicate joints being combined with screws and hinges, which would result in very limited flexibility. Thus, Jakob stuck with his tried-and-true way of grafting mismatched bones, ligaments, and tendons, chanting out the verse as he moved down his creation, hand hovering above its massive length.

A peculiarity of the *Amalgam Hymn* was that its length and verses varied based on the size and complexity of what was being grafted together. This meant that Jakob had to continuously perform the Hymn for over twelve minutes straight, but he had practiced a lot, so it was not too taxing an ordeal, though Veks seemed impressed.

Following the amalgamation, Jakob dragged the bone centipede from the table and to the floor, the heavy construct more akin to ten metres of thick chain than bone. Once he had curled it into as tight of a circle as it would bend, he started drawing out the hexagram. It was identical to how he had given life to his tail, but differed vastly in the complexity of the Necroscript required.

For the *Reanimation Rite* it took three words in Necroscript. For the *Birthe Sentience* rite, it took twelve. To make matters worse, Jakob had never drawn Necroscript before, always relying on Heskel for the task, but armed with the tome and its lexicon and instructions, he felt confident that he could do it.

He had been studiously repeating the required chant in his head to make it stick, and he had already written every block-letter of Necroscript twenty times. It was a blessing that the placement of the words did not matter, but, as he added them to the hexagram, he kept them evenly distributed nonetheless.

After triple-checking every facet on the hexagram and his drawings and writings, he knelt before it, hands touching two corners of the star, where they overlapped with the surrounding circle and candles were placed. Then he slowly began the chant and the six tallow candles of human fat burst alight with white flames, tinged blue at the edges. As he reached the halfway-point of the chant, he raised the tempo and pitch, and the candleflames followed his guiding tone, growing a metre tall and taking on a slightly-purple hue.

Then, as the chant reached its finale, the flames bent inward, diving straight into the coiled centipede. Immediately, all the flames went out and the room seemed to have been robbed of light, their handful of scattered candles now less vigorous.

Jakob hardly noticed this however, as his eyes were firmly locked on the creature within the hexagram and its innermost circle.

Ever so slowly, the bone centipede unfurled itself and rose to greet the world around it, an intellect now within its abnormal form, where naught but void had existed just moments prior. Its mandibles chattered with some sort of emotion, before it moved towards its Creator, coiling about him where he knelt.

"By the Seven…" Veks muttered. He had fallen off his chair at some point.

Jakob affectionally patted his construct on its head.

"Now we simply wait for the others to return."

Heskel and Holm found their way back into the basement laboratorium sometime before dusk, dragging behind them two men and a woman. Given Market West's clientele, slaves were quite easy to acquire without needing to provide permit or identification.

As well as the slaves, Heskel carried a sack full of tools and miscellaneous materials.

Veks observed them sceptically when they entered. "Where did you get the coin for all this? Were you holding out on me, *little boy*?"

"Heskel is resourceful," Jakob replied with a shrug, ignoring the jab.

Perhaps sensing the need to placate the avaricious Thief, the Wight pulled a coin-laden pouch out of his bountiful sack and tossed it to where he was once again balancing on the back legs of a stool.

Veks caught it in the air without even flinching, before quickly rifling through its contents with apparent child-like glee.

Jakob smiled at his simplicity. "Blame not the beast," he muttered, venting spent vapour into the stagnant basement air.

One of the slaves shrieked when they noticed the Fleshcrafter and *what* he was sitting on. As the man tried to run, the bone centipede shot out from under Jakob, skittering across the floor on its forty bone legs, seizing the attempted runaway in its powerful mandibles and bringing him to the floor.

Before the slave could brain himself on the solid stone, Heskel caught him by his unkempt hair, arresting his momentum.

"**Break not,**" he scolded the construct. It struck Jakob as peculiar that the Wight had not even acknowledged its presence until now, but perhaps he was used to seeing constructs, having long served under Grandfather, who was fond of chimeras.

"It will learn in time," Jakob commented.

Heskel looked at the construct, as he pulled the slave upright, his fist a vice about his neck. Then he grunted somewhat-approvingly.

"What are we gonna do with *them*?" the Thief asked, pointing at the three frightened people with his mirror-sword.

Jakob sent Holm back out on guard with a curt gesture, then brought the centipede back to him with a thought, sitting back down on its coiled body where it gathered beneath him.

"We disassemble them, obviously."

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VIII

Veks flew through the air as he tested out his new body. The boy and his bodyguard and bone creeper had worked on him for over two days, while he had been in an induced coma, thanks to some strange concoction he was given to inhale.

But now he was remade. The whispers in his head were louder, but they were pleased, and the coin-sacks strapped to his belt jingled merrily as gravity dragged him back down to earth again. Veks' cloven hooves left several shattered rooftiles in the wake of his landing. As he thundered across the tiles and reached the edge, he used his new legs to send himself flying in a massive leap, his slender and lithesome tail flowing behind him.

He was unsure where the inspiration for his transformation had come from, but given his clawed right hand, half-metre curved ram's horns, salamander tail, and goat hooves; it had clearly been demonic in flavour. Once not so long ago, he would have never indulged such an impure and heretical fancy, but those days were behind him. The visit to the Mage Quarter and his acquisition of the mirror-blade had irreparably deflected the trajectory of his life.

The boy had stayed true to his word and remade him as a stronger version of himself, the strength of four people stacked within his deceptively-slender arms and legs. And, for the first time in his life, Veks felt the freedom of true strength and independence.

Now he was beholden to none but himself.

Instead of resting on his laurels following his highly-successful transformation of the Thief, Jakob dove straight into his next project. His goal of recreating a being comparable to Heskel was side-lined once again for his exploration of whatever ideas came to him in fits of wild imagination.

With the easy access to acceptable relatively-untainted materials and organs, he set about creating a colossal bone construct, which, despite the implications of its name, would contain more flesh and fatty tissue than actual bones.

Grandfather had explored the idea of a hulking being when he created *Septimer*, but given his preference for chimeras, he had never reached the conclusion of a flesh-hulk, which Jakob now sought to remedy, armed with his new font of knowledge about constructs as he was.

There were certainly many upsides to using a human as a base for any creature he aimed to create, such as with Holm and Callum, but such upsides were more in terms of convenience rather than efficacy. And if he aimed to recreate a being as superb as Heskel, he needed more experience crafting a being from the ground-up, with every aspect carefully trimmed and polished for a specific purpose.

It would require more time dedicated to its creation, but a true Fleshcrafter's skill lay in creating a new and stronger being, not tinkering with beasts and their inherent flaws, hoping to accomplish something special despite their very nature working against you every step of the way.

After all, he had crafted his centipede construct from the ground-up, and it was obedient by nature, not by force, and contained an intellect that would evolve with time, rather than a stagnant mind, frozen in place by demonic spell.

Jakob was torn from his work by a sudden commotion.

He got up from where he had been kneeling next to splayed-open organs and looked over at Heskel, who had overturned a table when he collapsed. A horrified shiver flowed through him and he quickly ran to the Wight's side.

Before he could check on him, Heskel groaned in pain and discomfort, like a deep predatory growl.

A sound like leather being slowly ripped apart filled the laboratorium, and the skin on the forehead of the Wight, where the mask did not cover, slowly tore itself open, exposing the bloodless flesh below and parts of cranial bone. Then a seeping darkness boiled up through the flesh, until it started spilling out of the massive rend in the giant's forehead. Over one stretched-out and terrifying moment, the darkness took shape, becoming bulbous and halting its expansive growth. Lights and colour started flowing into it from below, like he was looking at a pool of dark water and seeing discarded things resurface. From one moment to the next, the chaos of light and colour oriented itself and became an eye full of stars and tiny galaxies.

With a gasp, Jakob took a step back, fearing he had already erred in looking upon it.

"*My son…*"

"Grandfather?"

"*I want the tomes.*"

How had he found out!?

"I cannot give them to you. I have yet to transcribe their contents."

"*I was not asking. Raleigh will pick them up from you. Prepare to greet him with due respect.*"

Before Jakob could protest, the eye sunk back into the skull of Heskel and the cavity started knitting itself shut.

He almost fell backwards in terror, and was only caught in his fall by the centipede construct.

"Raleigh… he's coming here?"

Heskel regained his composure and stood up, but instead of cleaning up his mess, he looked at Jakob. Despite the mask covering the Wight's expression, Jakob could easily guess it.

"You told him, didn't you?"

A grunt in the affirmative.

"I suppose it is good to know where your loyalties ultimately lie."

"**Cannot disobey.**"

"You may not have such autarchy of your own functions, but I do."

"**No.**"

"Yes, Heskel! I *will* disobey him! The tomes are mine! He can send *whoever* he wishes, but they will remain in my possession!"

The Wight looked poised to argue back, but Jakob quickly stopped him.

"You can leave and never come back, or you can help me finish this construct."

Heskel seemed conflicted, knowing that the boy would use the construct to fight back against Raleigh, the favoured Demon-vessel of Grandfather. Ultimately, he chose to help the young Fleshcrafter and Jakob was happy for it, as, without the Wight by his side, he would suffer immensely in lost knowledge and advice, not to mention, the loneliness seemed terrifying to him, given that Heskel had been a constant in Jakob's life since he first was summoned.

As the three worked in silence, only broken by the occasional chatter of the bone centipede's mandibles and the boy's quiet mutterings, Jakob wondered if it was possible to remove the element in Heskel's body that controlled his loyalty to Grandfather.

The Fleshcrafter reclined onto the two rear-most of his countless arms with a satisfied sigh. Under his many feet scurried his creations, busy tidying up his latest experiments and preparing his immense laboratorium beyond his ritual chamber for the next.

"*He is finally showing a rebellious phase.*"

"***What do you wish for me to do, aside from collecting the tomes?***"

"*Teach him a lesson he will survive, but will long remember*."

"***As you desire.***"

As Raleigh left, his steps a loud cacophony, one of the Fleshcrafter's many hands reached his chin, scratching it contemplatively, as his withered husk of a torso dangled aimlessly below the growth of the dozen branching limbs.

"*This will be good for him, I think. Strife builds resilience and character,*" Grandfather mused, knowing that his will would not be denied.

The following three days seemed both excruciatingly-long and as though they moved by in a blur.

Jakob was pleased that Raleigh was a loud and rapturous monster, as his appearance in the Slums and many subsequent fights with the guards gave them plenty of advanced warning of his approach, while they finished up the final touches on the Flesh-Hulk.

However, it troubled him greatly that Raleigh's might seemed undisputed, even in the face of the Crown's special Guard, and the members of the Adventurers' Guild.

When Jakob started painting the septagram on the floor, Heskel seemed suddenly surprised.

"What? Did you think I would rely on Necromancy for *this*?"

"**Too dangerous.**"

"I know. That's the point. You can't fight a demon and show restraint."

"**Fire and fire, more flame make.**"

"Enough! I have decided."

In truth, Jakob was conflicted. He had originally wanted to simply produce another fresh intellect with the *Birthe Sentience*, but while its growth potential was exponential, he needed something to fight back against Raleigh *now*. Unless reined in with a sufficient contractual bond, demons were powerful and wicked, not to mention unpredictable and anathema to the rigid nature of reality, whose fabric their mere presence corrupted. Though they had many uses, the thing they were best at was killing each other, and thus he had decided to summon a demon into his hulking mound of flesh.

Thanks to the blood-rag-bound Demonology tome, Jakob knew the perfect entity to summon too. Granted, it would be his first of such summonings, as he had only ever summoned imps, fire-sprites, and other simple beings, and never before a Greater Demon such as the one whose name he was now drawing into the complex septagram with a fine pen of horse-hair:

One of the chief servants of the Fourth of the Unholy Seven: *Mercilla, the Viscountess of Voracity*.

Given that Raleigh was a Wrath Demon, it seemed fitting to pit him against a Demon of Gluttony. They would devour each other; of that he had no doubt.

"Check it, but don't dawdle."

Heskel grunted disapprovingly, but set to work checking the enormous septagram, within which towered the mound of flesh.

The Flesh-Hulk stood about two-and-a-half metres tall, just somewhat above Heskel in terms of height, but what made it truly imposing was its girth, as it spanned twenty metres or more in

circumference. Within its almost-gelatinous corpus was a framework of bones that served as a cage for the four hearts within and was kept stable like a gyroscope despite whichever way the mound rolled, thanks to some truly-obscure bit of Necromancy that Heskel knew and had carved into the bones.

Though it seemed from the outside to be a simple stitched-together mess of bodies, it was truly the most complex creation Jakob had ever created. It made the bone centipede seem like child's play by comparison. The biggest hurdle had been keeping a functioning blood-supply running through the labyrinthine one-way veins he had crafted with an absurd number of valves, which had required eleven slaves to produce. Almost an entire afternoon had been wasted tracing down one faulty valve and replacing it, but now it was done, and soon a Greater Demon would inhabit its body.

"Is it good?"

Heskel nodded solemnly. Jakob knew it was a risky move to summon a demon such as the one he was invoking, but Gluttony Demons were fortunately the easiest to satiate, as they simply required sustenance and nothing else, unlike Greed Demons who grew more-and-more avaricious and depraved as time went on. But Gluttony Demons were destructive, while Greed Demons were clever and cunning, and its appearance would not go unnoticed, just like Raleigh's inherent nature made him loud and mayhem incarnate.

The centipede came up next to Jakob, dragging a large bowl of blood. For a summoning as tremendous as this, an absurdly-large Blood Toll was required, but, fortunately, they had been diligent in their harvesting of their bought slaves.

Heskel came up next to him shortly after with the second bowl.

"Excellent, we can begin."

The centipede moved around behind Jakob and lifted the front of its body, clamping its enormous mandibles about his torso, ensuring he would not move a hair's breadth from where he stood.

Dipping each hand in their respective bowl, he let the blood cover him up to his elbows, then he began intoning the lilting chant.

"*I call you from your lair of plenty; I call you from your bountiful tower.*"

"*Heed my call lest thy stomach remain empty; heed my call lest thy lips not savour my offering.*"

"*Obey me, Mercilla. Obey me, Mercilla. Obey me, Mercilla, heed my call and manifest thyself within this realm of substance and mortality!*"

Like a sudden bonfire, the septagram and the many intricate drawings burst into flames tinged purple, blue, and red. Like a massive gale-force wind, air buffeted the room, scattering the many tools and materials so carefully stored, shattering lanterns and specimen jars, and pushing even Heskel away from the circle of fire. Jakob held true though, thanks to the centipede keeping him in place with its tremendous mass, which stood unflinchingly against the gale.

Then the wind subsided and the flames died down, and, like a vortex, the blood in the two bowls started spinning rapidly, before being drawn impossibly into the air and towards the Flesh-Hulk where it stood in the centre of the septagram.

As though following a separate ruleset of physics, the blood passed directly through the hulk, and then immediately a slobbering voice filled the room.

"**TINY THING. I HUNGER.**"

"And you shall feast plenty upon what I have to offer you," Jakob ensured. Blood trickled down the left side of his head from where his eardrum had popped with the sheer concussive force of Mercilla's voice, but he did not relent, after all, any moment wasted could be exploited.

Lifting his blood-soaked hand, he quickly ran a knife across his left palm, and cited the *Contract of Obedience* he had meticulously conjured to ensure there were no loopholes for the Demon to manipulate, but, before he could finish its conclusion, a massive crash sounded just beyond the basement lab and the surprise made him pause for one crucial moment.

"**IS THAT A WRATHFUL ONE I SMELL!?**"

The massive flesh mound quivered in ecstasy, then started wobbling out of the septagram, smearing the detailed drawings under its colossal weight.

Standing locked in place by his construct, Jakob could all but watch as it rolled towards him, crushing anything it came near.

Suddenly Heskel tackled him from the side, tearing him from the grip of his frozen centipede, just before it was pulverised under Mercilla.

The backlash of Jakob's severed connection to the construct felt like lightning striking his brain and his whole body started seizing and convulsing uncontrollably, until he lost consciousness.

IX

Veks heard the battle taking place three districts away, and though the whispers warned him not to go, he went to investigate, as he knew from the direction that it was happening near the Boy's lair.

He wondered if it was lingering gratitude that drove him or some other unidentified desire, but whatever the cause, he gave in to his curiosity.

While he had expected something pretty devastating to be the cause of the cacophony of destruction, he had not expected to find half of Market West totally destroyed, three of its four bridges collapsed, and the remaining one being so congested with people that guards could only watch from afar, while buildings were toppled and earthquakes shook the city for kilometres.

It had been a mistake. The biggest mistake of his entire career as a Fleshcrafter.

Holm and his bone construct were gone, reduced to dust and imperceptible fragments. The Residential District, particularly the area near his first laboratorium, was a devastated crater, his well-disguised bakery servants there surely gone too, and all but the outermost buildings in the northern section of Market West was a ruin that seemed as though the aftermath of a years-long siege.

"Who do you think is winning?" Veks asked.

The Thief found them on the rooftop of a tall house in Breadbasket where Heskel had brought Jakob before his hideout was caved in.

"Mercilla," Jakob replied without a doubt. "She's a *Viscountess of Voracity*, while Raleigh is simply a *Squire-Lord of Devastation*."

"The tiny red one is …"

"Raleigh."

"Gotcha. Looks to me to be putting up quite a fight, honestly."

Veks was observing the mayhem through the telescope he had stolen from Jakob after he had been remade, and which Jakob himself had stolen from a fisherman.

"He is not weak, but—"

"**Mercilla is impervious.**"

"Exactly."

"That blob-thing is the Viscountess-lady?"

"Yes."

"And you made the body?"

"Yes."

"And basically gave it to a super-powerful Demonette, because the contract that was supposed to make her subservient was interrupted?"

Jakob let out of vent of spent air in frustration.

"Sorry, boss. I'm just trying to wrap my head around this."

"I had no other option. He wanted the tomes."

"Raleigh did?"

"No, my Grandfather. He sent Raleigh here."

"Your…? Wait, is he *the Underking*?"

Heskel grunted disapprovingly.

"He hates that title," Jakob explained.

By late evening, the people who had been able had fled from the district into Breadbasket and beyond, the majority hiding-out in Westgate, while the guards there struggled to maintain order amongst the thousands of displaced citizens.

With the only entryway into Market West cleared of people, the Adventurers' Guild sent in many of their heavy-hitters to try to kill the two warring demons, or at the very least weaken their vessels, while Royal Guardsmen cordoned off the district. The Guild was to no avail however, and lost twelve of their highest-ranking mages within an hour, before the rest retreated.

A little after midnight, the destruction and unceasing fight came to an abrupt conclusion, and there was an eerie quiet blanketing Market West and its neighbouring districts.

Hoping to find both demons dead or catch the victor during a moment of weakness, the Guild sent in another team of mages, alongside a large unit of guardsmen. Not a single one of the people who entered were ever seen again.

"So… what *now*, boss?" Veks asked contemplatively.

"You are no longer beholden to me. Do as you wish."

"Eh, I tried it on for a bit, but freedom is a bit boring, truth be told. With you, it seems life will continue to be entertaining, plus, I burnt through the coins you gave me."

"Are you not a thief? Steal whatever you desire."

"You don't get it, boss."

"I suppose I do not. Then, to answer your question, we head towards Market North. The richer districts will be more difficult to blend into, but I want to get into the Adventurers' Guild. With that many mages at their beck-and-call, they will have knowledge that I can put to better use than their limited imaginations would ever consider."

Veks looked at the satchel within which was the few items that Heskel had managed to save from the decimation of the lab. None of it was worth anything to him.

"Of all the things to save, you picked nothing that can persuade the guards to look away, just dusty books, flower seeds, and some random tools…"

"Considering the haste with which he had to gather the items, I believe he did quite well."

Heskel grunted in annoyance. He was not used to running from a fight, but, then again, he probably did not stand much of a chance against two demons settling millennia-old grudges.

"And the flasks of *that* blood I found for you?"

Jakob clicked his tongue in frustration. The sound ominous, like the crack of a bone, thanks to his mask.

Veks took this rather well, but, then again, he *had* skimmed some off the top of the amphorae and was holding the Demon's Blood in a safe place, wondering what sort of reward it might fetch him from the Fleshcrafter, if he just 'happened' to find it for him when he needed it most.

"So, how do we cross the gate-bridges?"

"We will figure something out," Jakob assured him.

They continued walking through Smogtown for a bit, then Veks suddenly stopped.

"I have an idea!"

In a way, it was disturbing how easily the Boy agreed to his plan, as he had expected *some* pushback. He was strangely naïve, while also callous and cold, but then, he was *so* very young, and given *who* his paternal role-model was… perhaps it was no odd thing he had turned out this way.

Wearing the stolen Magister's robe that he had looted from the Demonologist, Veks walked in front of Jakob and Heskel, as though the latter two were his strange-looking personal assistant and monstrous guard.

What surprised the Thief most, was that his hare-brained plan actually worked perfectly, as the guards seemed to respectfully allow the trio passage without even checking their identities or credentials, at least not until they reach the Haven district, two districts over from Market North. It seemed Magisters from the Mage Quarter were scrutinised quite diligently by the clergy of Haven, one of the areas of Helmsgarten dedicated to the worship of the Eight Saint.

They looked on as a Magister held up the queue of people passing across the gate-bridge into Haven, while four guards in white robes over silvery chainmail searched the man's belongings, paying particular attention to what sort of books he was transporting.

"Should we risk it?" Veks asked in Chthonic, to keep the people nearby from turning them over to the guards.

"We can simply kill them and pass through."

"I don't think angering the Church of the Eight Saint is a wise move. You wanted to stay inconspicuous, hence *this*," he replied, indicating his ridiculous robes with the hood that made it barely possible to see and the sleeves that were so over-long that he had to roll them up to his elbows just to be able to use his hands.

Heskel nodded, surprisingly agreeing to Veks' advice.

Seeing the Wight also advocate for subterfuge, made Jakob relent his impatient approach. "Very well, we move around. It may be a short detour, but if you say that is the wisest choice, I shall listen to your advice."

Veks was unsure why, but the acknowledgement made him feel proud, even though a kid who was at least four years his junior had been the one to give him praise.

After breaking away from the rapidly-lengthening queue to Haven, they went east through the Meat Market, Helmsgarten's most well-known slave district. It was a bit off-putting how much the Boy was talking about the slaves and their features, as though he was a farmer looking to breed the optimal cattle or a butcher trying to precure the best slices of meat. It took a special sort of callous disregard for human life to view people in such a manner, but Veks found himself nodding along, as though he too shared the opinions, while the voice telling him it was insanity grew quieter-and-quieter.

When the gate-bridge leading north to the Jewel district came into view, a beautiful woman ran screaming out in front of them. She clutched Veks by his robes, pleading with him to save her.

Without any prompting from the Boy, he already knew enough to see that the runaway slave was no fit subject for the Fleshcrafter's machinations. With his clawed right hand, he gripped the woman by her throat and lifted her off of him. Her pleading immediately froze in her lungs when she got a peek at his face, before he tossed her aside, and the trio moved on.

"You could have kept her, if you fancied," Jakob told him.

"She wasn't my type," Veks simply replied. "Besides, you need subjects who are taller and naturally athletic, right?"

"Indeed."

From the opulent Jewel district, they passed north again through the beautifully-maintained Park of Delights, where blossoming trees and flowers lined the many quaint pathways.

From the Park they headed west, reaching the Noble Quarter, where the colourful aristocracy flaunted their wealth in public and frolicked in cafés. There was an abundance of slaves here, but, despite their humiliating circumstances, they looked well-fed and content, unlike the poor sods in Market West, who had all been in some state of impoverishment and often were the possessions of violent people.

Unlike Veks, who almost drooled at the abundant wealth on display, Jakob had no interest in the noble-born, as they were generally out-of-shape and overweight from a life of excess and indulgence. Apparently, he had heard from his Grandfather that proud people were more difficult to turn with the demonic *Ritual of Abeyance*, as a quirk of the spell was that the Invoker actually had to be at a higher stature than the person they wished to enslave, and getting an aristocrat to view him as someone to be respected seemed a pointless waste of time. It seemed he would rather stick to the easily-bought-and-easily-forgotten slaves, whose very nature was to be subservient.

The Thief was weighed down by the many shiny trinkets, rings, coinpurses, and necklaces he had stolen by the time they reached the gate-bridge to Market North, but he kept up the ruse of the Magister-in-a-hurry that had gotten them across every checkpoint thus far, even though the guards seemed uninterested in even checking the aristocrats who passed back-and-forth. They likely did not believe there could be any danger in this part of Helmsgarten, doubtlessly because of their proximity to the clergy and their Holy Guard Corps based in Haven next-door, not to mention the Adventurers' Guild whose headquarters lay three districts over.

Market North was akin to West, but with many significant upgrades. The cobblestones were even and laid with care. The weeds were contained, and trees and long lanes of grass separated the pedestrian footpaths from the central road that ferried goods on horse-drawn wagons. The district was almost just one long street with shops, with a few specialist stores like a horse accessorist, a barber, a hair salon, and a vacant-looking apothecary.

The filth river that flowed through all the southern sector was a clean rapid-flowing stream in these parts, the actual effluvia and refuse kept underground in tunnels that connected to the river in the lower districts of Helmsgarten.

As they walked through the main thoroughfare, alleyways hinted of reclusive backroads that would be good for their clandestine activities.

They had only just passed by the Apothecary when a woman ran out of the door, calling after them.

"Magister! Magister!"

It took Veks a moment to realise that *he* was the 'Magister', but then he stopped to allow the woman to catch up to them.

"Magister Hargraves! I am terribly sorry I did not notice your arrival."

"No harm done," he said, allowing his voice to fall a few octaves, as he imagined someone with such an imposing name ought to have a deep tone.

"That pleases me greatly!" The woman was very enthusiastic, and not a little bit frightened by his presence and his entourage, but Veks gathered this was a normal response to Magisters in Helmsgarten. "I cannot express how delighted we were to hear that you wanted to take over the Apothecary after Saemuel went to Haven to join the clergy."

"I assume the payment has already found its way to you?" Veks asked, seizing the opportunity presented to them. The Boy seemed to humour him, so it was worth trying out. And an Apothecary could get away with a lot of otherwise-suspect activities. Like hiding a cannibal in a mortuary.

"Certainly! It arrived a fortnight ago. We have finished preparing the boxes you sent along with the payment, and you should find the bed- and bathroom to your exact specifications."

"Excellent. And for my companions?"

"I am very sorry, Magister, we were not informed you were bringing anyone else. Last we heard was that you were held up due to some mess in the Mage Quarter."

"I see," Veks replied, then improvised, "my latest missive must've been lost passing through Market West. I decided to bring a bodyguard and my assistant."

The lady nodded eagerly, clearly she saw this as good news. Veks guessed that Market North and its neighbouring districts suffered from a shortage of apothecaries and doctors.

"This here is…" he started, pointing at the boy.

The Boy put the palm of his stitched-flesh glove to his chest, the vile 'fabric' supple like a sponge and the indent made by his fingers slow to bounce back to its normal state. Even having thought himself grown-used-to-it, Veks could not keep his gorge from rising. "My name is Jakob. I am a Flesh—"

"He's a surgeon," Veks quickly interrupted the Boy, before he threw their fortuitousness to the wind.

"And your guard?" the lady asked, taking a frightened step back when the monstrosity settled its masked gaze on her.

"That is my construct, Heskel. He is mute." He guessed it was common knowledge that Magisters possessed magical beings as their servants, at least, he had often heard such said about them while employed under Toby in Market West.

The Wight grunted something that was quite possibly a warning that the Thief was overstepping his bounds, but he seemed cognisant enough to play along like his Ward.

"Do you have a basement?" Jakob asked the lady.

"We do, but it is kept as storage space."

Before the boy could explain that he needed a place to dismember people in quiet, Veks replied, "His work is very sensitive to the weather, and often comes with certain smells that would offend the denizens of the district, I'm sure."

"I see, I will have my servants clear out room for you."

"Very good," Veks replied, feeling as though he had a handle on the situation again. "May we have a look?"

"Of course!"

The Apothecary was a two-storey, with a basement and an attic, which, when compared to the Thieves' Den was quite an upgrade. The façade was an artful amalgam of stone and wood, with metal bars curled into fanciful patterns as window-shutters to prevent break-ins. It had a backdoor that led to a closed courtyard behind the building and an alleyway beyond its wooden walls. The basement had stairs leading down to it both inside the house, as well as in the courtyard, which seemed to please the Boy quite a lot.

The main floor was the shop, where rows of tall shelves stood stacked with herbs, powdered medicine, dried meats, and *things* in jars. The shop also featured a counter, a small backroom for private consultations and treatments, as well as display cases.

It seemed that whoever 'Hargraves' was, he was a Magister quite proficient in alchemy and medicine-making, given the countless plants, hard pills, and powdered drugs the lady claimed he had sent them ahead of his arrival. Many of the items came with labels, written in Novarocian, *Llemanian*, *Octef*, and *Heimlish*. After all, the nobles often spoke at least two, three and sometimes even four languages fluently, and Market North also catered to foreign nobles quite often as well.

The language of Octef was the only one that Veks had seen before, but he was aware of the other two and their alphabets, though he only knew that they were the languages of the neighbouring nation-states: *Lleman* and *Heimdale*.

Octef, as its name implied, was the language spoken by the Clergy of the Eight Saint, who was worshipped across all of the continent, according to their sermons at least. Having never left the confines of the metropolis, Veks had no way of knowing whether *this* was propaganda or fact.

"Do you know how to read these?" he whispered to Jakob, when the lady, who had sold Hargraves the Apothecary, was busy ordering her sweaty-and-tired-looking servants to clear out space in the basement.

"Of course," the Boy replied. "Do you want me to teach them to you?"

Veks considered it for a moment, but then shook his head, the hood of his robe momentarily blinding him as it shifted around. After correcting it, he replied, "I can barely read Novarocian, so you'd just be wasting your time."

"But you speak Chthonic fluently?" he replied, his voice not betraying suspicion, but merely straight-forward inquisitiveness.

"I don't know when I learnt it," Veks replied, realising they were having their conversation in the foreign tongue.

"It took me three years of daily intensive study to master it, and I still learn new things every day, but you wield Chthonic like a natural-born."

Before the Boy could dig any deeper into the mystery, the lady called them over to follow her upstairs.

The upstairs had a fancy bathroom, with a type of toilet Veks had never seen before, with a pipe that went through the building and straight to the sewers underground, and a bath that was hooked up to running water through similar, albeit thinner, pipes. Below the bath was a compartment for starting a fire to heat up the water within the large tub.

The bedroom held one enormous bed, the size of a dining table for eight, and with two stacked mattresses, a stainless and intact sheet, a duvet filled with pillowy feathers, a top blanket to make it look neat when not in use, and three large pillows.

When the lady asked, "I hope it is to your standards," Veks almost replied that he had never before seen such luxury, even on his spending-spree with the hundreds of Novarins he had received from the young Fleshcrafter.

After clearing his throat, he replied haughtily, "It will suffice."

The lady seemed to tense up at the implied insufficiency, but then Jakob changed the subject.

"I will go prepare the laboratorium."

Veks nodded, but the lady quickly reprimanded the Boy, "Is *that* any way to address your Master!?"

The Thief froze, as though he was about to witness Jakob's tail unfurl and pulp the lady against the fine wooden wall of his new bedroom, but, to his surprise, the Boy bowed his head and said elegantly.

"Magister, if you will allow my leave."

With a dismissive gesture, he sent him on his way, wondering if he would be punished later and sweat dripping down the inside of his stolen robe.

"These creatures are quite amusing," Jakob remarked after they had killed the two servants in the basement and were busy setting up the various workstations they needed, not to mention clearing ample room for ritual circles on the floor. "So easily swayed to believe falsehoods."

"**They are as automatons, following prepared plans.**"

Jakob considered the Wight's words carefully, wondering if he was quoting something he had never himself heard Grandfather say, or if they were words of wisdom he had come up with. The latter made him somewhat uncomfortable, as it indicated quite a lot of autonomous thought, but then again, the Wight had already acted against his Creator, so perhaps he had evolved beyond his original design. It was simultaneously an enticing and worrying prospect, as Jakob, like any Fleshcrafter, feared his creations turning on him despite the many safeguards that should prevent such a thing in the first place. It was however quite possible that Heskel had disobeyed his Creator by also obeying his initial command to protect his heir, after all, letting Raleigh 'play' with Jakob would go against Heskel's directive.

Jakob took off his scent-mask, letting the coppery tang of the dead men in the corner wash over him, inhaling it slowly as though he was savouring the scent of a flower.

"I need to know that Grandfather won't find this place."

"**His eyes see far.**"

"Then help me blur their vision or hide us from his burning gaze. He will not relent until he has the tomes in his hands."

Heskel seemed conflicted for a moment, and rightly so, given what he was asking of him, but then he nodded slowly.

With the blood of their recent victims, the Wight began painting hideous runes on the walls; runes so awful that Jakob felt his gaze naturally wander when he tried to focus on them, as though they were the sun and staring directly would burn his retinas.

After about ten minutes, Veks came skipping down the stairs.

"Have you seen—?" his gaze wandered across the room, his eyes twitching as he beheld the symbols, before it settled on the two bodies stacked on-top of each other near some empty crates.

With a sigh, the Thief-turned-Magister wandered back up the stairs, his prior enthusiasm suddenly deflated.

"It seems they already left out the courtyard," Jakob overheard Veks inform the lady above.

"We will need to soundproof this place," he told the Wight.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

Only the next day, they had a queue outside their door from early morning, and, given Veks' propensity for sleeping-in, Jakob ended up doing something he had never before considered a possibility: helping people with their ailments.

As it turned out, there was little difference between prescribing treatments and dismantling bodies, though the former was quite a boring affair, given the fact that almost everyone who came to him were in need of one treatment or another for venereal diseases.

When the Thief finally awoke and donned his crimson Magister's robe, Jakob told him which medicines to give for which type of warts, herpes, infections, and so forth. Further, he gave him clear instructions to only bother him in his lab for something serious or if he ran out of stock and needed new batches of medicines. The studious young boy had already memorised their inventory and seemed to instinctively know what the medicines in both powdered and pill forms did, simply by looking at them, as well as how to recreate them and how to up their potency.

By early evening, their entire stock of prepared medicines for venereal diseases was gone, and Jakob bid the pretend-Magister close the shop for the day.

"I suppose I will have to show you how to produce some select medicines yourself," he told Veks, as he had been interrupted in his careful dismantling of the dead servants eighteen times within the span of just five hours.

"Boss… if I knew that it was possible to make *this* much money simply treating the customers of the Pleasure District, then I would never have gotten into thievery."

Jakob had to admit, their profit was astounding, as it seemed the aristocrats cared less about their wallets than their libido and reputation of purity.

"In the morning, I want you to buy some more of *these* ingredients," Jakob told him, providing Veks with an extensive list. Many of the plants they made the medicines with were on the list, but so too were things that quite clearly were just replacements for the tools and materials lost with the previous laboratorium.

"What do you need cow dung for?"

"Fertiliser."

"Aha… and *this*, does it say '*three slaves of healthy constitution and lithe build*'?"

"I must have made a mistake, *that* was supposed to go on Heskel's list."

Veks scratched the patch of skin next to his right horn awkwardly.

"And how much should I spend on it?"

"I don't care."

"Do I get to keep the leftover coins?"

"Will *that* motivate you?"

"Motivate me? Heck, I would run all the way to Market West to get these on the cheap, so I could keep a fortune for myself, unfortunately that marketplace seems to have recently *dried up*, so I suppose I'll have to make do with a minor fortune instead."

The young boy chuckled, the noise sounding somewhat disturbing through his scent-mask. It was the first time Veks had ever heard him laugh. The boy seemed to notice as well, and quickly retreated to his basement, before he could betray more of his emotions.

"Now then…" Veks muttered to himself. "How much of *this* can I steal, and how much do I need to buy?"

The next three weeks were relatively peaceful, with only a few squabbles in their shop: such as when a customer returned demanding a ridiculous sum as recompense for receiving the wrong dosage of medicine and becoming impotent, thanks to Veks' inexperience mixing ingredients; and also when a nobleman became so irate by their lack of any drugs to increase his virility and 'sword-length' that he sicced his guards on Veks, only for them to be pulped to death after Heskel's timely appearance.

Leaning back in his chair during a lull in activity, his cloven hooves on the counter-top, Veks hummed contently to himself, while admiring the newest ring on his right index finger. It was a coiled serpent of jade devouring a ruby in the shape of an apple, and had cost him forty-two-hundred Novarins in the Jewel district. The ring was joined by six others of varying designs and metals, spread across the fingers on his clawed hand, though it was by far his most expensive one thus far.

The whispers had been quite pleased by his latest windfall, and he had come to find that every time he bought something new and ostentatious, a warmth spread through him, while the whispering voices praised him endlessly.

The Thief-turned-Apothecary had also paid many visits to the Pleasure District, which lay suspiciously-close to Haven, and was now intimately-familiar with the medicines he himself mixed and peddled.

His quiet was suddenly interrupted by a woman in a torn brown dress bursting through the door, panting heavily. She was quite pretty, though her red eyes betrayed a wild nature beneath the beautiful exterior, and the frizzy and disorderedly brown hair did not help.

"Don't move! And… give me all your coin!" she yelled, locking the door behind her, and pointing a rapier, which was already covered in blood, at his face. With a simple lunge she could clear the space between them and slice his throat.

Veks smiled, running his forked tongue across his sharp teeth. He was unsure when his tongue and teeth had changed, but they were far from the only changes his body had undergone as of late.

"Are you on the run, *young lady*?"

He pulled the hood back with his ring-covered clawed hand, exposing curved horns, glowing-orange eyes, and pale-green scales.

Before she could reply, he leapt from his spot and pinned her to the floor, his palm on her throat, the sharp claws digging into the wood beneath her, and his knee on her sword-arm.

With a fierce glare, she met his eyes, and said, "I killed my former master and need a place to hide from those who seek vengeance on his behalf."

"That's much better," he said, his face only a handspan from hers. "No one takes *my* property and lives."

Veks pulled his claws out of the wooden floor and got up, then offered her his left hand.

"Let's see what the boss says."

The *Incarnate* led Sig down a pitch-black staircase, having no trouble seeing where he was stepping, while each of her steps were careful. At the bottom, a heavy door led into a large basement that stood about three metres to the ceiling, and a vile stench wafted in her direction, making her freeze, before the Incarnate's grip on her wrist drove her unquestioningly forward.

He was far from the first Incarnate she had met, though there was a different air about him, where the ones she had been introduced to in the past were slothful and cruel.

All her thoughts of Demonspawn were banished when she stood within the charnel house of a basement, a slight figure in a bulbous-and-off-putting hooded apron, made of what she instantly recognised as flesh, leant over a large stone altar, whereupon lay a meticulous framework of bones, though not forming any creature that she was familiar with.

"Boss," the Incarnate said, addressing the short man.

Without warning, an enormous silhouette appeared behind the Bone-Collector, its masked face staring directly at her.

The 'Boss' looked up from his work, noted her appearance, and then looked back down at his work with disinterest.

"**She is touched**," the silhouette at the slight figure's back intoned ominously. He spoke a language that she had only recently gotten a fledgeling grasp on: *Chthonic*.

The Bone-Assembler looked back up at her, properly taking in her features.

"You're certain?" His voice was very young, convincing that it was not a man beneath the awful robes, but rather a *boy*.

The giant grunted.

"I must be losing my touch." He turned to the Incarnate Magister. "Veks, where did you find *this one*?"

"I didn't," he replied, now in Novarocian, probably for her sake. "She came to me. My fortune seems to be ascendent."

"Quite," the boy replied humourlessly in the same tongue.

With a simple tug that belied tremendous strength, 'Veks' brought her in front of himself and to her knees before his Master. It seemed strange for an Incarnate wearing the robes of a Magister to show such subservience to a mere Bone-Collector. Then again, the Boy in the hideous stitched-flesh robes did carry an imposing air about him, so perhaps she was missing something obvious.

Before her fate was decided by whatever mood the Incarnate's Master was in, she quickly said out loud, in shaky Chthonic: "My name is Sig of the *Eyeless*, former slave to *Magister Wilheim*. I possess the mastery over *Hemolatric* spells!"

"You speak the *Old Tongue*?" the Boy asked in Novarocian, his young voice sounding so innocent yet commanding at the same time.

Sig nodded eagerly. "I do! Please, spare me! I have slain my former master and seek refuge from reprisal, but in return I will freely share all that I know!"

"You can start by telling us who the Eyeless are."

Momentarily wrongfooted by the fact that they did not know, yet spoke Chthonic with such mastery, she realised that they had no clue about anything that happened in Market North, Haven, and the Noble Quarter. She had the brief inclination to feed them lies, but her intuition told her that it was folly, and thus far it had always guided her true.

"It is a cult of noblemen and Magisters, who worship *the Flayed Lady*."

The Boy laughed haughtily, puffs of air venting from his red mask, "So that is why you call yourself Eyeless… such arrogance to believe *you* can subvert the will of the Watcher."

The Flayed Lady was a former vassal to the Watcher of Worlds, but had gained enough power to challenge his iron-tight reign of the void between the stars. In the grand scheme of things, the Cult of the Eyeless was a powerless and insignificant play-pretend of bored nobles with too much free time, and Magisters who were in short supply of money and thus entertained the walking money-bags with

esoteric rituals and lore. But Magister Wilheim had wielded *true* power, granted to him by the Lady. But she was a fickle mistress and found endless joy in scheming and betrayal, so she had no sooner granted him power before she had granted Sig just enough to kill him when the right opportunity presented itself.

The Giant muttered something and his Master nodded thoughtfully.

"You may stay. Your presence will be amusing, though I doubt I will have much to learn from you, but you are welcome to prove me wrong.

"But do not leave this place, because I *will* find out, and I *will* kill you. These are my terms: do you agree to them?"

"Yes, *Milord*!"

She could practically hear his smile as he said, "Then, as the Watcher is our witness, a contract has been formed."

Sig stayed on her knees, while the Incarnate, Veks, went back up into the Apothecary.

"And you may call me Jakob," the Boy said, "I abhor platitudes and flattery."

"I will not forget!"

"Good. Now... Hemolatric spells could help with *my work*," he started, but then, upon seeing her grimace, added, "However, if you do not have the stomach for it, you may make yourself useful to Veks upstairs."

With a quick bow, she hurried up the stairs behind the Incarnate, wondering if she had walked from a den of wolves into a spider's web. Given the boy was an adherent of the Watcher, it seemed all but a certainty that her days were numbered, but Sig believed that the Flayed Lady yet had plans for her and all she needed was to bid her time.

"I know, I know," Jakob said to an irate Heskel. "Such an insolent whelp must be punished. Though I need to give some thought to what sort of punishment is adequate. Killing her would be too merciful."

It seemed downright bizarre to Jakob that someone with enough knowledge of Chthonic to speak it, albeit shakily and full of tonal flaws, and who knew of *the Great Ones Above*, would willingly choose to position themselves opposite of the Watcher, whose eyes saw all that was, all that is, and all that will ever be. It was akin to setting oneself aflame and then renouncing the water that would extinguish the fire.

Without the Watcher, the void became chaos unbound, and all rituals lost their power. Contracts became uncertain, and summonings became fraught with danger as their beckoning calls might spawn *anything* curious enough to investigate. In a universe of such terrible forces, the Watcher was the warden that kept all things in balance. The Flayed Lady was treachery and betrayal made manifest, and to put such a vile deity before *the Lord Above All* was the ultimate heresy in his mind.

"How long have you been an Incarnate?" Sig dared to ask, when Veks had showed her where to restock the shelves from the box of items he had handed her.

"I don't know what *that* means. But if you work diligently in silence until you have finished restocking, I'll indulge you."

She solemnly began stacking the dried herbs, charm stones, medicines in pill boxes, purified water, ampules of various oils, and so on. During the forty-minutes-or-so it took her to restock every single shelf, Veks leant in his chair, hooves on the countertop, and an amused grin on his face.

"You really made a mistake telling the truth to the Boss. I don't know whoever this Lady you worship is, but I've never seen him *that* angry. And trust me, he is not a person you should get on the bad side of…"

"I've been through more hardship than you can imagine; a little boy who collects bones is no threat to me."

"Oh sure, and why, pray tell, are you *still* here then? Deep down, you know that you're in over your head. It may be a kinder fate to leave you to the wolves biting at your heels than to let him have his way with you."

"This is just the most convenient place for me to hide," she lied, and tried to change the subject, "You said you would answer my question about when you became an Incarnate."

Veks chuckled, the sound a deep rasp. To him, Sig was no different than the petty aristocrats who believed themselves masterminds by forcing youths to serve them, such as how he himself had ended up in the employ of Toby.

He indicated his horns, claw, and hooves, "Are *these* what you mean by 'Incarnate'?"

"Yes, and the tongue, and the fangs, and the tail, and the scales.."

"Oh, right, I forgot about the tail…" he replied, swishing it about beneath his crimson robes. "But whatever you're referring to, most of these changes were a reward for my service to the Boss, the rest just happened on their own."

"H-he changed your body?"

"That's right. He's a Fleshcrafter."

"I've never met an Incarnate who hadn't formed a contract with a demon. The changes to your body are nearly identical, though your horns are larger than the ones I've seen."

"I'm telling you," he said, suddenly next to her, poking her in the forehead with his clawed index finger, "I am not an 'Incarnate'."

"So you don't have demonic powers?"

"No. Unless you count my cunning," he replied with a slick smile, his face still close to hers.

"You don't hear voices telling you what to do?"

"Hmm," he replied, scratching the base of his right horn.

"You *do* hear voices then," she concluded.

"Sure, let's call them that."

"But no powers? Really?"

"Really."

"That's a shame; even the lowliest Incarnates are granted immense powers, each according to their chosen *Saint of Vice*."

Veks pulled out the mirror-blade from within his robe. It had never left his person since he had gotten it from the Demonologist's library. "The voices started when I found *this*. Perhaps the changes too. But I'm telling you, the rest were the work of Jakob. He simply remade me the way I was inspired to become, thanks to the whisperings."

"But, you're identical to a half-demon!"

"So? He is no stranger to demons."

"Let me see *that*—" Sig reached out to touch the shortsword, but before she got within a hair's breadth of its splendour, Veks pulled it away jealously and gripped her head with his clawed right

hand. The talon-like nails dug deep into the skin and flesh of her cheeks and forehead, but instead of cowering in fear and pain, she simply froze.

"Do. Not. Touch. *My*. Possessions," he hissed, his voice like a cobra tensed-up, poised to snap forward and bite down with its venomous fangs.

He pulled his nails out of her head, letting a tremendous amount of blood splatter on the floor of the Apothecary, between the shelves of neatly-stacked inventory.

"No more questions," he then told her. "And clean up your mess, the noon rush starts soon."

It had been a constant since they opened up shop that noon would bring a sudden influx of customers, begging for treatment to their ailments, most of them having awoken late following a night of carnal excess in the Pleasure District, finding that their pleasure came with a strong burning aftertaste.

Before he could return to his chair, Sig told him, "I can figure out which type of demon holds sway over you."

Later that evening, Veks 'borrowed' some blood from Jakob's laboratorium and brought it to the attic, where Sig was waiting for him. She spent about an hour, carefully drawing out a ritual circle with a septagram inside it, and a different demonic symbol at each of its seven points.

Surprisingly, he understood what it did and how it worked. As well as the fact that it was very basic Demonology, to the point that even a simple-minded slave imp could perform the ritual.

"It's a soul compass," he stated.

"How did you know?"

Veks shrugged.

"I'm almost terrified to find out what Saint holds sway over you. If it has granted you insight into Demonology *and* Chthonic, it must be very powerful. Depending on the Saint, that can mean horrible things."

"Such as?"

"Well, it is quite possible that you will spontaneously manifest the Demon possessing you, and if that Demon is a powerful servant of either Sloth, Pride, or Envy, this district and all those around it are doomed."

Veks chuckled. "They're already doomed. The boy prodigy is in town and he leaves quite a mess in his wake."

Sig did not get the joke, but then again, Veks could not just tell her that Jakob had summoned a Viscountess of Voracity, so perhaps it was for the best that it went over her head.

"Anyway, step into the circle."

Veks disobediently ignored her instructions, pulled out his mirror-blade and slid it across his right palm, so that blood drops fell into the centre of the ritual circle.

"What are—" Sig started, scolding him like a teacher, but then she stopped. The ritual was working, as Veks knew it would. It was a crude and oversized reinterpretation of what should be a simple drawing with a brush and a diameter no wider than a hand. Clearly, Sig's version of the Soul Compass ritual had been made by someone who misunderstood how it worked, since it was as large as a summoning circle, to allow for a person to stand within.

What the ritual did was quite simple: the seven symbols representing *the Unholy Septology* were each a sort of magnet, which drew towards it matter that it was similar to. It was possible to expand or limit the Soul Compass ritual, to both include or remove certain of the Entities you were comparing a soul too. Such rituals were often performed by the Clergy of the Eight Saint to ensure their followers

remained true and uncorrupted, albeit a stylised version that did not betray its demonic origin. Further, it was the blood that was the catalyst, and thus a person need not stand within the ritual for it to function.

A fat yellow flame grew from the centre of the ritual, as though Veks' blood was flammable oil. This fire expanded until it encompassed the ritual circle and all the lines that formed the septagram, then it quickly rose towards the ceiling, before vanishing, leaving the blood in the centre untouched, as well as a single of the seven symbols. The rest of the blood that the ritual had been painted with was charred and black.

The symbol that remained was Demonic for "*Avarice*", depicted as the abstract profile of a mask with large curved horns and a leering smile with the tongue out like a serpent.

Though wrongfooted by her authority being usurped, Sig breathed a sigh of relief upon seeing that it was not a symbol attributed to the three aforementioned Sinners.

"Now your turn," Veks said, grabbing the bucket of blood and the simple brush Sig had used.

Though she seemed uninterested in sharing, the pretend-Magister's tone left no room to argue.

Within five minutes, Veks had drawn out a smaller-and-simpler version of what Sig had laboured with for an hour, and not once had he stopped to check his lines, knowing them to be true.

Before Sig could ask any questions, he grabbed her hand and slit open her thumb with one of his claws, her blood dripping into the centre of the septagram.

A muddy green flame appeared this time, and left behind three symbols after washing over the blood drawing. The symbols for Pride and Envy were left unscarred, with the one for Wrath being slightly erased by the flames, meaning it was not as prominent as the first two.

Sig stared at the aftermath with a mix of surprise, dismay, and fascination. "I was unaware a Soul Compass could be performed in such a way, even on one like me who has sworn no fealty to any of *the Seven Sinners*."

Veks laughed. "It seems you know nothing close to what you claimed. I doubt that the Boss will be pleased to hear that. I mean, did you figure you could alleviate his ire with such trivial rituals?"

"I—"

"If I were you, I'd run as far away from him as possible, before he finds out."

"He said that if I leave this place, he will kill me."

"Are you willing to take that risk? I'm not sure which fate is worse, truth be told, but you had best figure out some way to impress him before he decides for you, otherwise, you should be gone by the time I return from my errands. Maybe if you leave now, you may live a-day-or-two in freedom."

Sig looked panicked, like a cornered animal. She was clearly way more in-over-her-head than she tried to convince herself. The former Thief would've pitied her, if it wasn't for her arrogant ignorance. Truly, the aspects of pride and jealously held sway over her soul, even without a demon afflicting her.

She was still just sitting there in the attic-space when he left the Apothecary.

XI

As he leapt from building-to-building, returning from his visit to the Pleasure District, Veks spotted something slumped against the wooden wall of the Apothecary's courtyard.

When he came close and saw what it was, he bent low and threw it over his shoulder, before heading down the exterior staircase that led into the basement.

"Hey Boss," he greeted, as he found Jakob seated on a stool, holding a sealed jar with a long-legged jet-black spider within, which seemed to fascinate him endlessly. Strangely, the boy had left his gloves on the table next to him. It was the first time Veks had seen him without them on. His fingers were skeletal and the skin pale to the point of translucence, with every vein below being visible.

"I brought you something," he continued, hoping his words were not falling on deaf ears. "I found it outside just now. Figured you might get some use out of it."

After a few more moments of still not being acknowledged, Veks frowned and laid his 'gift' on the stone floor, near the table that Jakob often used when dissecting and 'dismantling' corpses. With a sigh, he looked around for the Wight, spotting him bent over his own project at the far end of the room, where he carefully worked a chisel and hammer to engrave a thin metal sheet with symbols. Next to the kneeling giant lay curled-up-and-blackened sheets of metal, as well as some that were reduced to molten slag or deformed into strange shapes that hurt to look at directly. Something instinctively told him to not bother the Wight, lest he wanted to end up like one of those failed pieces of metal.

Jakob looked away from the weaver spider Heskel had caught for him, spotting what Veks had left behind. It was the corpse of an emaciated and diseased dog.

A contented sigh of spent air left his scent-mask and he put his stitched-flesh gloves back on, after setting the jar down. It seemed that the former Thief was turning into something of a lucky charm, as he had managed to bring Jakob exactly what he had been seeking: an animal brain. Granted, he had to carefully extract it first, and then clean it and prepare it, but he could finally continue with making his next construct.

"Heskel."

A few moments passed in silence, and then came the sounds of something like a *pop* and the *screech* of tortured metal, followed by a frustrated grunt. Jakob knew that the Wight had once again failed to transcribe a Chthonic letter to the metal pages he had provided him.

After discovering that the symbols, which the Wight had drawn upon the walls of the basement to elude Grandfather's watchful gaze, were from the Chthonic Alphabet, Jakob had instructed him to transcribe them for him, so that he could have a codex of them and learn how to recreate them.

Grandfather had taught him the dead language using the Novarocian alphabet, and Jakob had simply assumed this was because the ancient tongue predated written text or its letters had been lost to oblivion. It infuriated him to now discover that it was something that had intentionally been kept from him, perhaps due to the tremendous power the ancient letters could invoke. If he could learn the alphabet though, he could not only create a being to rival Heskel, but one superior too.

After all, if demons could be summoned using their alphabet and symbols, and the dead could be given life and sentience using Necroscript, then what wonders could he achieve with the letters of a language whose very utterance could spontaneously manifest *the Great Ones Above* into the world?

Jakob felt cheated that this knowledge had been kept out of his reach, as though he was a child not trusted to hold his father's sword, lest he injure himself and others with it.

The heavy steps of the Wight refocused his gaze on the corpse on the floor.

"Look what he has brought us," Jakob said delighted, despite his inner turmoil.

"**Sample healthy?**"

"Let's find out, shall we?"

Sig was vigorously scrubbing a stain created by a customer's careless handling of one of the ampules filled with an acidic substance. It had burnt the floor black and eaten into the wood somewhat, and though Veks knew that it was futile trying to clean it up, he enjoyed torturing the arrogant squatter. She had yet to make up her mind it seemed, so he was trying to force the issue.

Truth be told, he hoped she would stick around, if only to see how the matter would play out and what sort of wicked designs the Boy had for her. However, he was also fully prepared for Jakob to ask him to hunt her down if she did decide to make a break for it.

The Incarnate shifted his hooves on the counter. He was quite content to remain in the situation he found himself, since the money from the Apothecary afforded him a life of luxury and excess, but the whisperings were growing restless, their slick voices becoming louder and more insistent with every passing day.

As though one of the Saints had heard his inner plea, the door shot open, slamming against the wall with a window-shattering blow. A single crimson-robed person stood on the threshold with a look of anger and indignance painted on his face. The fading light of the day backlit him ominously.

"What are *you* doing in my Apothecary!"

Veks laughed as the realisation of the man's identity hit him, but his laughter only seemed to infuriate the newcomer, who thundered across the floorboards, ignoring Sig and heading straight for the man who had assumed his identity.

The Magister took a step back when he spotted Veks' hooves on the counter, *his* counter.

"You must be Hargraves," the Identity-Thief replied.

"What is a demon-scum like *you* doing in my store!? Was it *Jarlson* who set you up to this!?"

"You may call this a *happy little accident* if you will."

Hargraves lifted the palm of his hand at Veks threateningly, but before the Incarnate could react, Sig jumped up behind the offended Magister and slammed the head of her brush into his temple. The blow snapped the brush at the handle and sent the man to the floor with a loud *thump* that shook the nearby shelves, rattling the ampules, flasks, and jars.

Veks vaulted the counter in a single languid motion, then bent down next to the Magister, putting a hand on his neck.

"Nicely done," he remarked, then lifted the unconscious man over his shoulder like a sack of flour and went towards the basement staircase.

"Lock up the store, will you?"

"Hey Boss," Veks called as he came out into the soundproofed basement. The Incarnate drew up short when he saw what the Fleshcrafter and his huge servant had done with the corpse he had

brought-in earlier that day. The brain of the creature was suspended in some strange oily liquid, and the body had been completely disassembled, many of its bones joining the set-aside framework that occupied one of the tables next to the planters that held sprouted seeds of Misty Reminiscence. He still had no clue what it would become when finished, but it had at least six legs it seemed.

"I take it you could make use of my gift," he continued.

"Thank you, Veks," Jakob said, surprising the Incarnate with his sincerity. The young boy looked at the burden he was carrying, noticing it for the first time.

"Who do you have there?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you," he replied with a grin.

Jakob seemed to consider this for a moment, before answering, "The Apothecary Magister?"

Veks' grin grew wider.

Sig was watching from the doorway, as bloodred light filled the basement. Suddenly, the light vanished, and the 'Boss' clicked his tongue in annoyance, his scent-mask laying discarded nearby. She realised she had not seen Jakob's full appearance before, but she was also uncertain whether that was a blessing or not.

"This is a waste of the precious-little Blood I saved," the boy said in Chthonic, at least from what she understood of it. She was unsure what blood he was referring to though. The ancient language was also rife with contextual words that meant something different depending on the context, so it was possible that it was not blood at all, which the boy was referring to.

"Why don't you just join us?" Veks said from behind her. Somehow he had snuck up on her, even though she had seen him enter the basement before her.

She jumped in surprise, but he quickly grabbed her mouth, putting one of his clawed fingers against his lips. Then he moved past her in the narrow hallway and held the laboratorium door open for her to follow him in.

"No luck?" Veks asked as she followed him to where the Magister was bound to a table, a cloth gag in his mouth and ropes restricting his movements. He was speaking Novarocian to include her, but she felt like a kid being denied access to the adults' conversation.

"I have tried twice now, and I cannot afford to waste more of the Demon's Blood on this. The Abeyance does not take hold."

Sig stared in fascination at the symbols drawn on the forehead, chest, and stomach of the Magister. She had never before seen the ritual the boy was attempting, but she could guess from its name what its purpose was.

The Incarnate stared at the man for a moment, then said, "You're using the Lord and the Squire to represent yourself and Hargraves."

"Indeed."

"It won't work. The Lord has to have true mastery over the Squire. He is a Magister, the upper echelon of the city, while he may only view you as a Magister or even someone beneath him, meaning the ritual will not work."

Sig thought the Boy would punish the Incarnate for his haughtiness, so she was surprised to see him nod his head in agreement.

"The question is, how do we make him *realise* his place."

"**Teach him fear,**" rumbled the deep voice of Jakob's Guard, startling Sig for a second time. The monstrous giant stood so still in the shadows that she had not even noticed him.

"I-I can help make him submit to you," she boldly said in Novarocian, not trusting herself to sound convincing enough in Chthonic.

The chillingly-calm eyes of the Fleshcrafter pierced into hers as he asked simply, "How?"

"With my Hemolatric spells, I can torture him without causing permanent damage."

Jakob's eyes narrowed, the expression seeming sinister on his pubescent face, but then he nodded slowly. "Show me."

Sig took a deep breath. If she wanted to live, her best bet was not to run like the Incarnate tempted her, but rather to make herself useful to the dangerous boy and his monstrosities. She drew the small knife she always carried for such spells, and carved a shallow symbol into the palm of her right hand, the tissue there already so used to the procedure that hardly any blood flowed as she cut through old scars. Once, when Master Wilheim had taught her these spells, she cried in pain at the sensation, but now she relished how the power of the Flayed Lady flowed through her, engorging her hand and fingers with blood and heating up the skin.

She put her hand against the chest of the bound Magister, and it was not long before his agonising and pleading screams echoed through the basement.

It took three days of methodical torture to finally break the Magister, but Sig could tell that her favour with Jakob had grown immensely as a result of her willingness to lend her expertise to him. It elevated even further when the Ritual of Abeyance finally took hold of the Magister, and his resistance and hate-filled demeanour turned obedient and placid.

"What do you seek of me, Milord?"

"Hargraves, you will overtake the management of the Apothecary to the best of your abilities. Ensuring that all the profits from the store will be given to Veks. You will teach myself and my servants whatever we wish to learn, if asked. And, finally, you may not leave the Apothecary unless given permission."

"Understood, Milord," the Magister replied timidly, before rising from the table after his bonds were broken and putting his crimson robe back on. He went up the stairs to the store as told and *that* was that.

"That was incredible," Sig said, wide-eyed. Then an upsetting revelation hit her, "If you had the ability to make someone subservient with ease, why then did you let me retain my functions?"

The Boy put his scent-mask back on, having needed to take it off for the ritual. A puff of strange-smelling mist flowed into the stale basement air.

Though his mouth was obscured, she could tell he was smiling as he replied, "I thought it would be more amusing this way. Besides, *you* would have been a waste of the precious Blood."

The now-obedient Hargraves proved to be a strict Magister, who ruled his Apothecary with an iron-grip, demanding perfection in the line-up of medicines and pills on his shelves. He had taken to using a wooden stick to punish Sig for every mistake, real or imagined, and it took every ounce of self-control in her blood to not pulp his brain with one of the many flasks on-hand.

"Amusing that he only picks on you," Veks commented, balancing on the top of one of the shelves with a single hoof, while leafing through a book of erotic drawings.

"He's a worse slave-driver than you, Incarnate."

Whack!

Veks laughed so hard the entire shelf below him started shaking, while Sig rubbed the back of her head where the Magister's stick had hit her.

"No talking," Hargraves scolded her emotionlessly.

"I've not seen one of his puppets retain so much of their personality before," Veks commented.

Suddenly a commotion from the basement drew their attention.

Loud tapping came up the stairs, then the wall. They heard Jakob yell, "Don't let *it* escape!" moments before the basement door blew off its hinges and knocked over the shelf Veks perched atop.

When the dust settled, Heskel stood in the now-ruined doorway, while Jakob was coming up the steps behind him. Veks was buried in the contents of two crates and several ruined flasks and remedies, and *something* enormous eagerly jumped on top of him, like a playful puppy, though twice the size of a wolfhound.

Sig almost sprinted out the door when she took in its full visage, but rather than flight, she found herself frozen in abject horror. The monstrosity had a head that was somewhat smaller than Sig's own, but crafted to resemble that of a spider's, minus the multitude eyes, though still capable of sensing its surroundings it seemed. Its abdomen measured nearly two metres in length and seemed to be equipped with a spinneret to produce silk, though the outer layer of its entire body was dense reformed bone, assembled through unknown means, having no visible seams from what she could tell.

From the sternum beneath its head sprouted eight thin legs also made of bones, though these were clearly the bones of humans and animals, given their varying sizes and many segments. Each leg ended in a pair of three fingers, which it was using to grip the downed Incarnate and pin him to the floor. Lastly, it had two fangs made of finger-bones that produced a strange chittering sound, which was grating to her ears and seemed to mess with her equilibrium in some odd fashion.

Magister Hargraves stood motionless, while Heskel moved to reach for the creature, as though its terrifying visage did not deter him in the slightest. However, before he could get close, the Incarnate reached out a hand from beneath the bone spider.

"I'm okay!"

"*Loke*, heel!" Jakob demanded, now standing in the basement doorway.

The spider chittered obstinately, but relented when a moment passed, as though obliged by some additional unheard command. When it returned to its Master, he put his hand on its head and it shuttered with delight.

"W-w-what the fuck is *that*!?"

"My newest construct: Loke."

"You didn't name the previous one," Veks remarked calmly, getting up from the mess.

Sig remained in the corner of the store, a shiver going through her body when the bone spider began observing her. Its posture changed from timid to threatening in a heartbeat, but Jakob put a hand on its head before it could maul her.

"Why is it so… so…?"

"Adorable?" Veks ventured.

"…Alive!"

"I have given it a canid brain, so it was very responsive to loyalty-reinforcing Necromantic rites. It seems that rather than having to learn everything from scratch, its reanimated brain retains some of its innate attributes, such as obedience and playfulness," Jakob replied. He looked down at his newest creation, emanating pride, before continuing, "Mischievousness also seems to have made it into the mix, but it will learn to behave in due time."

"It's a dog's brain… inside a bone spider…?"

"Yes," he answered, as though that was obvious and not-at-all insane.

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Once again Sig had to question the Lady and her wisdom in leading her to this madman and his servants.

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—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XII

After his latest stint in the Pleasure District, Veks was making his way south to check up on the developments of the ruined Market West at the behest of Jakob.

His cloven hooves shattered tiles as he landed on the sloped roof of a two story. He slid down its curved overhang, before launching himself forward with a powerful kick, sending ceramic chunks crashing into the alleyway below.

The rush of flying through the air, propelled by nothing but his own superhuman physique, was an exhilarating feeling, though it hardly alleviated the incessant whisperings, whose greed was truly boundless. The Boy would pay him for playing scout, but even that promise seemed so very distant, when the craving wanted to be satiated *now*.

"A quick detour then," he told the whisperings, arresting his momentum when he landed on the next rooftop. He looked around for something to steal and did not have to wait long, as a heavily-guarded wagon rolled over the bridge that led out of the district he was in.

Veks' forked tongue licked the blood off his clawed hand, while the last survivor was slowly dragging himself away on the cobblestones, his legs ruined and useless. He would not make it far before the bloodloss killed him.

The Incarnate quickly rifled through the corpses and their belongings, finding some trinkets and jewellery that made the whispers enraptured and jubilant. There was also a chest which he opened with a few powerful kicks of his hoof on its lock, but sadly it only held books and paintings, and nothing shiny.

As though his acquisitions immediately forgotten, the whispering voices started bickering with themselves, before turning on him.

"I must find more," he told himself.

"Hey Boss," the demon-man said as he entered Jakob's lab from the courtyard entrance.

"You're back," he observed.

"I couldn't get close enough to look, without attracting the Royal Guard to me. The whole of Market West is locked down, almost as if they're trying to prevent an infection within from escaping."

Jakob blew out a puff of spent air.

Sensing his master's displeasure, Veks quickly continued, "But I found something peculiar." He lifted a squirming hairless rodent-like creature in his hand. It was slightly bigger than a squirrel, with a long bushy tail and six legs. Its eyes were massive, taking up two-thirds of its head. If not for the swirling madness they held, it would have been a cute little monstrosity.

"Drop it," Jakob said hastily.

As Veks obliged and released its tail, the creature started contorting mid-air. It landed with a heavy *thump* on the stone floor and continued writhing uncontrollably.

"There were many of these buggers hopping around Market West and its environs," Veks explained, as he observed the creature go through its death throes.

"It is one of Grandfather's scout chimera," Jakob replied absentmindedly as he too watched the six-legged rodent spasm and die on the floor of his laboratorium. "Stand back," he then warned the former Thief as the rodent stilled.

Veks had only just moved away, when the entire thing spasmed anew, *something* emerging from within. The entire skeletal structure of the chimera lifted itself out of its body, discarding skin and flesh, with many additional bone legs also emerging from its ribcage. When its horrific transformation was finished, the skull with the two huge eyes was revealed as its central core, with twelve legs around it, like a demented Daddy-Long-Legs. The swirling mass within those two big eyes started spinning, and a faint violet glow came from them, as well as strange particles of floating light like the spores of some mushrooms that grew in the bowels of the sewers.

"*My son...*"

Jakob winced when he heard the voice.

"*What have you done to my servant? I can no longer contact Heskel.*"

"He is fine."

"*I want the Tomes, son. I am no longer asking.*"

"Sending Raleigh was your way of asking!?"

"*I do not know how you managed to defeat him, but I will get those Tomes. I will find wherever you scampered to. No walls will keep me out. Give them to me willingly, and you will be spared my displeasure.*"

"No," Jakob replied stoically, before smashing the bone chimera with his tail.

He bent low to grab the crushed abomination and tossed it towards the ceiling.

"Fetch," he said, and Loke skittered across the rafters above and took hold of the ruined chimera just as it started falling back down again. Then the construct retreated inside its nest in the far end of the laboratorium, where a funnel of hair-like silk covered the entire back wall.

"I didn't know it could spin webs too," Veks observed dully, as though he had not just witnessed the chimera nor heard the ominous declaration-of-war.

Jakob was trembling with unspent fury and indignation, but he let it go with a heavy sigh of vapour streaming from his mask. "His name is Loke."

"A worthy name," Veks replied respectfully.

"To answer your question, I designed his abdomen to produce keratin strands, like the hair on your head, and, using his spinnerets, he is capable of controlling its output, intertwining the strands, and adjusting the adhesion."

"That seems very complex."

"I'm quite proud of it, but Heskel deserves the lion's-share of credit, since he created the organic components within the bone carapace that I sculpted."

The Wight nodded with similar appreciation of their work.

"Anyway, about my reward?"

"It's upstairs. Hargraves just finished brewing it an hour ago. It should be quite a bit more potent than what you sampled yesterday."

"We'll see about that," Veks replied with a devious grin. After all, he was quite resistant to the previous batches of euphorics that the Magister had created. "What tasks do you have for me afterwards?" he asked, already eager for the next reward.

"Heskel and I are heading to the Guild District tonight, so you're free to do as you please."

"I can't come with you?"

"No."

"I see."

"You may indulge yourself as you see fit however, so long as my laboratorium still stands when we return."

Veks' grin seemed to split his face in half, the double-rows of sharp teeth giving him a predatory look. "You got it, Boss."

The Incarnate was hanging from one of the ceiling rafters, swaying back-and-forth unseen while customers thronged the store. Sig would have found the scene hilarious, if not for the fact that she worried he might fall upon anyone below whenever his current high wore off.

Hargraves snapped his fingers, breaking her stare at the ceiling and the wacky Devil.

"What?"

The Magister pointed at an unattended customer and Sig let out a sigh, before vaulting the counter and heading over to help a woman struggling to reach a skin tonic on the top row of one of the long shelves.

This is so beneath me… she complained internally as she put on a fake smile and helped the lady.

As the customer went to the counter to pay Hargraves for the tonic, a jostling of jars and ampules caught Sig's attention and she turned to look at the shelf behind her, the Incarnate perched on its corner precariously.

"I'm bored," he said with a sombre tone, while the nearby customers walked by unawares.

"Hargraves can probably brew up something stronger for you," Sig replied dismissively and returned to the row she had been organising mindlessly.

A clawed finger poked her in the back of her head sharply.

"The Boss is gone for a while. We have free reign to do *whatever* we wish."

She turned around to look at him, his whole body leaning off the edge of the shelf towards her, somehow not upsetting its balance, and his face only a handspan from hers.

"*Whatever*?"

"So long as his laboratorium still stands when he returns," Veks answered, his warm breath brushing against her face and filling her nostrils with the scent of sweet cinnamon and acrid copper.

"I have *some ideas* that you may find entertaining."

Veks grinned deviously in response. "Pray tell."

Sig pointed at one of the customers, a beautiful noblewoman with an expensive dress. "Bring *that one* to the basement, then I'll show you."

The journey from Market North to the Guild District required the pair to traverse four heavily-guarded and monitored districts, but they managed to make the crossings unseen, though a few corpses of the guards in the way were tossed into alleyways or courtyards, but not enough to trigger a city-wide alert, or at least Jakob hoped not.

The sun had set by the time their feet hit the marbled streets of the Guild District and opulent buildings of the finest wood, stone, steel, and glass were arrayed before them. Greatest amongst the many fancy buildings were the Bankers' Guild, the Merchants' Guild, and the Adventurers' Guild. The latter of the three was situated in the centre square of the district and had four tall spires that somehow looked even bigger up-close. Long and slender moss-green banners with indistinguishable

sigils waved in the wind from atop each spire and, though it was dark out, voices boomed from within its cathedral-like hall and people were coming-and-going nonstop. It seemed that the Adventurers' Guild was open all day around, unlike the rest of the Guilds where most of the lights were out by now.

"Any idea how we join?"

Heskel pointed at the wide-open door.

"Fair enough… Guess I'll ask inside."

Heskel walked in front of Jakob to clear the way through the stream of people, and the Fleshcrafter noticed new markings on the back of his stitched-flesh apron. Even amongst the patterns of multi-hued bruises, the charcoal symbols stood out, their many lines forming a whole that was as uncomfortable to look at as the sun at noon.

"You put the ward against Grandfather's spying on your clothes?"

The Wight stopped and turned to face him. Then he nodded.

"That's an interesting application."

"**Only work on dead flesh not steel.**"

"Wait, are you saying you could make the codex of Chthonic letters with pages of human skin?" It had been an ongoing struggle to find a material that would not violently combust or self-destruct when inscribed with the alphabet of the powerful language.

"**We can try.**"

Suddenly joining the Adventurers' Guild to learn more about magic seemed an unimportant side-quest, but they were already here and going back to the lab would take a while, so in the interest of efficiency and research, he would go through with joining the Guild to see what knowledge he could acquire through them, if any.

They had drawn quite a lot of attention by the time they made it inside the enormous Guild Hall, due mostly to their appearance, but also because the Adventurers of Helmsgarten were curious by nature and found intrigue in sizing-up newcomers to their fraternity.

A counter, not too alike the one in the Apothecary, albeit upscaled, stood near the back of the large hall, and queues of people were lined up at the six different people who manned it.

"Are you here for the trial as well?" the guy in front of Jakob asked, after eyeing him up-and-down with a peculiar sort of interest that lacked any kind of self-preservation.

Jakob nodded simply, though, truth-be-told, he was unaware what the young man was speaking about.

"Me too!" he replied excitedly. "I'd heard there was a surge in applicants since so many Adventurers perished in the Market West Disaster, but *this* is quite a lot more than I expected."

"I see," Jakob answered, realising that all the people who thronged the hall and filled the queues were in large part there because of the decimation he had caused within the metropolis' south-eastern sector.

"Maybe we can work together for the trial. I'm pretty nifty with a bow," he replied eagerly, pointing his thumb at a sad display of craftmanship with a fraying string. "I'm Servill, by the way, what's your—"

"I don't care," Jakob replied bluntly, then turned to his companion and said in Chthonic, "Clear the way, we're not waiting around like these fools."

Heskel grunted in response, then pushed Servill aside and moved down the queue, shoving the people out of the way as Jakob followed behind. Though a few people grumbled and shouted, none seemed interested in actually stopping them.

"**Weak,**" Heskel growled in Novarocian, berating the poor turnout in a language they could comprehend. The aspirants nearest cowered beneath the oppressive and deep thrum of his voice.

When they got to the front of the queue, not a single person in the hall was *not* staring at them, either in disbelief, anger, or amusement.

"Sir, you cannot just skip in line like that," the man behind the counter scolded him feebly.

"I'm here to join," Jakob replied.

"So is everyone else behind you," the man said, and the people behind Jakob shouted "Yeah!" in reply, though a glance from Heskel quickly brought them back to silence.

"Look at them. They're worthless. My Wight and I are worth a hundred of their ilk, maybe more than that."

Though the Guild Receptionist did not openly agree, he also did not disagree, amusingly enough, and it only served to prove Jakob's point.

With a sigh that seemed to imply that he was paid too little to handle brazen people like Jakob, the man conceded and handed Jakob a scroll of flimsy parchment. Before he could take a look at it however, the man also took out a thin wafer of tin as well as a chisel and a small wooden hammer.

"Name?"

"Jakob."

The Receptionist deftly chiselled his name in Novarocian lettering at the top of the wafer.

"Surname?"

"It's just Jakob."

"And your companion, is he taking the trial too or is he—?"

"He's my attendant."

"His name?"

"Heskel."

A few more deft strikes followed, the whole hall seeming intensely-silent as only the rapid *tick-tick-tick* of the chisel striking the tin card could be heard. Even other receptionists had stilled their work to listen in.

"Class?"

"What's that?"

"Your profession, expertise, etcetera."

He thought about it for a moment, then answered, "Summoner."

This time the Receptionist did not immediately start engraving the metal, but instead looked up at Jakob with a mix of fear and respect. "Are you telling me the truth?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

A flurry of whispers sounded throughout the hall, as people were relaying the information. It seemed that Summoners were a rare breed and having only Veks' story of the Demonologist for reference, as well as his own knowledge in the subject, he could see why people would be wary around him.

"If you pass the trial, we will of course have to examine your claim to ascertain its validity, but if it's true, then you will quickly find a demand for your expertise."

Jakob simply nodded in response. This was taking too long already.

The Receptionist chiselled the 'Class' onto the wafer, before continuing, "Age?"

"Fourteen," he replied.

"**Fifteen,**" Heskel then corrected him.

Jakob thought about it for a moment, then chuckled to himself, his scent-mask letting out a cloud of spent air. “I suppose you’re correct. Put down fifteen.”

More whispers followed, which was starting to wear on his patience.

A brief moment of hesitation followed, before the Guildman chiselled the age. Then he took a long look at Jakob and masterfully made a little caricature on the right side of the tin card. Lastly, he took out a strange cylinder and, with a single strike on the bottom-right corner below the portrait, embossed a tiny version of the Adventurers’ Guild logo:

A shield with an eye on the front, the pupil of which was a four-pointed star like on a compass, and seven weapons poking out from behind the shield: a sword, mace, hammer, dagger, staff, bow, and spear.

“There you go,” the Guild Receptionist announced, picking up the tin card and revealing that it was actually two wafers stuck together, by pulling it apart to produce two identical cards, one of which he put aside on the counter and the other which he handed Jakob. It seemed to be a way for the Guild to combat counterfeit badges, since anyone with enough time and patience could easily produce one themselves.

Before Jakob could even ask, he helpfully explained, “This is your Provisional Guild License. It will let you enter places that people normally won’t be allowed to enter, and crossing the toll bridges will be free. If you complete the trial, as described in the parchment I handed you, you will receive an iron badge to prove your full-fledged membership.”

Jakob held up the tin wafer, examining the details.

“How very crude,” he commented in Chthonic.

“**Blame not the beast,**” Heskel replied.

After looking through the assignment required for Jakob to become a legitimate member of the Guild, he sighed in disappointment.

“Little wonder most of their roster is worthless, if this is what passes for a ‘trial’.”

The parchment described a missing necklace, that had last been seen on a young girl who fell into a sewer manhole. His task was simply to retrieve it from the sewers of Haven, and, if possible, also recover the body of the young girl who was surely dead.

“What a waste of time.”

“**Endure a moment in patience; reap a field of gold.**”

That was a new one. The phrasing was a little bit strange, granted, the Wight was wont to strange phrases, though a font of wisdom nonetheless.

“You’re right. In the pursuit of knowledge, what is a day spent laying the groundwork?”

“**Good investment.**”

Jakob laughed at the sincerity with which Heskel said it, his scent-mask sputtering vapour.

“Indeed.”

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XIII

"Purpose?" the Haven Bridge-Guard demanded, threateningly.

Jakob lifted his provisional badge and unfurled the parchment scroll, which had already started tearing in the sides, flimsy as it was.

"*Another* one?" a nearby guard commented in dismay.

"What do you mean?" Jakob asked.

The guard in front of him sighed, before explaining, "You're the sixth person given this task in just the last two weeks. Now, listen, because I'll only say this once: If you get lost, you're on your own. If you die, we won't retrieve your body for your family. After the first two times we had to deal with your kind, we came to an agreement with your Guild that you were on your own."

Jakob just nodded, unperturbed by the warning. After all, the sewers had been his hunting grounds for over half his life, and he had personally seen to the creation of many of the horrors that now roamed its stone halls.

"What do I do once I've found it?"

"IF…" the Guard started, annoyed, "IF you find the necklace and/or the remains of Carlotta, bring them to the building with the domed ceiling, one of the priests there will return them to the family so they can finally find peace, and they'll probably give you something to bring back to your Guild as proof."

Jakob nodded, then crossed the bridge with Heskel in tow. He could feel the guards staring at him as he left the checkpoint and headed into the district proper.

It took a while to find a place where they could enter the sewers below the pale-yellow limestone paving of the district, mostly due to the remoteness of the access-points, but eventually Heskel found a manhole. It had a lock on it, but the Wight simply grabbed hold of the cover, his strength allowing him to onehandedly snap the locking-bolt and lift it open in a single pull.

As moonlight was starting to light up their surroundings and guards lazily patrolled the nearby plaza with torches in hand, Jakob and Heskel descended into the bowels of the district.

He had made it halfway-down the iron rungs when the Wight dragged the manhole cover back over the hole, shutting off the slender beam of moonlight that had been shining down into the murky depths below. To a normal person, the sudden absence of light would have been alarming, but Jakob and his Lifeward were born in the darkness and fared better in the dark below than in the overbearing light above.

When Heskel let go of the rungs and landed on the tunnel floor with a splash of filthy water, Jakob took out the parchment again, as he looked around. Though the quest description indicated that the child had simply fallen into the sewers and died, it seemed that something more serious must have occurred, given that six adventurers before him had failed to locate the missing necklace and the girl's remains.

The Wight started sniffing the air curiously, and Jakob took off his scent-mask and imitated him.

"Peculiar," he commented, his companion grunting in agreement. The sewer smelled *off*. Again, this was perhaps only something they, as dwellers in the deep, would notice, but the sewers had a different scent based on how deep you were.

Normally, the top layers would smell mostly of effluvia and stagnant must. The upper-middle was like an earthy and acrid cocktail thanks to its flourishing growth of moss and toadstools; the lower-middle was a pungent and heady stench, given that most things that died within the sewers would end up there after a couple weeks; and the deep was a mix of sweet decay, coppery tang, and the warm-and-debilitating odour of a special genus of Skin Beetles that Grandfather nicknamed *Bone Beetles*, which thrived amongst the mountains of bones scattered all about where the tunnels all culminated.

Without a scent-mask in the deep, most people would become delirious or unconscious from the smell, and even Jakob needed his mask in the sections where the Bone Beetles colonies were, despite having lived there for years.

"It smells more like the lower-middle," he observed. Hardly any feculent odours were present, despite the slurry underfoot, or, more precisely, it was overshadowed by the powerful stench of death. He put his mask back on, taking a lungful of the Misty Reminiscence and puffed out the spent vapour afterwards.

Heskel sniffed the air some more, his olfactory sense many times more evolved than Jakob's. Within a couple minutes, the Wight picked up a scent that made him growl like a bear smelling someone intruding on its territory.

"**Ratmen…**"

"That's not possible. We wiped them out years ago."

The Wight looked him straight in the eyes, the darkness in the eyes of his mask gazing deeply into Jakob's own.

"I believe you, but you know they *should* all be dead. You were with me after all."

The Ratmen was one of Grandfather's earliest self-sufficient chimera, but they had quickly proved more disaster than success, when their asexual reproduction and tendency for large litters led to a colossal tribe of them infesting the lower-middle of the sewers. Jakob, Heskel, and Raleigh had been tasked by Grandfather to wipe out their nests, ensuring not a single Ratman survived. That was more than two years ago, and had been one of the most formative experiences of Jakob's life, teaching him much of what he knew, as well as providing him extensive experience in the use of his creations and numbing the last remnant of his emotions, leaving only cold-hearted efficiency behind.

"Let's find their nest and wipe them out. The trial is secondary. All our plans will be for naught if the Ratmen repopulate and overrun the city."

Heskel nodded firmly. "**Hunt.**"

Jakob took off his flesh-stitched gloves and pulled out the two slender, long-clawed bone gauntlets he had made. After only a couple lessons in Hemolatry, he had designed the demonic ritual patterns on these gauntlets, allowing him to manipulate the blood inside anyone he focused on, with only a few limitations.

"Remind me to get rid of the Flayed Lady's pawn when we return."

Heskel grunted in confirmation.

It was clear that Sig had served her purpose and there was nothing more to learn from her. Truly, her knowledge in Hemolatry and Demonology was as shallow as her worship of the Great Ones Above. Unless Veks protested of course, after all, he would probably have his fun with her if he found out that Jakob withdrew his protection of her. Somehow, Jakob instinctively knew that the former Thief would make her last moments worse than he himself could ever imagine, after all, Jakob was not sadistic, but rather just efficient. Sadism required a mind like that of a Demon and Veks had surely become *that*, though Jakob was unaware of what served as the catalyst for his ongoing transformation.

"Remind me to also ask Veks about his transformation."

Heskel grunted again, an underlying tone of impatience catching Jakob's attention.

"Eager, are you? I suppose it has been a while since you could let loose. Go on ahead, I'll catch up."

The Wight must have grinned fiendishly beneath his mask, because he took off in a stomping burst of speed, a growl steadily growing in his throat, echoing off the sewer tunnels, making even the air tremble.

Jakob flexed his fingers within the bone gauntlets a few times, warming up the muscles in his hands, then followed behind the raging giant at a brisk trot.

When Jakob caught up to Heskel, the Wight was already busy squashing the diminutive figures of terrified humanoid rats, while they ineffectively tried to strike him with primitive weapons or their claws.

They're evolving… Jakob realised in dismay. When he had wiped out the Ratmen, they had not exhibited any form of ingenuity other than their ability to hide, but if they were making tools then that did not bode well.

Before he could give the prospect any further thought, a band of five Ratmen descended on him. The tail stitched into his flesh robes acted on its own and crushed the ribcage of two in a single swipe, and Jakob grabbed hold of the air with his right gauntlet, turning one of the rats in front of him into a folded-up corpse, then he swung the gauntlet towards the two remaining Ratmen and blood flew from the corpse like crimson icicles, tearing them to shreds under an onslaught of blood-formed javelins.

Jakob walked further into the large area they were in, the filth underfoot becoming red as the Ratmen were pulverised and shattered by the blood-crazed Wight. It was a massive cistern with thick pillars running in four parallel lines and holding up a vaulted ceiling, and, below the raised section they were standing on near the tunnel opening, a lake of filthy water spanned into the distance. A horde of Ratmen were fleeing along raised gantries that lined the walls, scurrying into smaller tunnels designed to feed rainwater and effluvia from the streets above into the cistern lake below. Strangely, a large number of rats were also swimming towards them, coming out of a halfway-submerged tunnel in the far end of the cistern.

They're exhibiting group behaviour… sending warriors towards us, while their weaker members escape…

Jakob raised both his gauntlets towards one of the fleeing rats on the rightmost gantry, and wrenched his hands apart. In the distance, the Ratman exploded in a cloud of mist, the concussive force powerful enough to damage the metal walkway and send a dozen of his kin tumbling into the lake below, three of them dead before they hit the water.

Already over three dozen had made good on their escape, but, fortunately, there was a ritual Jakob knew, which was second only to the Chthonic *Stone Plague* in terms of causing a mass extinction to living beings in a wide area. Given that the Stone Plague had similar limitations as many of the Chthonic Hymns and the fact that he had copious amounts of tissue, flesh, and blood available to him, the Demonic *Covetous Vessel* ritual was the optimal spell for him to hunt down every last member of the Ratmen tribe and hopefully wipe them out for good.

It struck Jakob as odd that Grandfather had not made use of such spells, as surely his knowledge on the matter was not lesser than his apprentice's, but, then again, Grandfather was a miserly keeper of secrets, and perhaps this tribe was a result of his misguided belief that his failed chimera could flourish as he had once intended. There was no doubt that Grandfather had the ability to reduce the

entire metropolis to ashes, if he so wished, but that was not his way. Jakob was himself a recipient of Grandfather's peculiar benevolence. If he had wanted, he would have the tomes now, so perhaps the Old Spider was trying to teach him another lesson. Or maybe he was losing his touch? It was hard to say at this point.

"Heskel, keep them clear of me."

A curt grunt came in reply, amid the brutal slaughter the Wight was undertaking. Jakob pulled out a piece of dense charcoal he often kept in one of the pouches of his flesh apron, then he knelt on the hard stone floor near where the large tunnel met the cistern entryway-platform. With practiced ease, he drew out a circle and a septagram within it, ensuring it was wide enough to fit a stack of the dwarven Ratmen corpses. In the letters of the demonic alphabet, he wrote out the particular instructions of the ritual, like a novice reciting a poem written by his forebears, upon whose shoulders he stood tall.

The preparations complete, he yelled at Heskel to bring corpses to him, which, to his credit, the Wight obeyed while continuing to decimate any Ratman who yet remained in fighting fervour and strong-willed in its defiance. He was a superior being in almost every aspect, with his disinterest in vocal communication seeming more like a quirk than a result of diminished capacity. Heskel's strength rivalled that of Grandfather's monstrous chimera and his endurance was quite literally limitless, though prolonged strain, as in hours of nonstop fighting, would lead to his body consuming muscle-mass to keep him from burning out, but even this was only a temporary thing, as his metabolism and regenerative abilities ensured he was fighting fit again before the following dawn.

His quiet intelligence was also a feat of Grandfather's ingenuity, as the Wight was essentially an eidetic memory bank who could recall in perfect clarity anything he had seen previously, as well as smells and sounds; even Grandfather had perhaps underestimated just how perfect of a laboratorium assistant that made him.

When no more contenders came at them for a moment, though it would no doubt be a short respite, the Wight looked at the ritual septagram and the pile of Ratmen corpses stacked in its centre, recognition of its purpose making him grow tense with anticipation.

"**Let me.**"

"No. I can do it."

Heskel nodded seriously. "**Say it clear.**"

"I know. I remember the words, do not fret."

Of course Jakob knew that he had to make sure his voice did not waver and his inflection did not stray. A mistake now could have apocalyptic side-effects, or well, only if performed within Helmsgarten proper. He was slightly insulated from *that* kind of failure by their enclosed confines of the sewers, but he had also ensured to place very strict limitations on the ritual beforehand, so there was no chance of backlash or mishap. Or well, not too much of a chance. It was never zero, even in the very best conditions.

Instead of offering up his own blood as Toll, he grabbed one of the mostly-intact Ratmen heads that had departed from its body and lifted it before the charcoal septagram and its mound of death.

"*O Coveting Saint, give thy blessing upon this creation and lend thine envious spirit to its exhumation.*"

"*With thy blessing, animate the dead so they may seek their kin and take from them the life they lost.*"

"*Come forth, Covetous Vessel and seek the kin to whom your flesh and blood binds you.*"

As he finished his lilting recital, the pile of dead half-rat half-human dwarves melted into an amorphous blob of bones, flesh, tendons, muscles, and blood, with the blood strangely serving as the outer layer. The abominable slime then rose up to a height of five metres, before exploding into a shower of globules each no bigger than a human skull. As they hit the stone floor, the blobs immediately took a multitude of shapes, some like strange balls on stilt-like legs, others like comically-fat bats or strange tangles of thin appendages, and one in particular just growing half a leg and using it to launch itself in a set direction haphazardly.

Just like the dozens-upon-dozens of Ratmen, the globules of the Covetous Vessel split down every tunnel, some splitting into even smaller parts the deeper they ventured. It would perhaps take a day or two, but, sooner-or-later, each of the blobs would find a Ratman and bond to it, the reaction causing both the blob and the rat to melt into nothingness.

"That was quite something," Jakob remarked, surprised despite having read about its effect when he first learnt of the ritual.

"**Seventh Saint… spiteful and destructive,**" Heskel commented.

"But in the right hands, Her vindictiveness can be quite effective."

The Wight just grunted in response.

"What should we do while we wait?"

"**Guild; necklace lost.**"

"Right. How could I forget…" he replied, suddenly void of enthusiasm.

Jakob took off his bone gauntlets and put his flesh-stitched gloves back on, as well as his scent-mask. After an indulgent puff of vapour exited the vents in the bottom of the mask, he pointed towards the large, halfway-submerged tunnel at the opposite end of the great cistern.

"I suppose we should check the most obvious place first."

Jakob was not a confident swimmer, so, while Heskel swam across the lake, he took the gantry walkway to the other side and followed the wall as he treaded water from where the gantry ended to the tunnel. Splotches of a pitch-black tar-like substance on the gantry and in the water were the only remnants of the Ratmen that had been hunted down by the Covetous Vessel within the massive cistern, and, soon, those who had fled into the smaller passages would experience a similar fate. Once unleashed, the spell would not end until its purpose was fulfilled.

After they swam into the mouth of the tunnel, they found solid footing as only half the tunnel was submerged. The long curving walls snaked through the sewers in a ponderous path, but never changed elevation, which was unusual. At its egress, a smaller cistern resided, a long tube-like room that seemed to reach up to the surface above and down to the deepest levels of the sewer itself. Where exactly the shaft of this secondary cistern exited above was not hard to guess, as a grate in the ceiling far above constantly sent a waterfall of filth down one side of the room.

"Which part of the river do you think we're below?"

Heskel looked up, then sniffed the air a few times, before answering, "**Royal district and Armoury.**"

That's quite far north, Jakob pondered. He had been this far north before, but not at this layer of the sewers, rather in the lower-middle, during one of Grandfather's many trials. After all, the underbelly of Helmsgarten was bigger than what was seen above, as it dug deep into the mountainside it was built against. Only the first couple layers of the sewers mimicked the districts above in size, but as it dug deeper it was wider at the base, like a pyramid.

Atop the water in the centre of the large shaft floated a makeshift island of buoyant trash and driftwood, and upon this structure stood a T-shaped crucifix from which hung a partially-devoured woman, her legs and abdomen torn to shreds and her bones exposed to the air.

With Heskel's aid, Jakob swam to the island, and it shuddered and bobbed when they ascended.

"Did *they* build this? This is akin to religious worship."

"**Even the littlest bugs worship.**"

Suddenly, the woman gasped, as if waking from a nightmare.

"She's still alive? Marvellous," Jakob muttered, recognising her wounds as ones that should have been fatal, particularly due to the necrosis, not to mention the destruction of her lower intestines and kidneys.

"**Sorcerer,**" Heskel grumbled.

Jakob leant close and grasped the woman's jaw with his gloved hand, lifting her head so he could see her face. Her eyes were milky-white and most of her hair had fallen out, leaving only wispy remnants behind. She was missing the cartilage of her nose, leaving just two holes where the septum would have been, and she had bitten through her lower-lip at some point. Perhaps, once, she had been beautiful.

"Kill… me…"

"That would certainly be a waste," Jakob replied, and moved even closer, before whispering into her ear, "I shall make you whole. Make you *more than* whole. You will become *perfect*."

The air started popping with tiny sparks in response and he felt a wind of charged potential energy, static electricity lifting the hairs on his face and making his skin tingle. Then a loud *bang* exploded against his hand where he still held her jaw and smoke rose from the fingers of his glove, where the outer layer of flesh had burnt to a sizzling crisp and become brownish-black.

"Lightning sorcery." He was awed and exhilarated in equal measure.

Masters of lightning were feared for good reason, as there was little that could stand in their way. Fortunately, his flesh-stitched robes were more than just stain-resistant work-attire, but also served to protect him from flames, corrosion, frost and snow, most forms of concussive force, and, importantly in this case, it distributed the current of electricity and redirected it to only the outermost layers of skin. When Grandfather had taught him flesh-stitching, he had been excruciatingly thorough. Still, a direct lightning attack to his face would probably be lethal or at the very least lead to significant scarring and nerve-damage.

Before the half-alive woman could charge up another strike, Jakob swiftly drew a small cylindrical flask from within his robe and, after ensuring the seal on his scent-mask was airtight, pulled the stopper free. It only took seconds from when the woman breathed in the Ratstool-and-Stingberry concoction before she fell unconscious, her head slipping from his hand as he released his grip.

Only after she was incapacitated, did Jakob appreciate the barbaric nature of the crucifix she was pinned to:

Firstly, her hands were the only part of her body that was physically attached to the T-shaped wooden structure, and it had been done with shortswords that were meticulously hammered through her palms and into the crossbeam.

Secondly, though her clothes were gone, she still had a chain around neck from which hung a pendant that sparked immediate recognition. It was an Adventurer's Badge, and it was bronze. Putting two-and-two together, this meant that she was decently-high-rank inside the Adventurers' Guild, although nothing had been mentioned about a missing bronze-ranker.

Thirdly, at the foot of the crucifix lay a pile of 'offerings', mostly in the form of salvaged trinkets and provisional Guild badges like the one Jakob himself owned, not to mention a handful of iron ones. In total, more than twenty-seven Guild aspirants or members had been killed by the Ratmen, and, now that he got a better look at it, their bones had no doubt been used to construct the artificial island upon which they now stood.

Lastly, neither the necklace nor little girl were anywhere to be found.

"What should we do? Continue looking for clues?"

Heskel grunted.

"That was a pointless question, I know. Of course we're going to remake this excellent specimen. A Wrought Servant with a mastery of lightning sorcery would be worth twenty times whatever knowledge we could gain from the Guild. An organisation that fails to notice *this* significant a number of lost members seems a wasted place for us."

Jakob scratched his cheek as he contemplated what to remake the sorceress into, but, in truth, he had a particular design that had been floating around his imagination for a long, long time.

"Good thing I still have enough Demon's Blood left."

XIV

With Heskel and *Stelji* in tow, the latter clad in a hooded flesh-stitched cloak that encompassed her entire body, Jakob entered into the Adventurers' Guild some days later. He had changed his mind about not returning to the Guild, as he figured he could use what he had discovered in the cisterns as leverage to get a hold on some of their knowledge. Also, he really wanted to see the expressions of their faces, when he revealed their enormous shortcomings.

Given his stunt on his first visit, people were quick to recognise him, and the entire hall fell eerily quiet, despite the throng of people. His Lifeward did not need to mow people aside when they walked straight up to the same Receptionist who had attended them previously.

"You have returned," the Guildman remarked. "How fared your trial contract? Did you find the necklace?"

"Yes."

Without needing to utter a word, Heskel walked forward and put a necklace on the counter. It was a softly-glowing aquamarine stone shaped like a crescent moon and attached to a fine silver chain. Though Jakob initially thought it lost, the trio had found it when they went through the many tunnels to ensure not a single member of the Ratmen tribe had escaped alive. The necklace had lain next to a gloopy pile of black tar. Even rat mutants could be vain, apparently.

His Attendant also put a sack of repurposed intestinal-lining and skin on the counter, and though it simply looked like a miscoloured hide bag, it was hard to disguise the smell it gave off.

To his credit, the Guildman did not cover his nose and simply asked, "And what's this?"

"Open it," Jakob said, and Heskel opened the bag and emptied it out onto the counter with a vigorous shake, releasing all the badges they had collected.

Just like the aquamarine necklace, they had found several more of the iron Guild badges next to the remains of the Ratmen who had fled. The death toll amounted to nineteen tin aspirants, twelve iron members, and the one bronze member. She was now dead to the world, replaced by Stelji, named thusly by Jakob as, following the many rituals and rites, the only word she could utter was "**MASTER…**", so he had named her one of the Demonic words for "*lightning*". For whatever reason, demons had hundreds of names for many of the elements, and "*Stelji*" specifically referred to lightning that flew from the ground and up to the skies, such as those very rarely seen during bad winter storms.

"This… where did you find these??"

"Our hunt led us from Haven's sewers to those beneath Armoury district. A nest of mutants had made their home there. They were collecting these badges, like trinkets." Jakob could not help but smile beneath his mask, though it was possibly a good thing the Guildman could not see it, given how shaken he looked. Part of him could still not help that he found it darkly amusing that such primitive abominations had killed *that many* Guild members.

"And *this*…" he started, lifting the bronze badge up. "*This* belonged to Lyssa! Everyone thought she died during the Market West Incident..."

Someone almost as tall as Heskel pushed through the crowd and made it to the counter. He was clad in form-fitting leather attire, his hair was short and grey, and he had the air of someone in charge.

"Jakob. Come with me please."

"Guild Master?" the Receptionist said in surprise to the man.

"Mikael, gather up those badges and bring them to my office."

"Of course, sir!"

The Guild Master looked back at Jakob. "Shall we?"

Figuring that declining would be suspicious, he simply nodded and followed the man to the back of the hall, where a spiralling staircase led up above. Both his Lifeward and Wrought Servant followed close behind, prepared for *anything*, though Jakob doubted the Guild Master was a big threat to him.

After recounting their journey into the sewers for a second time, making sure to omit the fact that the famous sorceress "Lyssa" was now standing behind Jakob wearing a different name and face, the Fleshcrafter leant back in the comfortable sofa. A cup of fragrant tea stood on the low table in front of him, but he was wary of imbibing anything he himself had not produced.

"I'm amazed you managed to uncover this infestation. Truth be told, the Guild should have picked up on the mass disappearances, but with the Market West Incident and the scrutiny of the Mage Quarter by the Royal Guard, everything has been too hectic for us to keep track of."

From what Jakob had gathered, the Royal Guard had thoroughly looked into every single person capable of summoning powerful demons and, as a result, Westgate was shut down, the Mage Quarter was ransacked as they looked for clues, and every Magister and their apprentices were interrogated. It also explained how Hargraves missed his scheduled transition to Market North and the Apothecary that Veks had finagled into their possession, as well as his sudden appearance, once his name was cleared.

"It goes without saying, but your efforts clearly surpassed those required to pass our membership exam, not to mention those needed to rank up to bronze. Once you return downstairs, you can pick up your new Bronze License."

"I have no use for meaningless titles and awards," Jakob replied honestly, though he would still take the new license, as it would allow him to move without scrutiny through nearly every sector of Helmsgarten. His plans expanded far beyond keeping just one laboratorium in Market North, and free travel between districts meant he could set up many more, not to mention diversify them akin to how Grandfather had constructed his complex of specialised laboratoriums all over the southwestern corner of the deep sewers.

"What sort of reward do you seek then? You don't strike me as someone who works for free."

"Knowledge."

The Guild Master narrowed his eyes and his gaze pierced into Jakob's own, but then he seemed to make his mind up, and stood from his chair.

A scrape of shifting bone plates and segments sounded from the cloaked Stelji as she prepared for a fight. He could feel the air become charged as she drew static energy into her remade corpus.

Ignorant to Jakob's servant and the threat she posed, the Guild Master opened the door to his study and looked to the Fleshcrafter who still remained in the sofa.

"Come on then. I shall let you peruse what knowledge we possess."

After following the Guild Master up another spiralling staircase and through a locked door, Jakob entered into a mix of a library and armoury, with overflowing bookcases, neatly-arranged swords of all sizes and types, steel plate-mail, and so on. Jakob immediately dismissed all of the collection as worthless junk, but then he noticed a couple of noteworthy items. One was a slender tome the size of a journal, with pulsating veins wrapped around its flesh-bound cover, and the other was a scroll of some unknown metal. The tome was clearly magical in nature. Both of the items were kept in glass

displays covered with sealing runes. To his frustration, he knew that he did not have the knowledge to disarm the seals without destroying the artefacts within the displays.

"You have a discerning eye," the Guild Master commented upon noticing his interest.

"I want those two," Jakob replied bluntly.

"Hemolatry is banned, you must know. I cannot in good conscience give you such knowledge," he answered with a devious smile. The fact that he confirmed it to be a tome of Hemolatric spells made Jakob want it even more.

"Let me guess, you want me to complete another task for your Guild."

"Indeed."

For a moment, he seriously considered the downsides to gutting the man before him and attempting to steal the two items, but given that such brazen action would compromise all of his plans, he decided to continue to play pretend. Even if he had had any Demon's Blood left after Stelji's transformation, it would be impossible for him to subjugate the Guild Master using the Abeyance ritual, given the very clear hierarchy they were involved in and the fact that, like it or not, Jakob was the Squire and *he* was the Lord. Perhaps a few days of intensive torture could break through those restraints, but the Guild Master's absence would surely be noted and he seemed like he would be a hard man to break, proud as he was.

"Give me the tome and I'll agree to your task in exchange for the scroll." He had no idea what the metal scroll was, but he knew it was unique, and a small part of him could feel the potential it emanated.

"You drive a hard bargain, young man," the Guild Master patronised him, before approaching the glass display and waving his hands around while muttering a long string of words. The locking mechanism of the seal seemed to be a mix of gesture and voice-based commands in reverse, like untangling a complex knot. It was the first kind of spell like this that Jakob had seen, but it seemed quite useless in any other context than as a lock, though he supposed that one could use such a spell in combat to seal the opponent's mind within itself. Perhaps he would try it out on some test subjects when he had time, after all, he was woefully short on non-lethal ways of incapacitating people.

As the Guild Master stepped back, Jakob approached the now-open display case and noticed the heartbeat coming from the book itself. He reached out with his right glove, where Stelji had burnt off the top-layer days before, and the veins unfurled themselves from the skin cover and reached back like sentient tentacles. As the veins touched his glove, they recoiled and he quickly grasped the book, lifting it from the display, the tentacles writhing like a bundle of terrified snakes, but unable to sever themselves from the spine of the book where they were rooted.

"Submit to me," Jakob demanded in Chthonic, the Guild Master staring in disbelief at what he was seeing, his haughtiness suddenly gone.

The veins relaxed and wound themselves around the book again, keeping it shut.

"I shall make good use of *this*," Jakob replied to the shaken Guildman. "Now tell me about this task you have for me."

Sig's arms were dripping with blood, her latest victim flayed and lifeless on the stone altar that Jakob used for his experiments and Fleshcraft. The stench of acrid copper filled her nostrils and her face was flush with the exhilarating nature of what she had done.

The Incarnate sighed heavily. "Such a waste. There's no beauty in your work. You're just a child playing with your food…"

He was dangling from the ceiling by one of Loke's hair-like webs, which now covered the entire back-half of the room. Her previous victims had quickly been nabbed by the sentient bone spider and taken back to its lair, where it did Saints knew what with them.

With a heavy *thud*, the Incarnate landed on the stone floor next to her, before pushing her aside.

"Hey!" she protested.

He stopped and pointed a clawed finger at her. His left hand and arm now mirrored his right, and his entire body was covered in either thick golden-red fur or pale-green scales. "Enough with *this*… I'm bored and I've indulged you plenty as it is."

With a lazy swipe, he severed the neck from the body, before lifting the once-beautiful-but-now-ruined head by its auburn hair. As blood lazily dripped from his 'trophy', he took one of Jakob's brushes and flipped the head upside-down, before using it as an inkwell to feed his tool with paint. With casual strokes whose execution belied their flawless accuracy, the Incarnate started drawing out several septagrams on stone floor where room had been set aside for such rituals. He drew out seven to be exact, arranging them in a circle, with each star touching the two next to it and the rings overlapping artfully.

"What are you doing?" Sig asked, both curious and alarmed. She knew enough about Demonology to pick up on the fact that he was attempting to summon something, but she had never seen this sort of ritual before.

"Just watch," he replied, before walking into the centre of his ring of seven septagrams.

Then he started reciting a spell that sounded like a poem, with Sig feeling somewhat proud that she understood every word:

"*Little scampering critters who cling to the spires of Mammon's home, heed this call and come forth to this realm of plenty, for the glory of the Shining Hoard!*"

Seven flames of gold burst from within the ritual circles, spinning like whirlwinds, but without affecting the air of the basement with neither wind nor heat. As suddenly as they came, they flattened and vanished, leaving behind seven almost-identical little beings no taller than a toddler.

"Aren't they adorable?" the Incarnate said, in an almost paternal tone.

"W-what *are* they?" she asked, as the humanoid gold-scaled critters started looking around in curiosity with their bulbous pitch-black eyes, round heads, long ears, and stubby horns.

"Greedlings," he replied. "Now, come on. It is dark out, so we can finally do something *entertaining*."

As the Incarnate headed for the stairs that led to the courtyard outside, the impish Greedlings quickly followed after him with scampering steps and unsettling chatter in some unknown language, a few even jumping on the back of the tall Demon they now served.

"But, I can't leave…"

Laughter was all she got as a reply. Sheepishly, she followed him outside into the still night air.

Dismay set in, when she realised that she knew exactly *where* they were going. Superstitiously, she had expected Jakob and his monstrous servant to fall on her as soon as she set foot beyond the borders of the Apothecary, where she had been imprisoned for over two weeks. Instead, nothing had happened, and yet, the silence did nothing to dissuade her paranoia.

To feel watched at all times… what a fitting form of torture, she mused to herself. But she was made of sturdier stuff.

The Incarnate was humming to himself, as his cohort of minor demons trailed in his wake. They had already crossed the unguarded bridge into the Noble Quarter without drawing attention, but she doubted it would last.

Maybe I can make a break for it and escape the city.

One of the Greedlings stopped and turned to look at her, it's diminutive stature doing nothing to diminish its horrifying black-eyed gaze up at her.

"I'm coming, okay?" she replied hastily.

She would bide her time a bit longer.

"Marvellous, isn't it?"

Sig just stared up at the tall façade of the mansion, which lay in the northwestern part of the district. It was built in the old style of too many arches and spires, many which served no purpose nor contributed to the structural integrity, but still it was awe-inspiring to look at.

The Demon frowned upon seeing her expression. "You've been here before."

She did not reply, which made him stomp over to her and grip her cheeks in a painful vice of his clawed left hand.

"This is the meeting place of the Eyeless and its cultists."

He released his grip immediately, the lingering pain informing her that puncture wounds were left behind. "How fortuitous, wouldn't you say?"

"What do you mean?"

"We get to also test your loyalty, and clear up an eyesore for the young Master."

"If it is loyalty, I already failed when I left the Apothecary."

"Do you truly believe that was a test? Do you think he has need of someone who cannot think and act on their own? Mindless loyalty is what he has his creations for. Think about why he let you keep your independent thoughts."

"Because it would be more entertaining to him."

"Perhaps," he replied with a grin that showcased his hideously-destructive double rows of needle-like teeth. "Or perhaps he wanted you to atone for your misplaced faith."

"Killing the worshippers of the Flayed Lady would please Her as much, if not more, as any other sacrifice. She embodies treachery after all."

"Even if you commit them under the mandate of her archnemesis?"

Sig gritted her teeth. "I won't serve the Watcher."

Veks grabbed her right hand before she could react, putting her index and middle fingers into his mouth, then he closed his double rows of needle teeth and tore them from her hand.

As though the taste of her was vile to his sensibilities, he spat out her severed fingers on the cobblestones, the Greedlings immediately fighting over them like starved dogs. The sudden shock numbed her entirely, and before she could let out a wail of agony, he seized her by the chin, digging his claws into her upper lip and around her mouth.

"Renounce your Lady as you carve up her worshippers," he said, in a voice that denied any response other than a firm nod. Nonetheless, she did not relent, staring back into his glowing eyes, their slit pupils like the bottomless abyss of the cosmos.

The rest of her arm went as he swiped his claws down its length, reducing it to tattered bits and exposed bone, the flesh and skin falling to the ground, where the greedy imps devoured the scraps with glee.

She bit down hard on the palm that still covered her mouth, tears welling in her eyes. She tried to say something, but he did not remove his hand, so all that came from her was a muffled whimper. She tried to nod, to show that she would obey, but it still took a long minute before he removed his claws from her face.

Often she had seen the Incarnate gorge himself on blood, particularly in the recent days of her hedonistic mutilation of Market North's proud-and-proper ladies, but her blood seemed utterly despicable to him. The Greedlings had no such reservations, however, and licked clean his bloodied hand and claws.

"Show me you are more than just talk."

Sig bit down hard on her bleeding lip, and focused her control on the blood that welled from her ruined right arm, concentrating on an image in her mind. Slowly, and painfully, the profuse bleeding slowed and then stopped entirely, then she worked the remnants of skin and flesh into a spiralling shape around the exposed ulna and radius bones. The hand and its composite parts were long-gone, only one of her finger bones remaining undevoured, a Greedling keeping it in its mouth as a snack for later. She then worked her blood around the ruined limb, forming a simple lance. It would require all of her concentration to keep the shape stable, but she had little other choice, if she wanted to impress upon the Demon her intention to obey.

In the end, it seems I am more afraid of death than the vengeance of my Lady.

His good luck only multiplied, when they broke through the exterior guards and made their way into the mansion proper. Veks struggled to hold back laughter, as he witnessed a large gathering of robed figures: a few dressed in Magister robes, and the rest covered in simple black hooded cloaks.

Veks nudged Sig forward, her steel-hearted will to live exciting his greedy heart.

"Go on, say it," he whispered into her ear.

Her expression turned to stone and she bit down harder on her lower lip, but then she yelled to the bewildered congregation.

"No longer will the Watcher abide your heretical worship! Your divine punishment has arrived!"

The next few hours, before dawn broke, were a blur of magnificent slaughter, as he and his adorable Greedlings killed-and-feasted on the terrified play-pretend cultists and the feeble Magisters, who had believed themselves significant and worthy enough to host them. What little magic they possessed was like a breeze before a tornado, making their deaths all the more enjoyable.

Eventually, when Sig was given the honour of hunting down the remnants as they fled into the mansion's undercroft and network of tunnels, Veks toured the large estate with his eager minions in tow. There were riches aplenty within the mansion and it numbered dozens-upon-dozens of rooms. In short, it was perfect.

"***This will do nicely for the Shining Hoard, wouldn't you say?***"

The whispers had fallen silent and no longer was there the buzzing coming from the mirror-blade. He took a final look at it, then tossed the useless shortsword aside, and with it the soul of the man named Veks.

"***I have come at last through the veil. Mammon of the Shining Hoard sets his hooves upon mortal soil.***"

The Greedlings cheered, as well as the many golden-scaled-and-horned demons and imps who had come to the call of their *Lord of Avarice* and spontaneously manifested into reality.

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XV

It was, he considered, a fortuitous development that the Guild Master had tasked him with *this* of all possible quests. After all, it had been in the back of his mind for a long while, and the sooner it was resolved, the less he had to worry about.

Jakob, Heskel, and Stelji walked behind their four temporary group members. The Silver-ranked Paladin and Flame Sorcerer, whose names he had immediately forgotten, as well as the Bronze-ranked Huntsman and Earth Sorceress. Of the four, only the Huntsman and Paladin seemed even remotely worthy of being remade, as the two magic-wielders were the bottom-of-the-barrel as far talent went, and their ranks reflected their experience more than their acumen and skill, with the Flame-wielder being into his late fifties and thus having literally nothing but experience to rely on. It seemed all those ranked Gold and above had either perished in Market West already or were travelling beyond the lands of Helmsgarten to chase fame and fortune.

"What help shall they be, if they alone provided nothing to the subjugation of Mercilla already?"

"**Fodder.**"

"Little wonder the Guild Master was so desperate. He saw talent in us, and either feared it and thus sent us to our doom or prayed we could restore dignity to his institution…"

Bone plates shifted below her flesh-stitched cloak as Stelji moved in front of Jakob and Heskel, instinctively knowing they were about to reach the Market West cordon and its many Royal Guardsmen on watch.

"Is she capable of detecting the electricity within people?" he wondered out loud.

"**Your strongest one yet,**" Heskel replied.

"For you to say so makes me proud."

After being let through the checkpoint guarded by two dozen guardsmen and crossing the only bridge leading in-and-out of the infested district, their party adopted a cautious formation, with Heskel, Stelji, and the Paladin in front, the two Sorcerers in the centre, and Jakob and the Huntsman in the rear.

"Look at this place," the Huntsman mused in morbid fascination as he took-in the transformed district, where streets of stone and mud had become gelatinous flesh-like structures providing winding passages through warped and stretched buildings full of maws and writhing hands that grasped for them when they got close.

"Keep it down, Kabel," the Paladin ordered, assuming the control of their group, as though it was natural that he would be leader. Of them all, he wore the most expensive-and-protective gear, being covered head-to-toe in full-plate and wielding a shield with some fancy coat-of-arms on its face, as well as a hand-and-a-half longsword with golden embellish along its central fuller and a flawless edge with not a single chip, scrape, nor dent.

"Fucking nobles," the Hunter muttered under his breath.

They walked in cautious silence for a while, the gelatinous ground at times shifting to tough bone or flexible criss-crossed walkways of something akin to tendons or muscle-fibres.

"Do you think there will be minor demons too?" the Sorceress asked, clearly out of her depth.

Instead of silencing her, the Paladin replied boldly, "If so, I will protect you."

"Demons of Gluttony are solitary," Jakob enlightened them. "They eat everything in their surroundings, even servants and—"

"Don't speak unless spoken to, *Novitiate*!" the Paladin admonished him. "Know your pla—"

With a powerful *woosh*, Heskel's fist shattered the Braggart's jaw and caved-in the side of his helmet. Despite his fanciful armour, the Silver-ranker fell to the ground like a sack of flour, its protection clearly less important than its ostentation.

The Earth Sorceress shrieked, and the Flame Sorcerer shouted, "Traitors! How dare you!"

"Silence!" Jakob ordered, his tone immediately halting whatever incantation the Flame-weaver was prepared to utter. "*You* are worthless. You were sent to die here! Do you not see it? Follow my lead or perish where you stand!"

The Huntsman stood frozen, then said, "He really killed him with one punch…"

Jakob was about to correct him, when he looked down and noticed that, yes, the Paladin was in-fact dead.

"Heskel. You used too much force."

"**Glass bones,**" the Wight argued back in Novarocian.

A dark laugh emerged from the Hunter at the reply. Clearly he was not as naïve as the two other party members. "I'm in," he then answered.

"Hmph, as if I'll listen to some *boy*," the Flame Sorcerer said.

Heskel was moments from bashing-in his head too, when the Hunter said, "*Ichien*. If you don't come along, I'll kill you myself."

"Guys, stop!" the Sorceress pleaded. "We can still be a team, okay? Let's do as he says."

With a reluctant sigh, Ichien nodded. "Alright, lead the way."

"We're facing a Gluttony Demon within its territory."

"And?" the old man asked.

"That means we wait for it to come to us, and prepare the field to our advantage."

"Huh, so it's not at all like hunting beasts," Kabel mused. "I was lied to."

"Demons consider themselves predators not prey."

"**MASTER…**" The sound of shifting bone-plates accompanied her unsettling voice. Seeing Stelji go to the fore of their group, they all started backing away slightly.

"Seems time is not on our side. However, we do have one *advantage*."

"And what's that?" the Hunter asked.

"Gluttony Demons are very single-minded," he replied with a puff of vented steam.

Without needing to be told, Heskel rushed to where the Paladin had fallen, and, despite the man's heavy armour, picked him up with a single hand and tossed him overhead. The body flew through the air for several metres, as they all backed further away, its reflective plate-armour glinting with the rays of the setting sun. Before it could land atop a demonic three-mawed pale-skinned-and-veiny house, a massive shadow fell upon it, devouring the body in a single gulp.

The Flesh-Hulk had changed quite significantly after Mercilla had defied his binding contract, as normally such a contract would restrain the enslaved spirit and its destructive aura. Given that Demons were not of the Mundane Plane, their very presence seemed to unbalance the fabric of reality around them, akin to pressure seeking the path-of-least-resistance to equalise itself. The most obvious transformation happened to the vessel of a Demon, which altered itself to more closely resemble the true form of the possessing spirit. Given that Mercilla was a Viscountess of Voracity, her immense spirit could not be contained within an unsealed vessel, even one as fine as the Flesh-Hulk Jakob had constructed. Thus, as her essence leaked from her vessel, it caused the alterations that had mutated the very reality of Market West after her taking up residence within.

Where once it had been a spotless hunk of flesh, muscle, and skin, the Hulk now seemed more akin to a reanimated tumour that had been left to fester uncontrollably. The outmost layer of skin was purple, grey, and black, and where it had torn from its mass expanding from within, nightmarish maws had appeared, resulting in something that looked like a putrid hill of decay, with many different snapping maws full of teeth that came in all sizes and forms.

He found it quite uncomfortable to witness his splendid creation tarnished in such a manner. *That* alone was reason enough to destroy her, not to mention the affront of disobeying his contract when he had summoned her in the first place and given her such a fine vessel. But he also knew that eventually the Viscountess' spirit would rupture its mortal cage completely and return her to the Demonic Realm, the fallout of such an event levelling most of Helmsgarten down to the deepest layers of its sewers. If he were to continue with his experiments, it would be a disruption he could not afford.

"By the Eight Saint…" Ichien muttered in fear.

"Stelji! Fry it!"

"**MASTER…**" the Monstrosity uttered, shedding her hooded cloak to reveal her magnificent visage, the masterpiece of human anatomy and melded bone plates that he and Heskel had wrought within the bowels of the city.

Before the gigantic Mercilla, no one seemed to really notice Stelji's inhuman figure, until the air began to vibrate and crimson lightning raced across the meaty ground to collide with the Mound of Demonic Flesh in a deafening crash of light. Seen from afar, it would look as if lightning had risen from the district to strike the skies above, where clouds began to let loose minor sympathetic thunderstrikes of their own.

"*What* is she?" the Hunter asked, dumbstruck.

"Perfection incarnate," he replied.

The air began to vibrate again as a second lightning bolt raced over the ground and struck with another colossal crash. Stelji's head looked to the skies and not the Demon Viscountess, the overlapping bone plates of her eyeless skull making her look more like an insect than a human. She raised her over-long arms toward the clouds, seeking to refill the elongated bulbous tanks that had replaced her lower arms and hands, wherein blood and lightning mixed through an intricate ritual diagram his Lifeward had invented. Heskel had yet again created the central feature of Jakob's creation, showing that his genius had been untapped by Grandfather's archaic mindset of how best to make use of his minions.

"She's not human," Ichien commented in awe, as lightning fell from above and struck the fingerless arms of Stelji, returning to her the lightning she had cast away, and mixing it with the blood that granted her flawless control over it. As she launched another crimson bolt of electricity, halting the Mound as it began to roll towards them, Jakob mused that his own contribution to her design was quite ground-breaking as well.

Within the severely-diminished chest cavity of the Lighting Tamer, a heart of paper-thin-and-flexible bone held the small ember of a Birthed Sentience, who ensured air and blood was constantly keeping Stelji's brain alive, as well as handling the precise mixture of her blood entering the tanks, so that she could manipulate the rest of the blood within as her own. In essence, Stelji was a simple Wrought Servant, but given the assistance of a secondary intelligence with the ability to grow with experience, she could surpass the limits such a servant normally faced. Her impulses were translated into action by her Thinking Heart and, with every passing moment, that Heart grew more precise and deadly.

She was perfect. But still, there was room for improvement, and now, rather than wondering *if* he would ever be able to make a creation to surpass Heskel, it seemed more a matter of *when*.

"Return, Stelji!"

"**MASTER…**" she replied, running back towards him on her spike legs.

Since he had found her with barely half a body, he had taken liberties with everything below her ribcage, turning it into a sleek-and-lightweight hollow frame of a slender waist and needle-like footless legs. She was made for decimation, not fighting, and after seeing that her apocalyptic lightning strikes failed to destroy Mercilla, he thought it prudent to send her behind their group, so that her Thinking Heart could witness from afar and potentially spot a weakness in the Flesh-Hulk's corpus.

"**TINY THING**," the Viscountess of Voracity roared from the hundreds of maws that covered its enormous fleshy mound of a body. "**HAVE YOU RETURNED TO FEED ME?**"

An arrow bounced off her thick veiny skin, then another thundered into one of her mouths.

"What?" Kabel asked, when the old Sorcerer glared daggers at him. "Aren't we going to attack it?"

"Do you really think *we* can beat *that*?"

"You won't know until you try," he replied nonchalantly. Jakob found it curious that he remained unphased by what he was seeing, but perhaps he was a kindred spirit, because neither did Jakob feel much aside from annoyance that the Demonette still lived.

Not waiting for their quarrelling to stop, Heskel moved forward with thundering stomps and gouged a hole in the bottom of the eight-metre-tall mound with a punch imbued with every drop of his strength. With a wail that hurt Jakob's ears, the Viscountess' enormous body quivered and thousands of hands emerged from all over its body and it started rolling towards the Wight, who wisely decided to get out of the way. The landscape was transformed by the steamrolling Demonette, the living houses flattening and the very ground altering with her passage. Mouths and arms emerged everywhere she touched.

Before she could even show off any of her magic, the Earth Sorceress was caught by three quadruple-jointed arms and dragged screaming-and-sobbing into a bottomless hole with teeth. Her piercing voice was swallowed as the hole chomped closed.

Yelling in outrage, the Flame-wielder launched a series of fireballs from his palms, charring the ground where the Sorceress had vanished, but managing little else.

"Lend me a light," Kabel said, reaching towards the old man with a strange-looking arrow that had a cylinder at the end in place of an arrowhead.

Ichien did not listen though, and instead sent fireballs after the rolling mound, quickly leaving them behind to give chase.

"Well, shit… the old man has gone crazy."

"Why do you need fire?" Jakob asked unperturbed by the scene before them: an enormous mound of putrid flesh rolling after a giant man, with an old magician hurling fireballs and yelling incoherently.

Kable handed Jakob the strange arrow, before searching his pockets for a flint Firestarter. He looked at the arrow in his hands, trying to discern its function and purpose, but came up short.

I should study Engineering, it may be a worthwhile endeavour, he thought to himself.

Kable found his Firestarter and handed it to Jakob, then took back the arrow and nocked it to his bowstring. Realising that the short string at the end of the arrow was like a candlewick, Jakob sparked the flint and set it alight.

With minimal effort, the Huntsman took aim and sent the arrow flying in a steep arc overhead, its candlewick beginning to fizzle and let off sparks.

"Watch this."

Jakob held his breath as he followed the trajectory of the sparking arrow, and, then, with a loud *snap*, it broke mid-air just above where the rolling mound passed under, showering a huge curtain of flames all down its huge body.

"Fascinating," Jakob remarked. He had never seen something like it before.

"Ha ha ha," Kabel mock-laughed in proud glee. Then his expression soured.

A loud wail made the ground tremble, and the many arms of the rolling Demon halted its momentum and turned it towards their position.

"Oh shit…"

The Hunter took off running, the abomination now fixated on him. Jakob stayed put though, watching as it veered away from a collision-course with him. A sickening crunch came when it rolled over the mad Sorcerer and absorbed him into its mass, visibly growing as a result.

Moments later, Heskel found him.

"Any ideas on how to defeat it?"

The Wight nodded. "**Stone Plague.**"

"That seems unwise."

"**Yes.**"

Jakob considered it seriously for a moment despite his warranted apprehension. "Can we contain it if we sever the bridge?"

Heskel grunted affirmative.

"Run to the bridge and destroy it. I will begin the Hymn. When you see it spread towards you, prepare to counteract the spell."

His Lifeward put a heavy hand on Jakob's shoulder, then locked eyes with him.

"I'll be fine," he told him, though he was not entirely sure it was the truth. Only time would tell. Part of him was secretly thrilled to attempt the spell however.

As Heskel ran off, he summoned Stelji to his side. She had not recovered her flesh-stitched cloak, as it had been swallowed by the Flesh-Hulk's passing, but it hardly seemed to matter right then. He would craft another for her later.

"Find the Hunter and bring him outside the district. Once you are across the river, make your way to the Guild District. Make sure nothing happens to his head. I need *that part* of him intact." He wanted to harness Kabel's unique ability to quickly calculate trajectories, not to mention tap his mind for more information about the fire arrow he had used.

"**MASTER…**" she obeyed and sped off, her agility surpassing even that of Heskel. She would find the Hunter in no time and he knew Mercilla would not leave the district, given her obvious attachment to it and his knowledge of Gluttony Demons' general behavioural traits.

"Now then…" he said to himself, walking towards the centre of the district, making sure to avoid the areas where flailing arms and chomping maws marked the ground, as well as giving the living houses a wide berth.

"*Take from the living their lifeblood and form,*" Jakob began to chant.

He was still chanting when he reached the approximate centre of Market West. Already halfway through the *Stone Plague* Hymn, the skies above had begun to swirl, the previous thunderstorms washed away by the attention given to the realm by a Great One Above.

"*Septen, formless and forlorn, gift this land with thy blessed touch.*"

"*What once was living will be made eternal. What once was fleeting will be set in stone.*"

"*Heed me, Septen! Through me unleash thy gift!*"

"*Petrify the wheel of time and lock this moment in eternity!*"

Jakob's body froze in place, his feet nailed to the ground upon which he stood. He craned his head back and threw wide his mouth, so that the twisting tendril of unholy energy might use him as its beacon to spread its gift. Just before he lost consciousness to Septen's overwhelming presence, he distinctly heard the roaring wail of Mercilla as she rolled towards him.

"That was close," Kabel commented, after Stelji had grabbed him with a strange three-clawed hand of blood and tossed him across the river that separated Market West from the Residential District.

He looked back at the district across the water, seeing the enormous fleshy monstrosity roll back towards where the rest of his team were. Then he noticed the clouds above, as they darkened and swirled like a whirlpool, before a giant finger-like spear of grey smoke descended into the district's centre.

When it impacted the ground, nothing happened, but he still stared at it for a few moments longer, strangely mesmerised by the sight. Today had been quite a strange day, and he had only been in Helmsgarten for under a week! He found it hard to imagine that any of the following days could even come close to matching the sheer excitement, mystery, and existential dread of teaming up with the famous Summoner, 'Jakob', or, as the Guilders called him, '*Skin Robe*'.

All the hairs on his body suddenly rose, and he instinctively looked towards his erstwhile saviour. Though her bone-white face had no eyes, he could feel her staring directly at him.

"How do you even see?"

"**MASTER…**" she replied unhelpfully, then, from her bizarre over-long-and-bulbous arms crawled tendrils of blood that coalesced into a whip-like tentacle.

"Erm, what are *those* for?"

When the bloody appendage grabbed him around the neck and started dragging him across the street, he realised that perhaps there was such a thing as *too much* excitement and thrill.

XVI

When Jakob opened his eyes, a shale skin fell off his body, piece-by-piece, revealing to him Market West after the spell. He was relieved to find that Heskel had managed to halt the spell, as he otherwise would not have been released from its grip.

The esoteric toll of the Stone Plague was that it took over the body of the Invoker until the spell had been completed, which meant that either all living matter was consumed and turned to stone, or the spell was halted before this could come to pass.

He looked around, and when he only saw petrified stone sculptures, where writhing arms and chomping maws had been, his imagination won him over for a moment.

What if Heskel did not halt the spell, but it was left to run its full course?

If *that* had come to pass, Jakob would now be the sole living heritor of a world robbed of life. It seemed quite a brutal fate, but he was sure he could overcome the challenge it posed. Then a bird crossed the sky above and he noticed distant sounds of industry, as the stone coating his inner ears turned to dust and vanished, restoring to him his hearing.

He breathed a sigh of relief, inhaling the morning air. Then he put his scent-mask on and made his way towards where the last bridge should have been destroyed by Heskel.

The ground that hours before had been gelatinous and semi-alive, was now like gravel, crumbling with every step he took, leaving the impressions of his boots in his wake. It did not take long before he found the remains of Mercilla, her mortal vessel turned to stone and resembling a large weirdly-shaped boulder. With no vessel to link her to the world, she was banished to the fold of the Gluttonous Saint from where she once spawned. Of course, if anyone was foolish enough to repeat Jakob's arrogant mistake, she could return to reality and exact vengeance.

The houses around him had collapsed under the weight of their roofs, and, where once maws had been, now remained only giant holes and pits in the structures and the streets. The entire district had been reduced to ashes, but it seemed the stone walls of the sewer tunnels below still held strong, else he would have found himself at the bottom of a great pit no doubt.

He gave the mound of flesh that was Mercilla a prod with his glove, and, in a rippling effect, its topmost layers fell in on themselves, partially revealing the core of the Hulk, which had served as the summoning ritual's vessel for containing her spirit. Satisfied that he had defeated her completely, he began walking towards the bridge Heskel had destroyed to halt the spread of the plague spell.

Two-dozen dead Royal Guardsmen stood frozen on the wrong side of the decimated bridge, opposite of where the giant Wight awaited him. Most were frozen mid-stride as they had been heading towards the centre of the district, no doubt charged with investigating the sudden changes to the area.

"Fools," Jakob commented as he passed the last two statues, who, unlike their comrades, had been in a hurry to return across the bridge. With slow steps, he came to the edge of the ruined bridge.

"**Blame not the beast.**"

"What happens when the beasts confront the one responsible for their deaths?"

Heskel grunted humourlessly.

"We may have to find a new place to hide. District guards and Guild Adventurers are one thing, but the Royal Guard answer to the Crown. Grandfather was very clear that we should not bring their attention upon ourselves."

"**Kill them,**" he countered.

"Don't be a fool. We will just relocate before they can track us down. Helmsgarten is big enough."

A dismayed sound escaped the Wight's mouth.

"That does not make us cowards! We are already hiding out of sight, so it would change nothing. Besides, you have seen what happens when we bite off more than we can chew. Even Grandfather makes his demesne deep underground because he learnt this lesson well. You have been with him long enough to know that."

Even as they stood on opposite sides of the crumbled ruin of a bridge, the stones of which now lay in the waters below, Jakob noticed the way Heskel's body tensed up. The Wight had served Grandfather for over twenty years, even before they were forced into the deep sewers by the Crown and their Monster-Killers. It was still a sore topic, but Jakob thought it prudent to remind his Lifeward that such were the consequences of irresponsible slaughter, careless experimentation, and wanton destruction. If one neglected the lessons of their forebears, they were destined to repeat them.

"You will follow my lead unquestioningly, or you will return to your former Master and beg forgiveness," Jakob said, doing his best to not show any concern that the latter might come to pass.

Heskel, not eager to learn what punishment he was due under Grandfather's wrath, lowered his head in obedience.

"Good, now help me get across. We need to return to the Guild before the Crown takes action. I *want* that scroll. Stelji and our newest subject should be waiting for us there already."

Kabel heaved bile and parts of his lunch out onto the cobbles of the alley they were waiting in. His neck was still sore from where the Monstrosity's tendril had leashed him.

"I'm adventurous, but even *that* was too much for me," he joked.

The Lightning Lady promptly ignored him.

"What are we waiting for anyway?"

Still no response.

He pushed himself off the stones, and observed the pale creature, as it stood at the mouth of the alley, watching the plaza beyond. She was wide open, and he made good use of that fact to sneak up on her, slowly drawing his knife from its scabbard on his lower back.

Then a sizzling shock punched the weapon from his grip, and, when he looked back, she was staring directly at him with her strange helmeted face. He lifted his hands in surrender, hoping she would get close enough to let him pin her to the ground, so he could escape. Sure, she had saved him from being demon-food, but clearly she was no friend of his, and he had the uncanny sense that she was not protecting him for his own sake, but rather some other purpose that was unlikely to serve him well.

"I just want to go home," he said, acting scared so she would let her guard down.

Strangely, the creature just stood there, then tilted its head as though not understanding him, before pointing one of her weird arms at him.

"Oh shit…"

As the air began vibrating, he turned around to run, but then—

Some strange language was being spoken next to where he lay on the cobbles. It made his chest hurt to listen to it. His whole body was sore as from strenuous activity and his ears were ringing as though possessed by tiny bells.

The sound of shifting leather made him look up, only to be facing the cowled and masked face of 'Skin Robe'. The young Summoner put a hand to Kabel's head, and muttered some more of those uncomfortable words.

"You're fine," he then said in words that Kabel could comprehend.

With an iron grip, a hand picked him up by the scruff of his tunic and placed him on his feet. A peculiar scent of flowers flooded his nose and he looked to the giant, who was clad in a similar robe and had that *awful* mask.

"Thanks," he muttered meekly, despite himself.

Why does it feel like he's looking at me as though I'm dinner?

"We're going to the Guild. You're coming with us. Don't tell them what you saw, and you will be allowed to live."

"Don't worry about it," Kabel replied to the Boy.

"You'll stay out here and keep watch. If it seems as though people are coming to hurt or capture us, let loose a lightning strike. Otherwise just wait for us to return."

"**MASTER…**" Stelji recognised the command. It was disconcerting how much her voice sounded like Mercilla's, Jakob thought.

He turned to the Huntsman, switching to Novarocian. "Let's go."

They walked through the open doors of the Guild Hall to a deafening silence, as those who filled its ever-present queues and sat around tables watched them enter. Then a roar of cheers and applause followed. A few men immediately came towards them, backed by the Guild Master. One of them clapped Kabel on the shoulder.

The Huntsman chuckled amusedly, and said, "I guess we're heroes, huh?"

After a debriefing to the Guild Master, Kabel was left to mingle amongst his fellows, as Jakob and Heskel once again came to the Guild Vault. After opening the door, the Guild Master let them enter first.

Though he seemed apprehensive, he eventually went over to the sealed display case and performed the unlocking procedure. Then he handed the metal scroll to Jakob.

"What material is this?" he asked, hefting the scroll in both hands. It was surprisingly heavy.

"Tungsten, we believe. It is extraordinarily rare, and our smiths have no idea how it was even crafted into such a thin sheet. Its purity is perfect, which by itself is impossible to achieve by any means of which we're aware. The fact that it is covered in strange lettering is also peculiar."

"So you don't know what it's for? Truly?"

"I have some idea, but I wouldn't have the first clue how to use it."

With the help of Heskel, Jakob unfurled the scroll. He froze upon seeing what was drawn on it. Even the Wight let out a grunt of surprise and awe.

"You have no idea what *this* is," Jakob concurred. "Else you would not have given it to me."

Through his mind-link, the tail on his flesh-stitched robe unfurled itself and smashed asunder the Guild Master's right knee, sending him tumbling to the floor.

Leaving the scroll in the hands of his Lifeward, Jakob stepped close to the Guildman, leaning down so he could look him in his eyes. He took off his scent-mask, revealing his eager grin.

"Please," the man begged Jakob.

He reached towards his head and gripped him by the mouth, fixing his head in place.

"I'll tell you what you have gifted me."

A bone-chilling scream echoed through the Guild Hall, halting the celebration that was merrily underway.

"What was that?" Kabel asked.

"I think that was the Master," one of the man's bodyguards said, worried. He had left his post to celebrate Kabel and his team's achievement.

Immediately, a rush of bodies stormed the stairs that led to the upper floors, everyone eager to help the leader of their Guild.

"Aren't you coming?" one of them yelled back to him.

"I lost my bow," he called back. "Besides, what the fuck am *I* supposed to do?"

Though some insults about his manhood were fired back at him, Kabel was left alone with the few confused novitiates and receptionists that remained in the hall.

He had a pretty good idea what had happened to the Guild Master, or rather, *who*, so he did the only wise thing he could think of, and quickly marched out of the building.

Kabel had only just left the threshold of the large door, when a heavy armoured glove settled on his shoulder, halting him.

"Where do you think you're going?" asked a tall Royal Guardsman. He was clad in their signature silver armour chiselled to have the crest of the Royal House, a proud eagle with its wings splayed and glinting amethysts as its eyes, and the colourful purple arming jacket underneath. Two of his mates backed him up, and a further six were already moving into the building.

He felt his insides turn to mush. Even in the face of a horrifying demon he had not been this scared. After all, a demon could be outrun, but the Crown of Helmsgarten had a reach that would find you even in the darkest corners of the continent, and the Royal Guard were its claws.

Before he could even attempt to argue his innocence, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and his ears begin to ring. He hurriedly shoved back against the Guardsman, before a blinding flash engulfed him and his two friends.

Kabel did not even have the opportunity to regain his senses, before a familiar slimy-and-wet cord wrapped itself around his neck and dragged him away.

"I supposed I let myself be carried away," Jakob replied, as he looked at the lifeless Guild Master on the ground. He wiped perspiration from his forehead, then put his mask back on.

Heskel was clutching the scroll in his hands with such intensity that Jakob feared he might damage it.

"I'll take the scroll," he said, but the Wight was reluctant to release it.

"Don't be petulant," Jakob scolded him. "Give it to me."

A clap of thunder and an implosion of air sounded from outside the building, shaking it to its very foundations. Moments later they heard new sounds comingling with the clamour from outside the sealed Vault.

After the Guild Master had screamed in soul-wrenching agony, they had had to bar the door to keep out the furious adventurers, but now the newcomers were efficiently bashing it down, every pounding strike slowly shearing its way through the locking bolt and steel hinges.

"We need to get out of here," Jakob said urgently. "Give me the scroll, and break through *that* wall," he told Heskel, pointing to the wall that would lead them to the street outside. He had no doubt that they could kill a few Royal Guardsmen by surprise or a lone couple in an open fight, but a full unit of them would be too much to take head-on, even for Heskel. At least if they wanted to survive the ordeal. After all, they were the foremost monster-slaying corps Helmsgarten employed, with many former Silver-ranked-and-above Adventurers joining their force for a chance at serving the Royal Family directly. Not to mention that a large percentage of them were powerful magic-wielders. They were everything the Adventurers' Guild was not: trained, efficient, and deadly.

Reluctantly, the Wight handed him his heavy burden, then promptly smashed through the stone bricks with a couple of powerful punches. As the wall crumbled, they looked down to the cobbles fifteen metres below.

Suddenly, the door at the other end of the treasure room blew open, a mighty gust of frigid wind following it in, as well as several Royal Guards with weapons at the ready. They shouted something, but Jakob did not hear what it was, as Heskel grabbed him and leapt from the edge of the broken wall.

Ribbons of flame and spears of ice followed behind them as they fell to the street far below.

Like a meteor hitting the ground, Heskel's body left a pit in the street where he landed, his heavy and durable body easily shielding Jakob from harm within his grip.

Moments later, Stelji came running, dragging an unconscious Kabel behind her.

Rather than set him down, his Lifeward took off towards Market North with the Fleshcrafter still in his arms, the Wrought Servant and leashed Huntsman right behind them.

Kabel spat out a third round of foul-smelling water, coughing all the while snot and tears streamed down his face.

"I swear next time I'll die for real," he complained to his handler.

The young Summoner turned to the Lightning Abomination and said some words in his harsh tongue. The Creature replied with its go-to response:

"**MASTER…**"

"She will be more careful," Jakob then told him.

Kabel shrugged, spittle still hanging from the corner of his mouth. "It doesn't matter anyway. I'm now guilty by association, so the Crown will catch me sooner-or-later."

"You will be safe with us."

"Not that I have a choice, right?"

"No," he replied bluntly.

The Huntsman took a look around, suddenly realising what the smells assaulting his nostrils were.

"*Why* are we in the sewers?"

The Summoner ignored him and barked some orders to his giant Manservant. Moments later, a crimson blood leash whipped around his waist and dragged him along until he started following on his own accord.

Yeah, there is such a thing as 'too much' excitement…

They had passed through a couple of districts below-ground, when suddenly Stelji froze, her arms crackling with a mounting static charge. She was facing one of the pathways that led to the deeper levels of the Metropolis' underbelly.

Moments later, Heskel and Jakob picked up on the sounds too. Skittering feet and claws, as well as the sturdy drum of legs in full-sprint. None of the sounds came from humans, that much was immediately evident.

"He chose *now* to make his move…"

"**Honour is the prize of dead men,**" Heskel quoted his Maker.

"What's happening?" the Huntsman asked.

"A new foe has joined the fray," Jakob replied. "We need to hurry."

With Heskel as the vanguard and Stelji making up the rear, Kabel and Jakob ran as fast as they could through the tunnels. The Huntsman was clearly unfamiliar with the stone city below the districts, but Jakob could navigate it blind if he had to, and so steered them true, as they fled the monsters of the deep.

Though Stelji remained on guard after they had passed into the tunnels below Market North, they were safe for the moment. Jakob was no fool though, and knew that Grandfather's monsters would track him, no matter where he went.

"Hey, do you see *that*?" Kabel asked, noticing something that neither Heskel nor the Wrought Servant had spotted.

Jakob followed his index finger and noticed it too. A child-like creature with golden scales stood in the middle of the tunnel some twenty metres away, its wide black eyes staring at them.

"Heskel, do we know of any other Summoners in Market North?"

"**There are none.**"

Before Kabel could ask, Jakob turned to him and explained. "That's an imp. Someone must've summoned it to track us down."

"I could kill it if I still had my bow."

"If they are somehow scrying through the imp, it is already too late…"

Without warning, the imp put its clawed hands on its top and bottom lips and started wrenching its own jaws wide, a sickening series of *pops* and *cracks* following the sound of shearing skin and ripping tissue. The air around them vibrated with static as Stelji moved to the fore, but Jakob put a hand on her shoulder before she could engage.

From within the split maw of the tiny imp crawled a tall figure, one which was at once familiar and alien to Jakob. He had grown taller and his face more reptilian. His eyes glowed in the dim light of the tunnel and his entire lower half was covered in red fur, with his upper body rippling in jade-green scales. Both his arms were now adorned with claws, his horns had elongated and changed shape, and his tail had gained muscle and length.

"Veks?"

"***I am Veks no more. Mammon is my name. Lord of the Shining Hoard they call me.***"

Jakob took a step back. "Are you another foe or are you an ally?"

"***You are due some gratitude for playing a part in my release from that infernal blade prison, so the answer depends on which you would prefer.***"

"We are being hunted by Grandfather and the Crown."

"***I will provide you shelter,***" Mammon replied as if it was only rain he was protecting them from.

"I have no idea what's happening," Kabel commented.

"Silence," Jakob admonished him.

"***So, what say you?***"

"A Lord of Avarice certainly provides nothing for free," he stated the obvious.

"***Oh, but a debt you are owed. Besides, a crafty one like you has services I seek.***"

Heskel had wisely stayed silent, but with a single look, Jakob knew that he did not believe it to be a good idea to trust a Demon Lord. After all, they were in this mess because of a demon many times lesser than Mammon.

Jakob handed the Lifeward the heavy scroll and told him quietly, "Whatever happens, *this* cannot be lost."

He nodded gravely in response.

"Lead the way," Jakob then told the Demon Lord.

They walked along familiar sewer corridors, but after turning off the path that would lead them to a manhole near the Apothecary, they began following tunnels that Jakob knew had not existed within the district prior to Mammon's arrival. Though momentarily wrongfooted by following these newly-made pathways, he realised that their destination was somewhere within the Noble Quarter.

More peculiarly, the stones of the tunnel slowly morphed into bricks of some strange golden alloy that shone with an inner light. The scents of spices and stimulants wafted towards them from further up the golden corridors. Though he had witnessed this sort of reality warping within Market West, there was a gulf between the corrupting influence of Mercilla and that of Mammon, not to mention the complexity of their influence. The Lord of Avarice's spirit was so powerful that it caused demons, imps, and other creatures of his home realm to manifest around him, either as faint whispering voices and fleeting shadows or as in-the-flesh beings normally unable to maintain solidity in the mortal realm without a summoner to bind them.

The further they travelled, the stronger the scent permeated the air and the more the natural aura of Mammon fell upon them. Heskel, unsurprisingly, was impervious, but Stelji and Kabel were soon under the thrall of the Demon's vice, staring at the golden walls with fascination and desire. Jakob was slightly better off, but it took most of his concentration to not fall victim to the spell.

No one in their right mind would summon a Demon of *such* power, given their proclivity to permanently alter the fabric of reality. It was an established rule amongst summoners to not summon a being impossible to control. And as far as Jakob knew, there were no means by which a mortal could bring something as powerful as a Demonic Lord or Lady to heel. Stories abounded in myth of countries and city-states that overnight descended into chaos as the result of a powerful demon being summoned. It made Jakob wonder about something.

"Why have you not spread your influence farther?"

"***Why would I trample the beautiful flowers that surround my demesne?***"

Jakob stopped walking as the realisation set in.

"You wish to remain in Helmsgarten?"

"***I am aware of my kin's famous contempt for the Mundane Plane, but no vice is more influenced by humans than Avarice, and this city is particularly rife. Why, it is like a paradise of indulgence.***"

"You will have to fight off adventurers and knights. I cannot imagine they would let you stay unchallenged."

The Demon Lord waved a clawed hand through the air. "***It is of no concern to me.***"

"What sort of requests would you then make of me?" Jakob wondered aloud, as he had initially assumed the Demon desired to be returned home to the fold of the Saint of Avarice.

Mammon stopped, forcing Jakob's group to do the same, then he turned and looked the Fleshcrafter straight in the eyes. "***Remake me as a dragon.***"

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XVII

Golden stairs led from the sewers and up through an opulent undercroft, from there they led into the ground floor of a massive hall. Jakob knew that Noble Quarter mansions were grand, but clearly the Demon Lord's aura had turned this one into a reality-defying space that was larger on the inside. Treasures were piled high everywhere he looked and it was hard to walk across the floor without kicking golden tankards, stepping on polished coins, or disturbing the many statues, bejewelled weapons, and hastily-erected stands with shiny armour adorning them.

Kabel and Stelji were both utterly spellbound, which Jakob found degrading, though he could hardly fault them, as he was nearing the end of his own futile resistance to the pervasive thoughts of greed.

"Release us from your spell," Jakob demanded of his host.

The Demon Lord laughed heartily, but then moments later the pressure vanished and Jakob felt that he could think clearly again. Kabel was midway-through showering himself with an armful of jewels when he came to, and Stelji turned away from the three-metre-tall silver mirror that she had been staring aimlessly into. The Huntsman seemed suddenly embarrassed, while the Wrought Servant returned her Master's side as though nothing had happened. Strangely though, they both seemed depressed that the desires no longer controlled them, as though it had brought them tremendous joy. It was surprising that a Wrought Servant could even experience joy, but, then again, the power that made her Jakob's thrall was one which the Demons themselves had sired.

Kabel watched, as the Demon and Skin Robe made peculiar vows to each other, while a ball of floating half-crimson-half-golden blood swirled between them. It was strange that he could comprehend the language they spoke, as it was clearly not Novarocian, and sounded more like poetic verse. He was unsure what exactly they were making promises about, but it did seem to involve blood, which was obviously a *great* sign.

"Did he really say he wants to be a dragon?" Kabel whispered to one of the Demon's human slaves. She had brown hair that was clumped and tangled with buckets' worth of dried blood and her bloodred eyes had a dangerous glint to them.

She lifted an arm covered in golden armour and pointed at Skin Robe. "He has the skill to remake flesh and bone. A dragon should not be a difficult feat for him to achieve," she trailed off, turning her dangerous eyes to glare at him, "he will need a lot of subjects to create such a monstrosity however. Take care that you do not displease him. Jakob discards anyone and anything that he no longer has a use for."

"You know him well?"

"Unfortunately, though my leash is now in the hands of the Greedy Lord, but perhaps it is an improvement."

Always eager to save his own skin, Kabel leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, "You don't suppose you could put in a good word for me? I don't quite fancy being rendered down to my constituent parts."

"Lord Mammon seems an avid collector, so perhaps he already has an eye on you if he has seen a worth in keeping you. But I would advise that you escape when you can, neither he nor Jakob are masters you should willingly serve."

"I'm afraid running is not in the cards for me, 'less I somehow manage to escape this continent. The Crown has me marked, you see."

"They're the least of your worries," she replied bluntly. "There are fates worse than death."

Kabel was not a fan of her tone, which implied she first-hand knew of such a fate. Then he suddenly noticed that her armoured arm was hollow, as though everything below the elbow was gone. As she turned back to watch the contract between Demon Lord and Fleshcrafter, he also noticed that her body was riddled with wounds, many barely just healed as though she had been in a fierce battle only days prior. He shivered when he realised that he had greatly underestimated the mess he was in.

It was about midday when they went back through the sewer tunnels, heading to Skin Robe's base of operations as far as Kabel could tell. The giant manservant seemed quite displeased having left behind the large steel scroll he had been guarding jealously since their flight from the Guild Hall.

Kabel was not sure that what he had seen was in fact real. After all, upon the completion of the Demon Lord's contract, a massive orange slug-like beast had crawled from the gullet of the Demon and quickly absorbed the scroll within itself. A Living Hoard, it was apparently called. He was unsure how a demonbeast devouring treasure was meant to protect it or keep it undamaged, but then he also was not an expert in the absurdity that he had witnessed.

"I think I might be hallucinating," he muttered to himself.

The giant grunted in response, as though finding his remark humorous.

After about twenty-or-so minutes, the Giant suddenly froze and sniffed the stagnant sewer air, as though anything apart from the cloying and warm scent of refuse was distinguishable to his senses.

"**Loke.**"

"You can smell him?"

A grunt came in reply, but, surprisingly, the young Summoner seemed to guess the words unsaid.

"Which way did he go?"

The Giant pointed down a tunnelway that veered from the path they were following, and also, more ominously, led deeper into the undercity. Kabel was not an expert on the matter, but even from his brief stay in the upper parts of Helmsgarten, he had gathered that the sewers were infamous for their treacherous labyrinthine halls and the nightmarish gutter-spawn that called it home.

"This is troubling," Skin Robe muttered, mostly to himself.

"I'm lost," Kabel replied.

A warning glare from the Manservant silenced him immediately, but then the Summoner looked him up-and-down, assessing him carefully for some reason. It made the hairs on the back of his neck stand, and turned his bowels to ice.

"Stelji."

"**MASTER…**" the horrible voice of the Lightning Lady acknowledged.

"Take Kabel with you and locate Loke. Bring them both back to the mansion of Mammon. Alive, preferably."

"**MASTER…**"

Immediately, she started off down the tunnel, following some unseen path.

"I'm supposed to help find your friend?"

"Yes."

"How exactly? What does he look like."

"Loke has eight legs and is slightly bigger than an adult male. He tends to leave behind silky residue, so he should be easy enough to find. But Stelji will no doubt locate him without the need for a trail."

Kabel was so dumbfounded by the description of this 'Loke' that he struggled to formulate a reply, but then he just gave up and considered his new task more pragmatically.

"I don't have a bow anymore."

Jakob hummed to himself. "I suppose you will need a weapon." After a moment of rummaging through some pocket underneath his off-putting skin robe, he withdrew two strange-looking gauntlets and handed them to Kabel.

As he put them on, he had a sudden realisation. "Are these made of bones?"

"Yes."

"Bone boxing gloves…" he mused, finding even the absurdity of such *weapons* too much to laugh at.

"Please do not use them for punching," the Summoner remarked. "They are for ranged manipulation of blood within a target."

Kabel flexed his fingers within the gauntlets, suddenly uncomfortable with the power in his hands. "Isn't that super powerful?"

"They are quite strong, yes. Please do not lose them."

"I have one more question—," he started, before being interrupted by the Giant.

"**Go.**"

Not needing to be told twice, Kabel hurried down the tunnel, following the echoes made from Stelji's peculiar spike-legs.

"**Unwise.**"

"We will see," Jakob replied. Clearly Heskel did not approve of giving the Huntsman such powerful weapons as the Hemolatry Gauntlets. Of course, they were devastating tools, as his one-time use of them against the Ratmen could attest, but with the Tome that the Guild Master had given him, he no longer had use of them. He had not had much time to study the Hemolatry Tome, but it was clear that it was sentient and could be used as a catalyst or focus of the many spells and rituals within it, shaving down on the time required to perform complex magic.

From a brief interrogation of the sentient being trapped in its pages, Jakob had gathered that a Covetous Daemon born of Envy and Greed had been summoned into the Tome. Daemons were the bastardised offspring of pairings between either conflicting or complementing demons, with the former being dangerous and unpredictable, and the latter being condensed amalgams of their two archetypes. Given that Hemolatry seemed to be a mix of the inherent magic exuded by Demons of Wrath, Envy, and Greed, it seemed quite an ingenious design to use such a Daemon as the core of the Spell Tome.

He had decided to name the Daemon, and by extension the Tome, '*Tchinn*'. It was a mix of the Demonic words '*Tchiv*' and '*Sechinn*': "*Possess*" and "*Desire*". He thought it rather a poetic name, as it combined two words that best described the Daemon's two halves, albeit in an unusual form of the language that he reckoned was not very grammatically correct, if Demons even observed such rules.

"Now, why did Loke leave his nest in the Apothecary?" Jakob wondered out loud.

Heskel grunted with a tone that implied it was obvious.

"I highly doubt the Apothecary lab has been found out."

"**Lesson learnt well,**" he replied, parroting back the words Jakob had used to convince him of what trouble messing with the Crown and the Royal Guards was.

He laughed despite himself. "Thank you for the reminder. It of course seems quite likely, doesn't it?"

Jakob pulled out Tchinn from within his flesh-stitched apron, where it was kept next to the Necromancy and Demonology tomes. As he lay his naked hand on its coiling and writhing surface, the blood-shaped tendrils grabbed onto his skin, tasting the blood beneath.

"*Tchinn, reveal to me the heartbeats of those whose blood you covet.*"

One of the unique elements of using the Daemon's own soul as the catalyst for a spell, was that it allowed him to bypass the Blood Toll that rituals naturally required when invoked by mortals. Granted, Tchinn's soul was tapped in place of Jakob's blood, meaning that with too many rituals invoked with the Tome as the focus, it would be possible to exhaust the Daemon's being in its entirety, leaving the Tome as nothing but a vacant husk.

If kept sufficiently fed with blood, this eventuality could be delayed, though it was bound to happen, given that nothing could return the bit of Tchinn's soul that was sacrificed every time. The same principle applied to most forms of magic that Jakob knew of, which was why most unaugmented spellcasters lived relatively-short lives, despite their tremendous power. It was also why Jakob tried to always utilise a vessel or servant for spells whenever possible. After all, he had plans that required he lived a long life.

With a *hiss* of compliance, the tome made the sound of a powerful heartbeat, like colossal drums of war. The sound radiated outwards, and, to Jakob's eyes, cast a crimson glow around the hearts of every living creature around.

In the distance, down the tunnel Stelji and Kabel had taken, he saw a single heart, which pounded quickly as it bobbed up-and-down, no doubt belonging to the Huntsman as he ran to catch up to the Wrought Servant, who appeared invisible to this strange sight, given her lack of a real heart.

When he looked down himself, he saw the outline of the steadily-beating heart in his chest. Curious, he looked to Heskel, where a strange seven-chambered and bulbous organ mimicked a human heart, but beat a slower staccato rhythm.

Then Jakob directed his eyes upwards, looking at the tunnel ceiling, above which lay the bustling Market North. Countless hearts showed the foot-traffic along the sides of the main thoroughfare, and a few larger organs no doubt belonging to horses and the other animals that were commonly used as beasts-of-burden.

As he was quite familiar with the layout of the tunnel they were following and where its terminus lay in relation to the Apothecary, it was easy enough for him to see the solitary heartbeat of who he could only assume was Hargraves. A little past his signature, both in the area above the courtyard stairs and down in the laboratorium, a collection of hearts showed a considerable group of humans.

"You were correct, it would seem. I count nine people: four within my laboratorium, and five in the courtyard." Judging by their heartrates, they were on edge, but relaxed. It seemed they were waiting to ambush Jakob and his Lifeward whenever they returned.

"Tchinn. Take from the four below the blood in their veins. Their blood belongs now to you."

A gleeful *hiss* erupted from all around them in the tunnel, and the four heartbeats within the lab suddenly stilled.

"We'll go through the front, grab the tools we need, and then return to the mansion."

Heskel grunted approvingly.

After emerging from the manhole in a back-alley near the Apothecary, the pair ventured carefully out into the foot-traffic of merchants and nobles, not managing to blend in, but also not drawing the attention of anyone who mattered.

A throbbing pain in his right temple had been steadily building after Tchinn had granted him the ability to see the heartbeats, and he needed Heskel to steady him on more than one occasion. The spell would not last for more than an hour, Jakob knew, but there was also no way to end it prematurely. Accompanying the glowing outlines around every person's heart was the minute, but still distinct, double taps of the life-giving rhythms.

In hindsight, it seemed quite foolish to try out a new spell at such a critical moment, but Jakob persevered. After all, so much was at stake, and he would not let something as banal as a migraine set him back.

"They are still within the courtyard," Jakob told his companion as they neared the Apothecary. After climbing the three steps to the door, Heskel pushed it open, revealing a modestly-crowded store. Hargraves stood by his counter, in the middle of prescribing the exact treatment a customer required, when he spotted them.

"Welcome back, Milord."

He was about to leave the customer he was attending, but Jakob halted him with a gesture.

"As you were, Hargraves. We will be leaving again shortly."

"Of course, Milord."

They went down into the basement, Heskel leading the way, in case there was anyone down there that Jakob could not see with his Heartbeat Sight. After they went through the doorway and found the basement suitably void of life, they set to work collecting the tools they would need, the Wight carrying the majority of them.

Though risking exposure, this was the most efficient way of fulfilling Mammon's wish, since the construction of so large a body as a dragon's required most of the tools they had gathered and created during their two months' stay in the Apothecary. Starting from scratch within Mammon's demesne would be safer, but would also require a significant time-investment to rebuild every necessary item, and Jakob abhorred inefficiency. He was also in a hurry to wrap up his agreement with the Demon Lord so that he could set to work uncovering the truth of the Tungsten Scroll. What little he had glimpsed of its text and diagrams filled him with such an exhilarating sensation that it was all he could even think about.

They had only just finished gathering up the last of the tools when a commotion from the store above drew Jakob's attention. From one moment to the next, a flood of people had entered the Apothecary; his sight showing him at least a dozen heartbeats that moved in a united column towards the basement staircase.

"We've been discovered!"

Heskel stowed the last tool away within his flesh apron and drew one of the crudely-curved chopping blades they used to sever hip joints, and other tenacious body parts, when dismantling subjects. In his hands it looked like a small easy-to-wield knife, but in reality it was half the length of Jakob's body and weighed over five kilos.

"Tchinn, extinguish the hearts of the five in the courtyard!"

With another gleeful *hiss*, the five men in the courtyard fell still. Their bodies would become like the four around their feet, whose exsanguinated corpses were a testament to the devastating power of the Covetous Daemon.

Jakob cast his glance around the room, peering through the walls at the heartbeats in the streets and alleyways above. Reinforcements seemed to be making an orderly attempt of restricting them to the Apothecary, as six more men now ringed the walled-off courtyard and a group of equal number was making their way to the front door.

With a blast of compressed air, the door to the basement blew off its hinges, slamming into one of the disorganised worktables and scattering flasks and alembics.

Before the lead figure, a stout woman in silver armour, could attack them, Jakob flung a spear of bone from one of the dead guardsmen at his feet using one of the few offensive Necromantic spells he knew, with Tchinn as his spell focus. The Covetous Daemon seemed quite unhappy to be used as the catalyst for such spells, given their association with a Daemon he was naturally opposed to.

If a Covetous Daemon of Envy and Greed was one of the beings whose nature had created Hemolatry, then an Undying Daemon of Pride and Sloth was the progenitor of Necromancy. As Pride and Sloth were conflicting vices, such a Daemon was quite pernicious and its very nature prevented death from taking hold in its vicinity. If not for the immense peril it would put him in, Jakob would have considered creating a spell tome containing such a Daemon to enable him to advance in his study of Necromancy.

As the wind-wielder's head exploded and the bone stake drove itself into the stone wall of the stairway behind her, two more figures pushed past her body callously, only to be immediately shorn in twain by Heskel's blade.

Jakob looked through the walls again, spotting at least a dozen more heartbeats joining the six in the apothecary above, and he also noticed the six outside the courtyard had ventured inside and were preparing to enter from the back-entrance of the basement.

"We're surrounded," he alerted Heskel.

The Wight chopped another royal guard in half, before flames engulfed his head, pushing him back to take cover.

Bright incandescent fire lit up the dim basement, revealing the massive mess of Loke's nest, which covered most of the ceiling and backwall. Jakob also noted, with some satisfaction, that his construct had killed several members of the guard unit before they had driven him out of the laboratorium, their bodies hanging in tangled cocoons among the rafters.

With smoke pouring off Heskel's head, mask, and shoulders, Jakob moved to the fore, forming a claw with his hand on the spell tome, before drawing it downwards. The fire-breathing man in the doorway was torn asunder as invisible claws rent his body, the next in line screamed in terror as he was covered in his comrade's blood. Seconds later, his body crunched together as though constricted by a coiling body when Jakob closed his hand into a fist atop the tome.

The doorway to the courtyard burst open and a man charged in with a wild look in his eyes, too fast for Jakob to react with another spell, but then the tail of his flesh robe freed itself to cave-in his skull with a single powerful slap.

Despite the decimation, more of the guards kept pouring down the stairs, and a sense of urgency took hold of Jakob.

"Heskel! Take the tools and run to the mansion! I will meet you there!"

Without turning, the Wight let out a discontented grunt, before slamming a guard into the wall and deflecting another's blade with his own.

"Go!"

With a roar of displeasure, Heskel killed the two men he was struggling against, then broke free from the mob forming at the bottom of the stairwell and barrelled through the newcomers that had entered through the backdoor.

Jakob moved towards the backwall, running a naked finger over the spell tome as he set it down.

In Demonic he commanded the Covetous Daemon, "*Protect me from them.*"

With his back against the web-covered wall and Tchinn on the floor some metres ahead of him, the tome was the only barrier against the rapidly-filling crowd of angry and terrified Royal Guards.

Jakob took out a knife from within his robe and used his blood to quickly draw a summoning circle on the stone floor. It was small and shoddy, lacking any wards against retaliation from the Entity he was summoning, but, then again, the two of them had something of an agreement already.

Sensing his malicious intent, the closest guards charged forward to stop him, only to be met with serpent-like tendrils the girth of tree trunks, all emerging from the Spell Tome on the floor. It was like one of Grandfather's hydras recreated in blood.

With his hasty summoning circle complete, and the attackers kept at bay for the moment, Jakob put his hands on the crimson lines and uttered the ritual.

"*Lord Mammon, Sire of the Shining Hoard, respond to my call and heed me well. Come forth and—*"

With a solid impact against his forehead, he was punched back against wall, cracking his skull against the stone and momentarily blacking out, saved from a fracture thanks only to his soft hood.

When he regained consciousness, two sorcerers were containing the tome in overlapping domes of pressurised air and scalding fire. He barely got to his feet, before four sets of hands pinned him down, slamming his face against the hard ground.

Someone got a vindictive kick in, and he felt one of his ribs crack painfully, while the weight on his back made it near-impossible to breathe.

"I will kill you all," he snarled.

"You wish," a voice replied confidently, and he was hauled to his feet, before a cloth was used to gag him and a sack was drawn over his head. He had only caught a glimpse, but it was clear that the person before him was an officer of some distinction, given her lavish amethyst-studded silver plate-armour.

"Bring him to the transport," she instructed.

"Yes, ma'am!" the ones holding him upright obeyed loudly and he was quickly hauled across the basement and up the stairs.

Before he left the basement, he managed to overhear the officer and a subordinate.

"Major, why did we let him live?"

"There are fates worse than death."

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XVIII

They had been in this rank and fetid hell for hours now, with scarcely a track to follow, yet Stelji seemed no less enthusiastic about carrying out Skin Robe's order. Kabel would have escaped by now, if not for the futility of it. He was utterly beholden to the Monstrosity's guidance, as, without her to lead the way, he was lost. And even if, by some miracle, he should find his way out alive, the Crown was on the lookout for him, so he would probably not make it far before he was caught. So, while the chances of this venture turning out in his favour were flimsier than parchment, it was the only real chance to survive that he had.

Suddenly Stelji froze, becoming like a statue, then she arced her head down and lifted her spike leg slowly, the bone-covered limb trailing a fine strand of silk.

Kabel quickly joined her and looked at the trail, seeing that it led down a side-tunnel, which, thank the Eight Saint, sloped upward. His enthusiasm refilled, he bounded up the slope, leaving the spike-legged Stelji to catch up.

"There's more up here," he called back to her, the excitement infecting his voice.

Then something else responded to his call as well, its guttural voice shaking the stones under his feet.

"Loke? Is *that* you?"

Something enormous blundered its way into view up ahead where the tunnel curved right. The first thing Kabel noticed was large black wet eyes the size of dinner plates and rubbery skin covering a body which seemed barely able to fit within this narrow demesne of filth. Its six legs were each capped with three curiously-rounded fingers that held talons the length of his forearm.

"I don't think that's Loke…" he remarked, his body frozen in terror at the sight.

Stelji walked past him, the air flooding with static in her passing, before she launched a single bolt of lightning at the enormous frog-like demon. The crimson bolt raced across the tunnel floor in a skittering zig-zag, before connecting with one of the monster's legs and cascading a torrent of lighting up through its body and into the ceiling where it dispersed outwards in ripples of red snakes of light.

The frog-beast practically exploded as it was cooked from within, flinging steaming pieces of rubbery skin and blubber across the tunnel. Tiny pieces spattered his legs, but given what *things* he had already waded through down in this stinking hell, he did not bother to wipe it off.

"I love you, Stelji," he announced sincerely.

Suddenly the air started to vibrate and the Lightning Lady turned to glare at him with its eyeless helmet.

He lifted his arms in mock surrender. "Just kidding, obviously."

It was damp and the stones were cold and rough to his skin. They had left him gagged and blindfolded, but, more distressingly, they had taken his robe and no doubt confiscated his priceless tomes.

He was fairly sure he was kept underground, as there were no audible sounds of the wind and the temperature remained fixed, despite the passing of the sun. For some reason, he was still alive, though he wondered if that was simply due his capturers dragging their heels in preparing his torture chamber, to which he was no doubt soon to be acquainted.

Barely-perceptible tremors in the stones made him turn his head in the direction of the door. A peeking-hole was slid open and unseen eyes assessed him meticulously, before the lock was disengaged and three sets of boots entered the cell.

"Wait outside," the stern voice of the leading person demanded of his companions, likely bodyguards, and the sounds of their retreat was followed swiftly by the door being slammed and locked again. From how the voice of the man before him echoed through the room, it seemed he was in a tall circular chamber, which Jakob found to be odd. But, then again, he was unfamiliar with Novarocian prison architecture.

Though the hood obscured most of his vision, he could make out the faint outline of the man before him. He seemed tall and slender, verging on too much of both, which gave his silhouette an off-putting appearance.

"You may be wondering why you are still alive," he began, his voice as blunt as a rock. Surprisingly, he spoke in Llemanian.

Jakob shrugged, which was difficult to accomplish with his hands and feet bound together.

The figure sighed loudly.

"So brutish, these Guardsmen. But then, they get the job done."

He distinctly picked up the sound of cloth shifting as the man knelt down to pull off his hood. Even though it was dim, the light momentarily blinded Jakob. As he blinked away the blur in his vision, he finally saw his captor in full. Immediately, he was struck by the fact that he was clad in a flawless off-white robe accented with purple embellishments and wore a long necklace of an eagle with amethysts as its eyes. Secondly, he noticed just how old the man was, perhaps into his sixties, which his voice did not betray the slightest notion of.

While Jakob stared up at the man from his seated position, he muttered an incantation of some sort, and a translucent clawed hand of mist extended out from his right elbow and moved towards him, shearing through Jakob's bonds in passing, before pulling out the cloth that gagged him.

"Why haven't you killed me?" Jakob asked in Llemanian, his mastery of the language seeming to please the scarecrow-man.

"Oh they certainly were baying for your blood, and they may still have it, depending on what comes of our meeting."

Jakob flexed his jaw with an annoyed grimace, it was sore from where someone had either punched or kicked him. The cold in the room was also bone-chilling, as he wore nothing but a set of frayed pants to preserve his modesty, which was ironic when he had been robbed of all else that he possessed.

"You want something from me," Jakob guessed, switching to Octef, the language of the Eight Saint's clergy.

The man followed the language switch with casual ease, as he replied, "Of course. You are an accomplished young man, despite your proclivities for the profane."

"You know nothing," he answered haughtily, switching to Heimlish.

"No one knows everything," the man replied, following the switch again, not skipping a beat.

"Then tell me what you desire of me," Jakob continued, switching to the sing-song speech of the Demons.

The man paused, then smiled triumphantly as he replied, not with a normal answer, but a direct quote of obscure Demonic poetry: "*In a name lies a thousand truths and the leash of control, but I give mine freely in return for yours.*"

He switched back to Llemanian, the stoic language of the neighbouring country. “My name is Jakob, but you no doubt know that already.”

“I know more about you than that, you can be certain. You may address me as *Sirellius*. Most know me as the *Diviner*, chief Advisor to *King Ubrik* of Helmsgarten.”

It was a euphoric sense of power that filled Kabel as he flung out his gauntleted hands, tearing apart the beasts and nightmarish creatures that flowed up from the many tunnels leading into the sewer cistern.

Stelji was meticulously laying in with her devastating lightning attacks, vaporising most of the creatures that even dared gaze her way. He barely had time to admire her destruction however, as the horde of monsters seemed inexhaustible. Even armed with Skin Robe’s powerful bone gauntlets, he seemed ill prepared to stem the tide.

After killing the toad-beast, the pair had ventured down long windy pathways that seemed to go on for kilometres, before they had once more picked up the track of spider-silk that seemed to indicate Loke’s passing. He still was not sure *what* exactly Loke was, but, as he reconsidered the Summoner’s description, it seemed obvious now.

As the realisation of what he had been sent to retrieve dawned on him, he let his guard down and a large bear-like rat barrelled into him, sending him straight into one of the tall pillars that held up the ceiling. He collapsed into it with a sickening *crack*, finding his right arm bent the wrong way at the elbow, but despite this injury, he continued slashing with his left hand, the magical gauntlet allowing him to shred apart anything he focused on, as though an invisible demon’s claw was under his control, turning the monsters’ own blood into the weapons of their destruction.

The bear-rat whirled around to smash him against the pillar again and Kabel struggled to get out of its way. Only moments from turning his midsection to mush with its colossal frame, some enormous weight landed with all eight of its legs atop the rat monster’s skull, crushing it against the stone floor and arresting the beast’s momentum.

Kabel’s thoughts were not that he had been saved, however, since the monstrosity before him was like a figment out of his worst fever-induced hallucinations. With a bone carapace body longer than he was tall, eight triple-jointed skeletal legs capped with three fingers each, a thick cord of silk connecting it to the vaulted ceiling, and mandibles that chittered at the front of its eyeless face, it made all the creatures rushing into the cistern pale in comparison.

The Huntsman screamed in fear, only for the spider to lean in close, its chittering mandibles almost touching his ear, and the sound emanating from them inducing a drunken torpor on his body and mind. He tried desperately to fight back with his left fist, but the magic seemed unwilling to obey, as though the spider was impervious somehow.

Suddenly, one of its eight legs grabbed the cord of silk from its back, the one previously connecting it to the ceiling, then it took that silk and wrapped it around Kabel’s torso, before throwing him onto its back, his ruined arm hitting the tough bone armour of its body with enough force to make him momentarily black out.

When Kabel returned to consciousness, the Spider Demon was hurriedly galloping back along the tunnel through which he and Stelji had entered the cistern.

In the distance, he could still hear the grumble-and-roar of battle, silenced at evenly-paced intervals by the tremendous concussive force of contained thunder.

He gathered the breath in his lungs, before screaming into the cistern, hoping the Lightning Lady would hear.

"Stelji! Help me! Save me! I don't wanna be spider food!"

"If you were aware of my work in your metropolis, then why was I left untouched?"

"Oh, I certainly wasn't aware of all your work, nor your existence for that matter. I postulated that the Underking had made a return, despite our agreement."

Jakob narrowed his eyes at the mention of Grandfather's other name. In truth, his Mentor had many names, though most were known as different historic villains, such as *the Wicked Doctor of Lilibeth, the Llemanian Widowmaker,* and, more locally, *the Underking of Helmsgarten*. It seemed an inevitability that so long-lived a monster as him would garner many different names as he moved from place to place while plying his trade.

Though Jakob knew more about Grandfather than most, he had never heard about any sort of agreement with the Novarocian Crown. The notion disgusted him. It seemed a reneging of Grandfather's self-professed ideals, but, then again, Jakob was well aware of Grandfather's duplicity. He wondered if Heskel knew.

"How did you learn about me?"

"Through the Adventurers' Guild. We of course pay close attention their members. After all, they are granted quite substantial freedoms within our domain. You rose quite rapidly through their ranks, and your manner and unknown origins immediately caught our attention. Then I began to put many scattered incidents together, and it seemed quite obviously linked to your emergence into our fair city."

"But still you waited."

"We cannot simply imprison someone on the suspicion of a crime against our Kingdom."

"Yes, you can."

The old man smiled, "Our King believes in justice, so we like to avoid acting in ways to reveal the illusion he has manufactured. Regardless, we only had to wait a few days after becoming aware of you, before you revealed yourself to be the person I suspected. After all, such magic has not been seen within Helmsgarten in over ten years."

Jakob rubbed the soles of his feet. They were raw from being scraped along the harsh stones when he was dragged into his cell.

"We would like to enter into an agreement with you."

"What would the terms be?" he asked, still rubbing his feet.

"You fulfil a request for us, and in return you are allowed to live. Of course, you will be exiled from Helmsgarten. After all, we can't have our leniency become known to the public."

"These are agreeable terms, but what request would you make?" Jakob wondered.

Sirellius was just about to answer, when two hurried raps on the cell door interrupted him. He turned to the source and told the person to enter. Moments later, a courier was let into the circular cell, pausing briefly to stare at the emaciated, bald, and deathly-pale visage of Jakob sitting almost naked on the ground, before regaining his professional composure.

"The entire southern part of the city is overrun with monsters, sire!" he blurted out in Novarocian.

Sirellius turned to look at Jakob, who simply shrugged.

"What sort of monsters?" the old Advisor enquired.

"Rats the size of bears! Six-legged frog beasts! Four-head serpents! And many more that I scarcely have the words to describe! The Major is asking for orders to be deployed."

"They are granted. Tell her the following: the Adventurers' Guild are to focus on civilian evacuations; the Royal Guard will stem the tide and find the source; and the District Guard will cordon the affected districts and lock down the bridges."

With a double-handed salute that seemed to Jakob like an imitation of the Kingdom's eagle symbol, the courier hurried from the cell.

"Grandfather has finally made his move," he told the Advisor.

Sirellius scrutinised him for a long moment, then nodded to himself as if coming to some conclusion. "You are no longer on amiable terms, are you?"

"I owe him no fealty. He himself taught me that only the strongest survive."

"Any advice you can give us?"

"I will tell you what his goal is, if you return to me my tomes."

The old man took a while to consider the matter, but then nodded his assent. He reached down a hand, the fingers by themselves longer than Jakob's entire hand. Reluctantly, he let himself be hoisted to his feet.

"Follow me," Sirellius told him.

After abandoning his cell and climbing spiralling stairs for many minutes to escape the depths, they found themselves in one of the lower floors of the Helmsgarten Castle. For a brief moment, Jakob considered just how much devastation and long-lasting damage he could inflict, but he was not a vindictive person and his focus was on the horizon of the future, not the meagre spoils of the present. After all, a temporary loss or setback meant nothing if the end result was favourable.

Sirellius eventually led them to the third floor, where he had a study adjoining a command centre of sorts. The room was crowded with lieutenants and officers of the Royal Guard, whom the Advisor seemed to be in charge of coordinating. Additionally, there was an entire cadre of scribes and their couriers, who relayed messages as efficiently as possible.

Upon seeing the old man, the lot of them paused what they were doing to salute him with their hands crossed over their hearts, the same way Jakob had seen the courier do earlier.

"Have my orders been relayed?"

"Yes, sire!" they voiced unanimously.

"Then what are you standing around for? Get to it!"

"Yes, sire!" they replied, the commanding officers at once evacuating the room to no doubt rouse their men to action, while scribes handed off letters and notes that were carried from the room by fleetfooted youngsters in light form-fitting attire.

The pair and their escort continued into the adjoining study, which Sirellius closed the door to behind them. Jakob noticed there was another door that led from the hallway and into the study, but knew the old Advisor had purposefully shown him the power he possessed.

With a hand, Sirellius indicated a soft-looking couch, but Jakob declined the offer. He smiled amusedly, then sat down on the opposite couch, before leaning forward and grabbing a little bell, which he sounded gently.

Moments later, the hallway-facing door opened and a red-haired servant with a dimpled smile entered.

"Sire?"

"Bring a tray of sweetmeats and cakes, as well as tea for myself and my guest."

"Of course, sire," the servant replied meekly before exiting and hurrying down the hall, his steps audibly on the carpet outside as he rushed to obey.

"Now. You say you know the goal of the Underking and why he has chosen now to overrun our fair city with his beasts."

"Return to me my tomes, and I will enlighten you."

Sirellius' amused smile froze, before an annoyed expression briefly crossed his face. Then he arose and went over to a large metal chest next to a bookcase, which was overflowing with historical memoirs and accounts that seemed to date back centuries. From within the large chest he withdrew a smaller wooden box, which he brought to the table that sat between the two soft couches, before returning to his seat.

Jakob immediately undid the clasp and withdrew the three tomes, checking them to ensure they were undamaged. Then he thought about how they had been shoved together into the same box and realised something. His face twisted into a grimace of contempt. The spell tome was inert and glued shut, and he immediately recognised the spell.

"Unseal them."

"That was not part of the deal."

Jakob chuckled, realising that the Advisor had not actually violated their agreement. Sirellius seemed unsettled by his response, but Jakob did not care. He finally sat down opposite the man, with the three tomes clutched jealously to his chest.

"*These* are what he seeks."

"The tomes?" Sirellius asked, a flash of anger crossing his face at being fooled. If Jakob actually cared, he might have found some joy in turning the table to his favour.

"He is also seeking my Lifeward."

"The one called Heskel, correct?"

Jakob nodded. "He may also attempt to recover the core of one of his pet demons, who was slain in Market West." Though Jakob doubted it could be recovered, as it had been devoured by Mercilla, and her vessel had in turn been petrified by the Stone Plague he unleashed. But then, a demon's core was as strong as the will of the entity within it, so it was never a sure thing, especially when the demon in question was Raleigh, Grandfather's fiercely-loyal executioner.

"*That* was his doing!?"

Jakob neither confirmed nor denied it. If the old fool did not know Jakob was to blame for unleashing Mercilla, then he had no reason to enlighten him on the matter. After all, their agreement did not include that sort of information.

"If he is still as fond of feints and smoke-and-mirrors, then his released horde of monsters in the southern districts will be a distraction, while his more powerful servants travel through the sewers to strike further north, beyond your cordons and lookouts. If he is aware of my hideout in Market North, he is likely to strike there as well."

"This is very useful insight. Thank you."

Jakob was momentarily wrongfooted by the sincerity with which the old man said it.

"What happened to my robe?"

Sirellius was already moving towards the door that led to the command centre, probably to update his orders to include this newfound information. Without turning he replied offhandedly, "We burnt your profane clothes, but you may take one of my robes to replace it."

While the Advisor was busy barking orders for his scribes to jot down and relay through the messengers, and the two guards by the door watched him with open contempt and disdain, Jakob had

a look at the closet that stood next to a modestly-sized bed. Within were hangers with robes, vests, trousers, and so forth. In the end, he simply grabbed a crimson magister's robe, knowing it would let him pass inspections without any questions asked. He was quite frustrated to have lost his hand-crafted tail, as it had proven quite a useful tool both in his work and as a protection against assailants.

Sirellius returned to the study to find Jakob sitting cross-legged on the couch wearing the robe, while studying one of the books. Though Tchinn was sealed and his magic along with it, the Necroscript and Demonology tomes were as they had always been, inert. It seemed Sirellius considered the Hemolatry Spell Tome the biggest threat, despite the fact that the other tomes arguably held bigger dangers within their pages to those who could discern their texts. The knowledge in the blood-rag tome had after all led to Mercilla's summoning, but Sirellius did not seem a scholar of the summoning arts, else he would have known not to return them to Jakob.

"It's a bit too big for you."

"It will suffice until I craft another robe."

"You know that won't be possible. I told you that you'd get to live, but I cannot in good conscience sit idly by while you mutilate innocents."

"Will you object to me harvesting my material from demons?"

Sirellius paused. It was clear that he could not fully gauge whether Jakob was being facetious or not. "Err, no, I suppose not…"

"Now. The true reason why I am still breathing," Jakob started.

"You don't waste time, do you?"

"I would rather conclude our contract as soon as feasible, so that my true undertaking can commence."

Sirellius lifted an inquisitive eyebrow, but Jakob kept his face blank within the obscuring hood.

"We have a matter which you seem uniquely suited to solve."

"Pray tell."

Two knocks on the door came, and the guards let the red-haired servant enter with a tray of plates with dried-and-sugar-coated fruits, small slices of cakes and pies, empty cups on saucers, and a fragrant tea in a porcelain vessel. It clinked as the man crossed to where they sat and settled it on the table between them. As soon as he had set down the tray, he left the study.

Sirellius indicated one of the cakes. "I recommend the gooseberry tart."

Jakob took the crumbly pastry, eschewing a plate, and bit into it. The tart was both acidic and sweet, with the dense-but-brittle crust balancing the flavours. He followed down the bite with a sip of the hot tea.

Watching his expressions with some satisfaction, the Diviner noted, "It is calendula tea. I had the leaves shipped here from *Libou* yesterday." To Jakob's knowledge, Libou was a small vineyard and farming town in the northeast of Lleman. It lay more than two-hundred kilometres from Helmsgarten. Once again, it seemed that the old man enjoyed flaunting his power. How ironic that so powerful a man required help from Jakob.

"I am unused to such flavours," he told his captor.

"What do you normally eat?"

"Corpse-meal. It is quite bland, but nutritious."

"Corpse… meal?"

"The dried and processed bits of my subjects which I have no use for."

Both the guards looked on the verge of emptying their stomachs, but Sirellius took it in stride. "They certainly breed them strong in the sewers."

"You have it wrong. It is not that those who live in the sewers are strong by nature, but rather that those who survive have overcome the innate adversity of the environment and evolved into stronger beings."

Sirellius finished his pastry and settled his cup on an empty plate before him. "I will tarry no longer. I require you to resurrect someone of great importance to our fair city."

Jakob emptied his cup in a final swig, the liquid scalding its way down his gullet, then he arose from the comfortable couch.

"Take me to the body."

With the guards in tow, they left the study and descended to the entrance hall of the castle, before delving deeper into its belly, into what was easily-recognisable as a family tomb of the Royal Family and wealthy aristocrats, as well as national heroes.

Braziers of burnished steel were licked by guttering flames on the sides of the walls as they descended into the undercroft. The stone staircase was worn smooth by the passing of thousands of boots over hundreds of years and the air was stale, with a faint odour of dry bones and dust.

While taking each of the large stone steps one at a time, Jakob remarked, "I cannot resurrect a long-deceased body without major consequences to the inhabiting soul's state."

He had been running through a list of ideas for how to go about bringing back life to someone who was deceased. Grandfather himself seemed to have solved the problem of mortality some centuries past, but Jakob was well-aware of the inherent problems that came with *that* exact method of Unlife.

Jakob also doubted he could get away with a simple reanimation. After all, when people spoke of bringing back life to a body, what they truly meant was returning the soul to its mortal prison. The personhood of someone lay in the soul, while their physical body was simply a vessel that most suited it. There were several ways to overcome a ruined vessel, but none to overcome a ruined soul, and, depending on the manner of death and the duration the soul had been without a mortal bond, the resurrected person might as well have been a mindless servant, as time eroded their personality like water-and-wind erodes stone.

They came to a set of ornate-but-rusted steel doors, which the two guards pushed aside to allow them in. Sirellius paused on the threshold, before withdrawing an item from within his robe and handing it to Jakob. It was his scent-mask.

He inspected it thoroughly, but found it to be mostly-intact, with only minor cosmetic damage to its exterior. His handmade scent-balls of Misty Reminiscence still sat within the tip of its beak.

"I do not know what sort of narcotic is contained within, but I gather it is important for your concentration."

"It is not a narcotic," Jakob said, then fitted the crimson mask to his face. He imagined it suited the magister's robe quite well, as they were near-identical in their reddish hues. With a deep breath and an indulgent exhalation of spent air, he elaborated, "Without such a mask, the depths of the sewers are inhospitable. The smell will rob you of your faculties and you will pass out, never to wake again."

From the face which the Advisor made in the torchlight, it seemed he did not believe him.

After a brief respite, as one of the bodyguards retrieved a torch, they went through the gates and followed a long series of narrow tunnels wherein everyone except Jakob needed to lower their heads to fit through. It seemed like they wandered for ages, but Jakob realised quickly that Sirellius was leading them on an intentionally-confusing and long-winded roundabout-way to their destination,

perhaps hoping to trap Jakob within the tomb once his work was completed. But one did not inhabit the labyrinthine sewers and not develop a preternatural sense of direction.

Eventually, they came to a room about ten metres across and three metres tall, wherein were many stone slabs. It seemed a room for morticians to prepare a body for burial, as there were many vessels of harvested organs and the tools of the trade strewn about on wheeled tables. Jakob took off his mask briefly to taste the air, noting a pervasive smell of death and sickly-sweet embalming fluids. Such scents were nostalgic to him; Grandfather's laboratoriums had all borne the stench, given that no amount of scent-water nor abrasive cleaning methods could fully eliminate it.

Only one of the stone slabs was occupied, and two men stood above it, chanting quietly. Minor frost-burn was evident on the pale body of the corpse.

"Tell them to halt their primitive attempts at preservation," Jakob told Sirellius.

"Why?"

"They are damaging the vessel beyond repair." Already, he saw that the body would require several amputations on its extremities to prevent gangrene if the resurrection was successful.

"Can you bring him back to life?"

"Yes."

"How?"

Jakob looked around, wondering whether the guards and sorcerers would balk at his words.

"They are loyal and will obey what I command," Sirellius informed him, seeming to guess his thoughts.

Jakob grinned and exhaled air from the vents of his mask. "The best course of action would be to turn him into a Lich. But I will have to prepare the vessel and bind the soul with the aid of a Daemon."

Everyone around him, except the Advisor, seemed to suck in air in unison.

"What must be done?"

Jakob pointed at the two sorcerers defiling the body. "I will need their bodies."

Sirellius nodded, and before the two men could act, his bodyguards had restrained and gagged the two men who protested vehemently to no avail.

"What else?"

"I need you to unseal my Spell Tome."

Sirellius took a step back.

"As the Watcher is my witness, I will fulfil your request. Now, unseal the tome, so I can get to work. The more time passes, the worse the condition of the returning soul."

The Advisor extended his hand and Jakob gave him Tchinn.

XIX

"***I believed you had reneged on our contract, Flesh-sculptor.***"

"I am simply inconvenienced at the moment, Lord Mammon. Your assistance in this will greatly accelerate my ability to fulfil your request."

The two guards who were supposed to watch Jakob, while he worked on making the Daemon-powered phylactery, lay dead on the ground, their blood glistening on the claws of the Demon Lord.

"***What work is this that you are undertaking?***"

"They wish to have some person of importance brought back to life. I have given them my word and will fulfil their request. My word, once given, is inviolable."

"***An ethic many of your kin lack,***" the Demon Lord noted with some satisfaction, wandering across the stone floor, as though sightseeing.

"***Amusing.***" Mammon leaned over the dead man on the slab. "***Are you aware that this is the Crown Prince of Helmsgarten?***"

"I was not, but it hardly matters. Once my work here is complete, a nuisance will be gone from my life, and I can focus on what matters."

"***Do you believe they will let you leave here unharmed.***"

"I am no fool, but they will let me live until the work is complete. What comes after is a consideration for then and not now."

After conveying the requirements and ideas Jakob had formed about the Daemon-phylactery, the Demon Lord asked a question he had not expected:

"***Do you resent me for claiming this vessel?***"

Jakob looked at Mammon's unreadable face. Once it had belonged to a human, but now it was transformed to the Demon's whims and constantly struggling to accommodate the impossibly-powerful soul within.

"Why should I?"

"***Was he not your friend, this Veks?***"

"Friend? I have no use of such bonds. Relational ties are the chains by which we are bound and enslaved."

Mammon laughed darkly. "***Are you certain you are not a Proud Demon in disguise?***"

Unblinking, Jakob stared back and answered, "I am worse than a Demon. My Pride is not inherent to my being, but it is earnt. Demons are short-sighted like an explosion, while I have the long-lived smouldering flame of ambition within me."

"***See!***" the Demon Lord remarked, excitedly. "***This is why I enjoy the Mundane Realm! You humans are an endless source of entertainment!***"

Jakob frowned beneath his scent-mask. "I was being serious."

The subsequent demonic laughter echoed down the long and winding corridors of the tomb.

With the aid of Lord Mammon, Jakob drew his most complex summoning-and-binding sigil to date. It had seven overlapping circles, a fever-pitched reimagining of a septagram crossing through them, and many smaller symbols and sketches within, as well as lengthy written incantations that essentially eliminated the requirement for the Invoker to chant a long and water-tight contract. If not for the

hyper-specificity of the sigil, he could have potentially reverse-engineered it and used it to summon a different daemon, or even a Demon Lord such as Mammon himself.

"Who decided to name this daemon 'Guillaume'?" Jakob wondered. The Demon Lord had provided him not only with the knowledge of the ritual itself, but also the name of the entity he was summoning.

"***A name given cannot be retracted and has the power to alter any given being's fate. But for an Invoker such as yourself, only the power which it holds over a being is of any import.***"

The reverence and significance the Demon Lord put on names made Jakob slightly ashamed of his own capricious approach to naming entities. Grandfather seemed far more adept at naming his creations. After all, Heskel wielded a name that Jakob had not encountered before, and from what he had learnt of other languages, it seemed to hold a multitude of meanings, which, to a being such as Mammon, likely meant that Heskel's potential was limitless. Jakob's name-giving on the other hand were simple and straight-forward, such as with "Stelji". If the Demon's words were true, the Lightning-wielding Wrought Servant would never evolve beyond her name, her potential forever confined to matching her name. But, there was a beauty in the simplistic and straight-forward, Jakob thought. After all, the simple invention of the spear had forever changed the trajectory of humankind, both in warfare and hunting.

Following the arduous and painstaking brushwork required for the sigil, Jakob took the bowl-like vessel he had constructed from the bones of the two dead sorcerers using the Amalgam Hymn. It was his hope that their magically-attuned corpuses would provide a stronger base than normal bones. Mammon made several precise cuts on the inside of the vessel with his wickedly-sharp claws, each collection of cuts representing some Chthonic abstract law.

"How is it that demons know Chthonic? Your own language and symbols are potent enough by themselves."

"***Even the proudest of my kind do not neglect the veneration that the Great Ones are owed. Their voices echo in the darkness between our realms, and even our powers, strong as they are, remain only errant sparks from the flame of their magic.***"

On some innate level, Jakob knew this truth. After all, had he not used Chthonic to command Tchinn? A language that could spontaneously manifest a Great One was one which ought to be revered and feared, even by demonkind.

"What of the Betrayer, the Flayed Lady?"

"***Oh, she is powerful, and has many followers across the realmscape. But she cannot match the Watcher and his Vassals. But then, her insidiousness is a flame that burns neither bright nor leaves trails of smoke, though its heat is intense to those who feel its touch.***"

"I noticed that Sig the Eyeless was amongst your retinue."

"***She has regained her eyes.***"

"Be wary that her insidious flame does not remain as warm embers."

"***She renounced her Lady to me as she slew her own cult and adulated the Watcher before my own ears.***"

"Humans are insidiousness incarnate. They may say what is pleasing for you to hear, but beneath the façade they possess a different tongue that speaks only behind your back."

"***You speak as if you do not count yourself amongst them,***" Mammon noted with a chuckle, before becoming serious again, "***But you are quite right. It was after all a devious human who entrapped me within a blade once.***"

Though he would not say it out loud, he found it strangely ironic how naïve and direct demons were. After all, they took a word given as law, even though they had the notoriety of being silver-tongued and devious. If not for their sincere straightforwardness and simplicity, they would have been unconquerable foes to humankind. Most of Jakob's Demonological spells-and-rituals hinged on these contract and word-as-law concepts that demons held in high esteem.

Jakob had a sudden thought. "What if a demon believes itself above a contract? Can it break free of the bonds? After all, are they not merely imaginary concepts?"

"***Perhaps if all Demonkind decided to unanimously ignore contracts, it could be possible to make all words and promises null. But the will and belief of the whole of our species bind the errant strays who would deviate. Likewise, you humans follow arbitrary concepts that in actually have no power over you.***"

"Such as laws? I think you know that such concepts do not bind everyone equally."

"***Not laws, they are after all transient and according to the age and whims of those in charge of your hives.***"

"Then what?" Jakob asked. For once in a long time, he felt like a student before a mentor, enraptured by the words of one wiser than him.

"***Humans such as yourself, yes you are not exempt, hold steadfast to the idea of Time. After all, are there not whole communities amongst you that dedicate their life to tracking time and who give names to concepts such as 'days', 'weeks', 'months', 'seasons', 'years', and so forth?***"

"But these are inviolable concepts based on fact."

"***Are they? Or do you simply believe that they are? How are you sure that today is in fact today and not three hundred years hence? What assurances do you have that time is a fact? You only believe what everyone else believes, and they are no more informed than you on the matter.***"

Jakob opened his mouth to retort, but realised he had no argument to counter with. As he considered the Demon Lord's words, he realised that Time was but one amongst many things that humans vehemently believed were fixed and unchangeable, but were in actuality no less transient than the laws that defined borders and schooled a populace into subservience.

"You have expanded my perspective," Jakob answered finally.

"***Only a willing listener can receive wisdom,***" Mammon replied.

Steps echoed through the tunnel and Jakob hastily addressed the Demon Lord.

"With your assistance, I should be able to wrap up this matter within a few days at most. I pray that Heskel has already begun the preparations without me."

"***Of course. Your companion is diligent. The eight-legged construct and your two servants have also found refuge within my golden hall. They await your return.***"

Jakob nodded curtly, as Mammon turned to golden flakes that dispersed into the air and became dust within moments.

"… Tarry not … Flesh-sculptor …"

While the demonic voice faded into the stones, the steps of the approaching men grew louder-and-louder, before eventually manifesting into Sirellius and four guards, two of them obviously sorcerers given their lack of meaningful weaponry and loose-fitting armour. It was quite amusing how they always dressed according to their assigned roles, he thought.

"Just in time," Jakob answered as though he had expected their arrival.

Sirellius narrowed his eyes and his retinue spread out, two with their swords pointed at him, the other pair behind them, hands lifted and waiting for the signal to chant their magic. To assuage their fears, Jakob set Tchinn down on a nearby slab.

"I briefly lost the ability to divine on your work," the Advisor said, an unspoken accusation hiding behind it.

"You were scrying on me?"

"Obviously."

"How?"

Sirellius ignored him and continued his interrogation. "Why have you slain your guards?"

"They attempted to stop me."

"From doing what?"

"What I promised to do. It seems their constitutions were too weak to allow my work to progress." It was only a half-truth, though *what* they had attempted to halt was his summoning of Mammon. "They were not as loyal or obedient as you promised."

Sirellius bristled at his words, taking the insult personally. "That does not explain why my divination failed."

"Have you tried summoning a Daemon before?" Jakob asked, indicating the complex patterns that covered the floor near the centre of the room.

"No."

"Neither have I. I do not pretend to understand all that such an undertaking involves, but I am aware that it may have a profound impact on the stability of nearby rituals." It was another half-truth. In actuality, Mammon had provided the magical aura that prevented scrying, though it had been meant to conceal their interaction from Grandfather, not the Advisor, though it made sense that the Old Man possessed the ability to scry on him, since there were no other logical explanations as to how he managed to coordinate his Royal Guardsmen from the castle, while they roamed many kilometres to the south amongst the populace of Helmsgarten. Sirellius' ability to scry also explained the Crown's infamous ability to locate anyone, no matter where they went nor how well they hid.

Sirellius nodded slowly as if conceding the point and he let the accusation drop. In the end, he had more use of Jakob than two guards of middling capabilities. It seemed Jakob yet retained the upper hand.

"We will stay to oversee the rest of the ritual."

"Sire, what about the invasion?" asked one of the sorcerers.

"They will manage without us; *this* takes precedence. The Major is capable of making her own choices."

The Diviner nodded curtly to Jakob, indicating that he may continue his work.

Jakob smiled grimly beneath his mask, before taking a full drag of the Misty Reminiscence within and peeling it off his face. After stuffing the mask in a deep pocket of his oversized Magister's Robe, he let out the cloudy air with a steady breath, then walked to the edge of the elaborate ritual circle and knelt within the small ring made for the Invoker.

Unlike those beyond the confines of this particular circle, he would be untouched by any sort of magic or aura that the summoned Daemon naturally exuded. Normally, such an inclusion was paramount to pulling off a flawless Contract Binding, but it was not a necessity here, given that the ritual contained the contract within and he needed only Invoke the rite. But, he was dealing with an Undying Daemon, who had one of the most devastating natural auras amongst Demons and their Spawn, so it was a precaution even the Demon Lord had advised.

Grandfather had once mentioned that a newborn Undying Daemon could decimate a city in days, while it would take a Covetous one like Tchinn months. Complimentary Daemons, such as Tchinn, whose halves were able to coexist, were strong not because they had a bigger reserve of power than

normal demons, but rather because they could combine the nature of their halves in dangerous ways. On the other hand, Conflicting Daemons, whose two halves were opposing forces, were fuelled by a limitless supply of power, but were also constantly experiencing inner turmoil as their halves attempted to overpower the other.

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, Pride Demons often produced Conflicting Daemons when they mated with other demonkind, given that their spirits were unbendable and overpowering. The Proud Saint was after all the first of the Seven Saints to fall to Vice, spawning Proud Demons and their Realm from the pure strength of his soul alone.

It was unheard of for such Daemons, like the Undying whose halves were Pride and Sloth, to exist in a stable balance, thus they were impossible to control. However, the genius in the contract that Mammon had constructed, was that there was no attempt at control, only a simple trade that any Demon would gleefully accept, especially one where Sloth held sway.

Jakob placed his hands on the symbols Mammon had personally drawn, and he felt quietly amused that the Advisor and his retinue all took several steps back from him. In reality, there was nowhere for them to hide from what was coming, given that Jakob occupied the only sanctuary.

"*Guillaume, heed my beckoning call.*"

Every single flame in the morgue, and no doubt every last one in the entire castle and its vicinity, was smothered as the entity came forth within the bone-melded bowl. It appeared as an oily black flame with a core of brilliant pale blue. The instant the Daemon arrived, the words of the contract, which inscribed the many rings of the summoning ritual inside-and-out, were set alight by its gaze.

Its voice came like a whisper, and Jakob immediately heard the five people behind him collapse to their knees, while whining in agony and pleading for death. "**…your deal…is…favourable…**"

"I am pleased that you say so," he replied. Already, one of the sorcerers lay dead, his eyes turned black and ooze dripping from his ears. Moments later, he struggled upright, his black eyes now serving the Entity in the bowl at the centre of the ritual.

"**…what trade…doth thou…seek…?**" Guillaume asked, his drawling-and-slow voice causing the other sorcerer's head to open with a terrible crunch of cranial bone as a new limb covered in thorns emerged from within. His eyes too were black as tar and served the Daemon.

"Return the soul and wits to the man whose corpus occupies the dais," Jakob replied, noting with self-satisfaction that the protections placed around the Crown Prince's stone slab kept him from the magic of the Daemon. "As stated in the contract, you will be gifted a gallon of blood at dawn every second day, which the Advisor in the white-and-purple robe will ensure. If an offering is neglected, you may take your offering from him, before the summoning is annulled and you are released."

"**…I accept…these terms…**"

Satisfied, Jakob smiled to himself, "You may keep those whose minds you've already consumed, as a show of good faith. The Advisor will be at your beck-and-call, if you need it."

"**…thank you…Jakob…I will…remember…your gifts…**"

He looked up, feeling a tinge of unease trail down his spine. If not for Lord Mammon's assurances, he would have worried that the Daemon could place him under its thrall, after all, it had managed to enkindle the two sorcerer guards with its flame, despite the fact that the ritual severely limited the reach of its aura. It was quite a thing to behold that even the tiniest fraction of an Undying Daemon's aura had such tremendous power within it still. He had no doubt that several others within the castle had fallen under its flame of undeath, chosen either by random or according to some unknowable logic.

Sirellius wiped blood from his nose and glared at Jakob, who remained kneeling within his sanctuary.

"What have *you* done!?"

"What I was asked," he replied calmly.

The Old Man attempted to chant his magic, but found himself unable to, perhaps due to the internal trauma he had experienced, yet miraculously survived, or perhaps because of the lingering aura of the Daemon.

When his magic would not come to him, he picked up one of the unconscious guards' swords and startled shambling towards Jakob, with the intention to kill him clearly written on his face.

"Enough, Sirellius! Put down the sword."

The Advisor froze, turning his head to the source of the admonishing voice.

From the stone slab, the Crown Prince of Helmsgarten had arisen, his body no better than moments before, with frostbite, gangrene, and putrefaction corrupting it, but life returned to him nonetheless.

The naked man regarded Jakob, then the bowl and the oily flame within, as well as the two black-eyed Undying Slaves, the blood-drawn ritual lines, and the room they were in.

"*How* am I alive? What sort of magic is this?"

"My Liege—" Sirellius began, but the Prince was incensed.

"I will speak with father. I *know* he orchestrated this." He quickly stormed for the exit.

"But, your body…!"

Halfway across the room already, the Prince paused and took-in his body in the sickly light of the Daemon in the bowl. "How *long* was I dead, Sirellius?"

"…Eight days, my Liege."

"*Eight*? Eight days!? I am a corpse, you incompetent fool! *Look* at me! *Look* what has become of me!"

Jakob arose from his spot and turned to look at the Prince after reattaching the scent-mask. "I can fix your body. I can make you more than you were."

"Are you the one who brought me back from the Afterlife?"

"I am."

"Very well. You may correct the mistakes that Sirellius caused."

"My Liege, I was not responsible for—"

"Silence!"

Jakob stepped out of the ritual circle and walked towards the pair, retrieving Tchinn on the way and stuffing the spell tome into one of the pockets of his robe.

"Let us leave this undercroft first," he told them, then he turned towards the Advisor, who already seemed to be regretting the actions that had led him to this moment. "I will need materials."

"You will have them," the Prince answered on behalf of the Old Man who suddenly looked twice his natural age in the Undying light.

XX

After working nonstop on remaking the Crown Prince's body for almost an entire day after preparing the materials he needed, Jakob found a corner of the study-turned-laboratorium and slept for a few hours.

When he awoke, the Prince still lay unconscious on the workbench and the remains of the people whose muscles, bones, skin, and hair that had been used to remake him crowded the floor near one of the large mosaic windows.

As he stood watching the sunrise through the window, munching on a gooseberry tart and sipping calendula tea, he wondered if Sirellius would actually let the Daemon go hungry.

The minutes passed and the blazing orb cast its light across the metropolis as it followed its ponderous journey through the sky. He concluded that the Advisor had dutifully fed Guillaume a gallon of blood, when the Prince's remade body continued drawing breath, albeit shallowly. Whether out of self-preservation or loyalty to the royal family, Jakob could not say, though his bet would be on the latter.

While he stood in his own thoughts, there came a knock on the door.

"Enter," Jakob answered.

After a few hesitant moments, the door to the room pushed open and Sirellius entered. His flawless white-and-purple robe was now adorned with a splatter of crimson droplets on the sleeves and skirt.

"Your future King yet lives," Jakob announced amusedly. "I see that you personally fed the Daemon."

"You said yourself the duty was mine," he replied sombrely. His once-haughty expression was now one of defeat and resignation.

"Our deal has now concluded."

"I did not ask you to practise your heresy on my Prince."

"Consider it a gift," Jakob replied, though, from the expression on Sirellius' face, he clearly did not. "He is stronger than ever and will be able to pass on his genes."

"What do you mean?"

"Given the circumstances of his death, procreation would not have been possible without my intervention and correction."

A look of surprise crossed Sirellius' face. "I did not realise… Thank you."

"May it ameliorate the enmity between us, so that the urge to track me down will not compel you in the future."

The Old Advisor laughed, but there was no humour in it. "If I had known I was making a deal with a Demon, I would have considered my contract more thoroughly."

Jakob grabbed a jar he had prepared the day before and passed it to Sirellius. The syrupy brown soup within sloshed as he took it.

"Once he drinks *that* he will awaken. I will take my leave before then."

Immediately, the Advisor leant over the body of his Prince and forced the concoction down his throat. Jakob had already left the study when the sound of coughing-and-sputtering could be heard from within. Moments later, the unmistakable voice of the Crown Prince was scolding the Old Man.

With his hood drawn and a hand on Tchinn within his pocket, Jakob quickly left the castle behind and sought out the quickest route to the Noble Quarter.

Kabel wiped blood off his cheek, though it only smeared his dirty face more. A spindly hand-like creature lay before him, its midsection rent with the force of one of his attacks with the bone gauntlet. It unsettled him that this creature of nightmarish design had moments prior been vaguely humanoid in shape.

"These are nothing like the ones in the sewer," he commented.

Sig kicked the creature with a gold-embellished boot. "The Underking seems to really want the Giant returned to him."

"Heskel? Why?"

"Why should I know?"

Kabel shrugged. He had found a strange kinship with Sig the Golden, though friendship was not the right word for it. He had no illusions that she would not gut him the moment the Demon Lord believed his usefulness had reached an end.

I seemed to have traded ownership without being informed… he mused to himself. Of course, he could always make the attempt to escape, though his intuition told him *that way* lay only death. Kabel had been called many things, but suicidal was not one of them, in fact, he had most often been likened to a roach or rat, given his proclivity for self-preservation at all costs.

"Did *he* give you that weapon?"

"I think it's more on loan than anything," Kabel answered. "I'm generally better with a bow though. This is the first bit of magic I've been able to use, and I feel like even a toddler could use this *thing*…"

"Why don't you ask Lord Mammon to gift you a bow then?"

"Are you suggesting I ask a Demon for a favour?"

Sig laughed, realising the insanity of her advice. "We are doomed either way. You may as well, I figure."

"My soul is still my own," Kabel replied.

"Are you entirely sure?"

Now it was Kabel's turn to laugh. "Not exactly…"

Golden glitter suddenly rained down in front of them and a demon manifested itself in a haze of shiny mist.

"*Salutations, Hoardlings!*" it called cheerfully as its full visage stepped from the obscuring mist. It had a static smiling mask of grey stone as a face and a lopsided body with thick legs and skinny arms and torso. Its body was made of spongey orange gelatine that was partially translucent and twin cores shone with an orange glow where its belly and heart would normally have been located, had it been human. It seemed neither male nor female, though Kabel already had seen enough of Lord Mammon's cohort to know that such was the norm.

"New orders?" Sig asked.

"*Indoodily! My name is Sarll, follow me or I'll eat you!*"

The gel demon took off in a merry skip as it moved down the streets and alleyways that snaked around Mammon's demesne.

Sig and Kabel followed closely behind in a steady jog.

"I swear each is more unhinged than the last," Sig commented. They had been fighting for what felt like days, each new opponent announced by the arrival of a demon. However, more often than not it was the tiny Greedling imps who guided them, so the arrival of a true demon was a worrying sign of the sort of resistance they would meet.

From one moment to the next, Sarll vanished around a corner and they had to break into a sprint to keep up. Given that demons did not seem to be wont to empty threats, the prospect of being eaten by Sarll, if they fell behind, seemed a very real possibility.

As they rounded the corner, they emerged into a small park full of well-trimmed hedgerows and trees, where a fountain with statues of chubby angel children, who danced around the eager stream of water in petrified glee, stood as its centre. On one of the benches that surrounded this sculpted structure, sat a man with the pelt of a bear draped over his body to cover his naked skin.

"**Return it to me,**" he demanded as he noticed Sarll opposite the fountain from him.

"*You smell strange,*" Sarll replied happily, its cheerful demeanour unflinchable.

The man stood from the bench, which Kabel immediately noticed was bent and fractured from his immense weight.

"Another one of these…" he complained.

His blank eyeless face was smooth and drawn back so that his skull was close to a crescent shape when viewed from the side. As the humanoid rose to his full height, which was close to three metres. his face started elongating from jaw to upper lip.

"**Return it,**" it droned on again, its throaty voice garbling the words as though they were a foreign language. As the creature started ambling towards Sarll, its malformed stumpy feet cracked the flagstones underfoot.

Sarll skipped towards the humanoid with not a care in the world. The Gelatine Demon jumped over the fountain with a powerful kick and slammed its arm into the head of the man-thing, its body shifting the mass on its chunky legs to its arm mid-motion.

The impact folded the humanoid giant onto itself, so that its smooth forehead snapped against the lip of the fountain.

As Sarll landed, its body was once again the weirdly-proportioned shape it had started with. No sooner had the Greed Demon landed than a spindly limb like a five-metre-long eight-digit finger had shot from the back of the humanoid's spine and pierce it through the glowing heart core. The finger continued ripping through the Gel Demon's body, before pivoting back and penetrating the belly core on the return-strike.

With a burst of light, Sarll's body imploded and vanished in spatter of gloopy gelatine.

"I think we might be fucked," Kabel commented uneasily, as the giant man spun on them and his body unfolded like one of the paper decorations they made in his hometown to the west.

Sig nudged his body with her gold-trimmed boot and sighed.

I kind of liked him…

She knelt and with a careful grip on his wrist, pulled the bone gauntlet from Kabel's broken body. Blood-flecked spittle bubbled from his mouth as he tried to utter some final words to her.

"Just close your eyes," she told him. "I will take your pain away."

Most of his body lay some metres away, but his torso and left arm were still attached to his head. In the end, the Chimera had not been too strong, but the fool had simply gotten unlucky. It was nothing new for Sig who had seen many of Lord Mammon's other slaves fall, and yet she felt a tinge of guilt

when she put her golden prosthetic to his temple and sent spike of blood through his skull, destroying his entire brain with an internal explosion. The final bit of light was snuffed from Kabel eyes.

"*They* won't have their way with you," she promised in a solemn whisper.

Glitter and mist pre-empted the arrival of *yet another* Demon, and she stood up and attached the bone gauntlet to her left hand as she awaited its arrival. The gauntlet fit her as though it had been made to her exact measurements. Somehow, it did not seem too far-fetched an idea that these had once been designed with her in mind, despite the fact that Jakob openly despised her and had only kept her alive because it amused him.

When the lightshow vanished, there was no Demon to greet her nor a Greedling with its big bulbous black eyes.

"***A shame, to lose such an amusing toy,***" commented the voice of Lord Mammon from behind her.

Sig immediately spun to face him. He was standing over Kabel's body, neck bent and looking down at the lightless eyes.

"M-my Lord," she stammered, "I apologise for this outcome."

Without breaking his gaze with the corpse's dead eyes, he simply replied, "***It matters not. Gather his remains and come home. The Young Master has returned from his errand and is eager to fulfil his promise to me. Your compliance in his endeavour is expected.***"

The mansion of Lord Mammon had continued its reality-defying internal expansion and now was like a town on the inside, with mounds of gold and piled treasure stretching into the horizon. A strange sluglike *Hoardbeast*, not too unlike the one that safeguarded the Tungsten Scroll, carried Jakob from the grand entrance to a central open spire where many winged demons and creatures frolicked and played, their Master lounging at its peak.

When their eyes met, Mammon vanished, only to reappear before the beast that bore him, a cloud of golden flecks falling away from him like the scales of a moth. Jakob dismounted the slug by stepping down its soft body and the Demon Lord graciously offered him his hand so that he landed safely on the coin-strewn ground.

"Might I possibly learn such magic as this?" Jakob wondered. "With the ability to transform a building into so vast a space, any place may become the perfect laboratorium."

"***If I possessed the knowledge of how to pass on such a skill, you would be deserving of it, but alas.***"

"A shame, but I suppose even a minor Greed Demon can be enticed to provide me with such utility as *this*." It was certainly something he intended to investigate.

"***Nowhere near as grand, but similar, possibly. I am unsure what powers my weaker brethren possess however, and it may be that I alone amongst my species wield this ability.***"

"I shall have to experiment and find out," Jakob muttered.

"***For a price, I may offer my expertise again.***"

Jakob considered the proposal. Greed Demons were the least destructive to human civilisation as they seemed perfectly able to coexist with a materialistic capitalist society that revolved around bartering and trade. But prolonged exposure to Lord Mammon would no doubt corrupt his faculties and steer him down indulgent paths that he had no desire to explore.

"I will consider it, but, for now, show me where Heskel has set up, so that I may begin work on making the new visage you wish to inhabit."

Heskel grunted with satisfaction upon seeing his Ward.

"You have been hard at work, I see," Jakob commented.

"**Much to prepare.**"

"Indeed. Where is Kabel and Stelji?"

"***Kabel is dead, I'm afraid, and I have taken the Lightning-Tamer for my own.***" Mammon answered from behind him, his unnerving ability to observe and traverse every square-metre of his demesne with ease showing Jakob that there would be no room to circumvent his contract with the Demon Lord and live. Though he also had no intention to renege on their deal, given the, albeit-perilous, usefulness such a connection would prove to any person of his trade. Besides, this was an opportunity to craft something of mythical eminence and not one he would pass up on just to retain some of his freedom.

"Make good use of her, she is only going to get stronger with every fight, and, in time, she will no doubt be the strongest tool in your arsenal."

"***She has already distinguished herself, as has your Blood-Witch, but I will heed your wisdom and not squander their capabilities.***"

"Has Kabel's body been retrieved?"

"**Yes, dismantled already, but brain cannot be salvaged.**"

Jakob frowned. "No matter, we will make use of him nonetheless, though I would have loved to study his grey matter."

"***The Blood-Witch was the one to blow out his flame. It seemed to be out of compassion,***" Mammon explained, the latter sounding like a half-formed accusation.

"Sig once declared herself Eyeless, and though you say you have reformed her and returned her to the fold of the Watcher's grace, an ember of perfidy is sure to still smoulder in her chest."

The Demon Lord's eyes narrowed at the implied scepticism in Jakob's words. "***You are my guests, Jakob, but do not forget your place.***"

"I believed we spoke as equals."

"***No Proud Demon am I, but I am above your kin, this is obvious to all observers. You are useful to me, but, ultimately, I am indulging you and your craft. Call it fascination with a lower species.***

"***Look around you. This is a sanctuary for all that ails and hunts you. Without me, where would you be? You are beholden to me until our contract has concluded. Do not forget that.***"

Jakob weighed the benefit of retorting, but ultimately conceded the point in favour of staying on good terms with the Lord of the Shining Hoard and lowered his head.

"My apologies Lord Mammon, I shall learn to bite my tongue when my words are of no benefit to my betters."

When he lifted his head, the expression on the Demon Lord's face marked satisfaction that his status was secure. After all, within Helmsgarten, he was perhaps the most powerful entity present, bar the Crown in its totality.

Mammon turned on the spot and evaporated into golden mist and Jakob breathed a sigh of relief.

Thank the Watcher that Demons are such gullible fools.

Heskel grunted disapprovingly, but knew enough to not give words to his thoughts as well.

"We must play nice," Jakob told him. "Patience is a virtue, didn't you know?"

Frustrated, the Wight kicked a pile of coins, sending them clattering down and away from their estrade upon which their makeshift laboratorium was erected.

"You are honest like a Demon," Jakob noted with amusement.

He grunted in what could only be described as offended outrage.

"We are the heritors of this world, Heskel. The pen of history will be in our hands, not *theirs*, rest assured."

Jakob finally had the time to look through what tools they had to deal with. Unsurprisingly, every blade, saw, needle, and thread was of the purest most-brilliant gold. Given that the tools were infused with the essence of a Demon, a powerful one at that, they would not break nor chip, but he thought the level of ostentation was frivolous.

As for their materials, they had a healthy sampling with half-a-dozen men and seven women, though he could already tell that they would require more, since the Flesh-Hulk had required eleven adult bodies and the Dragon corpus that they aspired to make would dwarf even that monstrosity. Also, they were starting to turn gold instead of decaying, which he found an irritating challenge.

"Where is Loke?"

"**Hunting materials.**"

"Excellent. We will require thirty bodies, split two-to-one between men and women."

"**Thirty-five,**" the Wight argued back. "**Fifteen men, twenty women.**"

Jakob considered it, but did not understand the logic. "Explain."

"**Women possess flexible lighter bodies, better for large construct.**"

"You believe that will be necessary?"

Heskel grunted affirmative, as though his verbosity had suddenly rendered him mute.

"We could counteract the weight of male muscle-mass with expanded skeletal support."

"**No. Mobility essential.**"

"Very well, I'll concede in favour of your experience."

The Wight regarded him coolly.

"Alright, fine! It's not *just* your experience, clearly you've given it more thought than I."

Heskel nodded once and that was that, the debate had ended. It was a nostalgic feeling to Jakob, who could not help but relax as he recollected similar arguments from before they ventured out of the sewers. It was the rare few arguments that were settled in his favour, but he always felt like he learned more from every time he was showed the flaws in his logic.

And now that he considered it more dutifully, there was a simple irrefutable sense in focusing on making a lithe dragon for a Greed Demon to inhabit, as opposed to a heavy well-armoured corpus. If a soul shaped the vessel it occupied, then surely a vessel must fit the shape of the soul it intended to inherit.

"While we await the return of Loke, I have another task I'd like to complete."

His Lifeward tilted his head with an unspoken question.

"I need new trousers, apron, gloves, and boots." As he saw Heskel turn to the pile of bodies yet to be disassembled, he grinned beneath his scent-mask. "Not of human flesh, Heskel. You see, we find ourselves in a Garden of Plenty. If our Host is willing to lend us his subjects, we may make for ourselves robes of their durable pelts."

A gruff pulsating thrum was elicited from the Giant of sown-together parts. Jakob had never before heard such a sound. It was unsettling and dangerous, making his bones ache and heart quake.

Heskel was laughing.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XXI

"***Marvellous!***"

Ringed around Jakob and Heskel's mightiest creation, the Shining Hoard and their Lord were enraptured and merry, wanton desire to possess so extraordinary a vessel purely visible on all the faces that beheld it. Even the Lightning Construct, Stelji, who seemed incapable of fear, was sufficiently cowed before the slumbering corpus.

Sig the Golden, or 'Blood-Witch' as her Lord had taken to calling her, stood some distance away from the celebrants. The phantom sensation in her missing hand was awakening again in this moment. She had started to notice a pattern with how it always seemed to pre-empt some soon-to-be danger, especially considering how it twice already had saved her when fighting the monsters of the Underking who sought to break into Lord Mammon's demesne.

She would stay vigilant for anything that might do her harm, even within the Demon's private sanctuary.

The Flayed Lady yet favours me. Her strings to me have not been severed, only frayed. Her quiet flame burns in me. I feel its intensity.

My time will come.

I am Her blade.

Wearing their work-robes crafted from the pelts of Mammon's demonkind who converged on him and broke the barrier between realities wherever he travelled, the pair stood before their creation, pride swelling within their hearts. Loke dwelled behind them, eager to serve its master the moment it was needed.

"***Marvellous indeed!***" the Demon Lord praised them again, while circling the dormant vessel.

Jakob was unsure how long they had spent constructing the enormous body, though it felt like many months, maybe even years. It was quite possible that only a matter of days had passed outside the peculiar dimension that existed within Mammon's mansion, though he could not know until he left its embrace.

A smattering of bristly pubescent hairs adorned his upper lip and chin, and made his scent-mask itch and chafe, though he had been so consumed by his task that he had not considered his personal hygiene or well-being.

As he looked around, he considered how it had been wise to guard himself from the influence of the Demon Lord by having Heskel anoint their attire with Chthonic sigils that kept them void of corruption, though he wished he had had the knowledge to do it himself and considered his lack of familiarity with the ancient alphabet his biggest handicap. Hopefully it would be remedied when he had the opportunity to finally study the Tungsten Scroll.

Sig, Stelji, and Loke had all inhabited the Demon Lord's demesne unprotected for a longer duration than Jakob's own long stay and the infectious aura that Mammon exuded, like a human exudes the scent of their natural oils, had taken its toll on them, both physiologically and mentally.

The Blood-Witch had become enamoured with trinkets and baubles, and these were hoarded jealously in her private nook of the ever-expanding mansion interior. Further, her blood had turned

into an abnormal rose-gold colour, as evident every time she manipulated it to utilise her golden prosthetic.

Meanwhile, the Lightning-Tamer seemed obsessed with her mirror-image and froze whenever she caught a glimpse of herself reflected in the shiny hoard. Likewise, her exterior had undergone a metamorphosis, with silver covering three-fourths of her previously-pristine bone carapace. Jakob was willing to bet that the magic he had enabled her to wield was also immutably changed in some manner.

Loke was a unique case, as he possessed the brain of a canid and the Vice of Greed was already exhibited in his behaviour prior to any involvement with the Demon Lord, but he had still manifested a strange desire to 'mark' his territory by way of covering everything in the now-golden thread that was spun from his body. Jakob had tested the new web his construct now spun, and found that it was of a completely different substance than what it had originally been, meaning the change was more than just cosmetic. Similar to the change Stelji had undergone, Loke's carapace was almost-entirely golden from mandibles to spinneret.

"***You have truly outdone yourself,***" Mammon praised as he came back into view from another indulgent stroll around his soon-to-be vessel.

"I pray this is sufficient for my end of the deal."

"***More than! Far more than!***"

The Demon Lord stopped before them and snapped his clawed fingers. From the coin-strewn ground beside him crawled an enormous orange slug with no discernible features other than a black slit where its mouth was. An oval core shone through its translucent flesh from within what was ostensibly its 'head', just above the black slit mouth.

Mammon placed a hand on his Hoardbeast and it immediately regurgitated the Tungsten Scroll that Jakob had entrusted to his safety. As soon as the Scroll landed on the ground, Heskel moved to gather it up and ensure its integrity. He briefly unfurled it to make certain its drawings and instructions were untouched, then sent his Ward a single affirmative nod.

"I am glad we could amiably conclude our bargain," Jakob announced.

"***Indeed. My past interactions with your kind have left scars of distrust, so it pleases me greatly that you could deliver what you promised.***"

Jakob stared blankly at the Demon Lord.

"***The Blood-Witch will show you the way to the outside. But, first, witness my apotheosis!***"

Like rain travelling against the pull of gravity, golden lights flew from the horned-and-demonic body that once had been known as a thief named Veks, whose soul was now forever trapped in a mirror-polished sword that lay buried beneath mountains of hoarded wealth. As the last streak of golden essence left its old vessel, the body simply collapsed to the ground, scattering coins with its dead weight.

Jakob allowed himself an indulgent grin as the slumbering beast opened its eyes to reveal glowing-orange irises. A pulse of energy radiated out from the Dragon, as the soul of the greatest Demon that ever graced Helmsgarten took hold and unfurled its aura with renewed vigour, proving that while Veks' body had been fitting, it was not as excellently-matched to its inhabiting spirit as the slender salamander-like Dragon that Heskel and Jakob had constructed.

"***IT IS PERFECT!***" Mammon roared, using his enormous thousand-fanged maw and potent vocal cords to give voice to his delight. He moved his six clawed limbs with an effortless ease and swished his tail jubilantly. It might have been an amusing sight, if not for the fact that his body

measured thirteen metres in length and four in height. As it were, Mammon's excited state in so colossal a body seemed only to alarm the onlookers, who moments before had been cheering him on.

As Jakob had expected, the body immediately began a metamorphosis into something akin to how Veks' body had originally become transfigured, with its stitched-together bruise-hued skin rippling as it turned jade-green and scaled on the top-half and head, while the bottom-half and tail began sprouting reddish-brown fur like that of a blood-spattered bear.

However…

There was one markedly-important difference between the former vessel and the new dragon-shaped one, a vital 'flaw' that undermined its strength completely, and it had intentionally been added by Heskel at Jakob's behest: a Necroscript Soul-Lock.

"***WHAT IS THIS!? WHERE ARE MY POWERS!? WHAT HAVE YOU DONE!?***" The enormous Dragon of Greed spasmed in impotent rage as it attempted to crush its creators underfoot, but it was physically and mentally unable to harm them. It was unsurprising that the Demon Lord would immediately notice the effects of the Soul-Lock, given that it restricted his innate magical powers, which his private demesne further empowered, such as his ability to observe all that occurred within his personal mansion realm, as well as the ability to translocate his physical body between locations, and every other unique power he would normally possess. Only his aura was unhindered, though Heskel and Jakob were both unaffected by its corroding touch thanks to their precautions.

"Heskel, if you wouldn't mind."

Jakob could tell the Wight had a grin on his face when he uttered those fateful words. "**Obey.**"

Sig was running for her life. The Endless Mansion of Lord Mammon was gripped by pandemonium as the Demon Lord's servants fought against their erstwhile ruler, who, despite his apparently-sealed powers, was still utterly decimating anyone whom he laid his glowing salamander-eyes on.

She vowed to hunt down the Fleshcrafter and his brutish bodyguard once she escaped the treacherous dimension of the rampaging Greed Dragon. It was not a Vow of Revenge, for she held no special consideration for the arrogant Demon Lord. No, it was a Vow of Resentment, as they had taken from her a golden opportunity to sow her own betrayal and chaos, reducing her to little more than a side-feature.

"I swear, my Lady, their blood will be Yours."

As she climbed yet another hill of cascading coins and stolen treasure, a furred demon raced through the air overhead, its bat-like wings ruffling Sig's wild gold-specked hair.

It seemed that the Fleshcrafter had somehow sent the Demon Lord into a blind fury after he took-up residence in the monstrous beast that he and his servants had laboured on for weeks. Or had it been months? Perhaps it had even been a couple years…

She shook her head, trying to clear the fog that clouded her memory. Somehow, the pervasive pressure she felt while near the Demons had grown stronger than before and was interfering with her faculties.

A massive tremor suddenly shook the entire mansion interior, nearly burying her as she slid down a hoard mound when it collapsed in an avalanche upon the valley below, burying a few of the strange buildings the demons had taken to living in.

After managing to avoid a near-death of being crushed beneath tonnes of gold, she turned to look back towards the fight between the demons and their furious Lord. It seemed one of his former subordinates had managed to cut a deep gash into one of his eyes, the damage to his physical vessel

somehow linked to the stability of the strange dimensional space inside the mansion that existed purely as a result of his presence.

It seemed strange to her that they would turn on Mammon, when he clearly possessed superior strength and vitality, but perhaps that was how the demons acted when they saw weakness. Normally, servants and squires would defend their Lord's honour by capturing the ones who had offended it. It was maybe not too far-fetched an idea that all social mobility within the Demons' own worlds were driven by a primitive 'might makes right' idea. Sig at least thought it would explain so strange a behaviour.

When she turned back towards the distant horizon, she thought she could see one of the exits from the pocket realm, but she saw no evidence of the Fleshworker and his hulking Guard passing through. The pair had vanished as soon as hell broke loose, leaving behind their constructs and former servants with unsettling ease.

"Lady, give me the strength I need," she prayed as she thundered on towards the gate in the distance.

I will look forward to disembowelling them.

"How many more secrets do you hide from me?" Jakob wondered out loud, as he and Heskel wandered through a derelict Noble Quarter, where countless battles between mortal and monster had taken place since last he had been here. It seemed order had been restored, but, from the large funerary pyres and yet-to-be-retrieved corpses, the victory had been won at a steep cost. He wondered if the Crown and its guard would venture into the deep and face-off against Grandfather. After all, if they had struck a deal once, Grandfather's actions had surely violated its terms and ensured his own death sentence.

Heskel did not answer the question. He had exhibited many peculiarities after they had first left the sewers, such as in the development of his personality, not to mention his hitherto-unmentioned repertoire of obscure incantations and rituals.

They had left the private demesne of the Greed Lord through a complex Chthonic sigil the Wight had prepared in advance, unbeknownst even to Jakob, which penetrated the endless space of Mammon's dimension and created an opening for them to simply walk through to return to reality. They had appeared in the garden outside the mansion, emerging from a decayed hedgerow.

Further, it was his archaic knowledge of Necromancy that had enabled them to trap the Demon Lord's soul within his new vessel and render him 'mortal' in a sense, at least insofar as making him killable. Though, as was the case with all True Demons, he could not be permanently killed, only cast back to his natural form within the realm that spawned him.

It might take a while, but, sooner-or-later, the Demon Lord would be killed by the lesser demons who seized on his weakness like wolves sensing a wounded pack-leader and believing themselves capable of taking up the mantle. It would be one more loose end gone, though it was not truly much of a loose end truth be told. After all, the Soul-Lock ensured Mammon could not cross the boundary of his mansion demesne and enter Helmsgarten.

Jakob still struggled not to find it amusing that even so powerful a Demon was susceptible to entrapment. In a way, the stronger they were, the less cunning they became, as though their mightiness was the only thing that mattered. The fact that Mammon had not even considered the possibility of Jakob's subterfuge was a testament to *that*.

But then again, he and Heskel had been careful to only communicate through Necroscript or coded speech, like passing notes while the tutor was watching, except getting caught would have resulted in excruciating death.

The pair reached the gate-bridge leading into Market North, and, though this district had fared better than Noble Quarter, it was full of ruined shopfronts and corpse-pyres as well. Unlike Noble Quarter however, the guardsmen of the Crown, as well as a smattering of Adventurers' Guild mercenaries, were keeping order and had set aside space for the injured and dispossessed. It seemed that they entirely avoided the Quarter now, perhaps having fought against the Demon Lord's servants and lost, or maybe considering it less-important than the money-making Market where the rich and proper had invested untold fortunes.

With Heskel in the lead, carrying the Tungsten Scroll, they hurried down side-alleys and backroads until they reached the courtyard of the Apothecary. Jakob hoped that the Crown considered his former laboratorium abandoned and insignificant now that they faced a bigger threat to their supremacy from below. But even if they still kept guards there or sent patrols by, the pair would only stay for long enough to decipher the Scroll.

"Hopefully they have not utterly decimated our tools."

Heskel grunted indifferently.

"You're right. What does it truly matter?"

"Sire… *what* have you done!?"

"Sirellius. What matters more to you: the stability of the Kingdom or your *former* King?"

The wizened Advisor looked at the man who sat in the throne, slumped against the backrest and blood oozing from nearly-two-dozen stab-wounds to his torso and stomach. Patrych yet held the murder-weapon in his grip, his powerful body showing no sign of emotion or strain from what ought to have been a traumatising event. The lifeblood of his progenitor dripped from the blade-tip and soaked into the white-and-purple carpet, creating a stain that would never wash away.

"The King is dead…"

Sirellius met the gaze of his new ruler, whose soulless ice-blue eyes were locked firm on his own.

"All hail the King, long may he live and prosper!"

Patrych seized the crown from the brow of his deceased father, not even bothering to wipe away the crimson specks that marred its splendour, before settling it atop his perfect head.

And, to think, that just a week prior he had been dead.

"Sirellius."

The Old Man stiffened as he awaited the first orders of his new King.

"Bring me *the One* who remade me. I wish to thank him, *personally*."

"As you wish, my Liege."

Sig did not need a trail to know the location of her quarry. For she had learnt something about Jakob that was sure to be his undoing:

He was arrogant and believed himself untouchable.

Such an individual might not conform to original behaviour patterns, but that did not make them any less predictable.

"Halt!" demanded one of the patrolling guards when she had just crossed the gate-bridge into Market North, but she was too determined to let anyone get in her way. Before the man had the time to reassert his demand, her golden arm had sprouted thorns of blood that punctured several holes into his throat when she lightly slapped her palm against him.

The guard's wingman, for they always travelled in pairs in this part of town, barely had time to drag his sword out of its scabbard before the blood of his companion shot from his open wounds like a storm of crossbow bolts, shredding him.

Sig had progressed far in her mastery of Hemolatry as well as in her imagination. With a single word, she brought the blood of her two victims to her, where it covered her prosthetic like a crimson layer of skin. If an archer required arrows for their bow; Sig required blood for her magic, though her own would also work, as long as she had enough to spare, but *that* was only for emergencies.

Armed with her crimson arsenal, she sped down the backroads, eventually finding a point from which she could ascend to the rooftops, so that she avoided the twists-and-turns and lost as little time as possible.

Jakob will die today, she vowed.

With what bordered religious reverence, Heskel unfolded the Tungsten Scroll on the only table they had been able to salvage from the ruin of Jakob's standoff against the agents of the Crown.

Similar to the first time Jakob had laid his eyes on it, the sight of its contents made his head swim and turned his mouth dry, while his eyes began to itch. It was as though mortal eyes were not meant to read its curled and wandering sigils nor behold its complex drawings and diagrams.

The scroll stayed unfurled without needing to be weighed down. Jakob almost felt as though it *longed* to be read and understood. It longed to be used. He was obviously no stranger to books and tomes infused with a sentient mind or enslaved soul, but the scroll was made of a seemingly-inert metal, exactly because of the ruinous power Chthonic sigils had on most surfaces. Therefore, it seemed that binding a sentience to it would not work, but Chthonic was also not a language known to play by the rules: it was the language by which rules were made.

Strangely, they had only encountered two things that did not self-destruct or combust following a Chthonic sigil being inscribed on its surface: *this* peculiar metal named 'tungsten', and the skin of living beings like humans, demons, and beasts.

It seemed to make no sense to Jakob, given that hide and skin was not possessed of similar unique properties as this metal. Though perhaps the answer lay not in logic that made sense to him, but rather in some unknowable force akin to the entities that the powerful language could invoke.

After letting the Wight study the scroll for what felt like hours, Jakob looked at him expectantly.

"Is it what we believed it to be?"

Heskel tore his gaze from the metal sheet.

"**It is a summoning ritual.**"

Jakob clenched his teeth so hard that his jaw creaked in protest. With a carefully-controlled exhale of vented steam, he let the tension gripping him relax somewhat. He took a deep breath through his nose, the scent of Misty Reminiscence flooding his nostrils.

"…And, pray tell… *what* does it summon?"

His chest hurt from the tension that rapidly built up in his body as he awaited the Wight's answer. It was too much excitement for him to handle and he felt blood trail down his lip under the mask as it poured from his nose.

Heskel looked at him intensely. He did not need to speak for Jakob to understand the answer.

Sig snapped the man's head into the brick wall with a roundhouse kick of her gold-toed boot to his temple. The impact produced a loud internal *crunch*, but, just to be certain, she leant over his unconscious body and slammed her palm into his forehead, sending a spike of her rose-blood through his cranium and brain matter like an ice-pick through hard ice.

Just a couple more streets.

She was close to the Apothecary now, though her progress was repeatedly delayed by the persistent guards who had found the bodies of the patrol she had slaughtered. Though she had always been skilled at staying out of the seeking gaze of the guards, she had thrown caution to the wind for the sake of getting to her quarry before they left the city to escape her and all the other enemies they had made.

With a flick of her golden arm, she sent a triplet of blood darts into a guard just as she rounded the corner. Her startled expression last only a moment, before the light was snuffed from her as the darts exploded within her body.

Sig moved on quickly, before more of them came after her. The alleyways were not a great place to avoid detection, but the rooftops had proven far worse, after a well-aimed arrow had clipped her ear and the side of her cheek.

The phantom sensation in the limb Mammon had robbed from her made her immediately halt and not a moment too late, as an arrow flew past her so close that it ruffled her wild hair, its aim to catch her mid-stride.

She whirled around and instinctively flung a closely-grouped barrage of blood darts at the archer who stood nearly forty metres further down the way she had come.

While her own projectiles crossed the distance with blinding speed, the archer managed to release another arrow, but Sig easily drew the blood-coating on her body in front of her like a shield, which stopped the steel-tipped missile dead a couple seconds later.

The archer on the other hand had no such defence, their recklessness earning them a face-full of open craters where the Hemolatric magic impacted and exploded.

Sig turned and continued on. She was *so* close now.

"*Nharlla*?" Jakob asked, not sure if he had heard correctly. "Are you absolutely certain??"

Heskel nodded gravely.

"That cannot be."

"**It is,**" he insisted.

"What would summoning such an entity entail? Would we be dooming our world if we dared?"

"**Unsure.**"

Jakob bit his lower lip, which was already a bloody ruin thanks to his repeated peeling off of the skin with his teeth. He had taken off his scent-mask to wipe the blood from his nose and mouth, but it still flowed eagerly.

The revelation that the Tungsten Scroll held not only the instructions on how to summon a Great One Above, but one of the Watcher's own Vassals, was unimaginable. And yet... he supposed that somehow the Great Ones would have once been in contact with the denizens of this world, else the propagation of their language, sigil-alphabet, and spells would never have made it here.

The Watcher had many Vassals, all of them ruinous in their strengths in one way or another, but Jakob only knew of Chthonic Hymn belonging to three of them: the Watcher itself, with the '*Hymn of Devouring Madness*'; Septen, with its '*Stone Plague*'; and Nharlla, with the '*Catastrophic Scream*', '*Unravelling*', and '*Doppelganger*' hymns.

The other hymns that he knew of were creations of Grandfather, like the '*Amalgam Hymn*' or '*Implosion*', and a few others that he had long suspected as being lesser versions of 'true' Hymns that stemmed from Great Ones.

Given that all of Nharlla's associated spells, that he knew of, were associated with metaphysical ailments and hallucinations, it seemed summoning the entity would not result in conventional decimation of the world, but perhaps the result would be more devastating or long-lasting. There was no knowing what sort of event summoning a Great One into reality would cause, but, it was possible that Jakob might be rewarded for the attempt in some manner. Suddenly, the thoughts of what sort of reward so powerful a being could gift made his head swim with dangerous ideas.

He shared a long gaze with his Lifeward.

"We *have* to attempt it."

Heskel made a sound that might have been a chuckle. He should have known that the Wight would easily invite the challenge such an undertaking required.

All thoughts of the task Grandfather had once given him were suddenly not very important anymore. Jakob almost found it amusing that the Old Spider still sought the tomes Veks had stolen from the Mage Quarter, when Jakob now possessed something that dwarfed their rituals a million-fold in effect. Even summoning Mercilla was incomparable to the greatness of summoning Nharlla, if indeed it was possible.

"So. How do we get started?"

Heskel began listing the things they required, as prescribed by the scroll.

Sig flexed the golden digits of her prosthetic as she crossed the walled-off courtyard to the stairs that led below the building it bordered and into its belly. The pervasive smells of the many wares of the Apothecary stung her nostrils, despite the fact that she was still outside and a steady wind battered the district and its back-alleys.

I should kill Hargraves when I'm done, she decided.

With the barest effort, she commanded the blood coating her body to coalesce and take the shape of a crude dagger. She wanted to lock eyes with the Fleshcrafter when she took his life.

The phantom pain alerted her that she was close now.

Without making a sound, she pried the basement door ajar, seeing a figure within the damp-and-dark basement leant over some metal plate, using only a candlelight to see. The rest of the interior was upturned and ruined, making her wonder what had happened here since last she had set foot in the lair of the monstrous Creator.

Focus.

She could easily fling a blood dart through the crack in the door and kill the Boy *like that*, but it would be too easy. Such a kill had to be savoured. She had fantasised about it for months, after all.

With her real hand she carefully pushed the door all the way open, before slipping inside and skulking towards the figure. She almost thought it was someone else, but then she remembered the strange attire he and his manservant had crafted inside Mammon's realm, using the skin of the greedy demons that flocked to him like flies on shit.

Even though she had been utterly quiet, he suddenly turned to regard her.

"I thought I recognised your scent," he told her, his face blank of any emotions, the crimson mask he normally wore hanging from the neck of his demon-skin robe.

No! This is wrong. You have to fear me! I am your Reaper, come to collect your soul!

"Well?"

Sig took a step back, as Jakob regarded her coolly.

No! NO! I am not afraid! I am fear made manifest!

She tightened her grip on the dagger of blood collected from every guard that had stood in her path to get here.

Just as she was about to lunge at him, a meaty and immensely-strong hand seized her by the neck and lifted her off the floor, *pops* and *cracks* sounding from her body as she spasmed against its vice-grip.

Heskel's shadow seemed to swallow her whole the more she struggled.

XXII

With a flip and mid-air rotation of her entire body, Sig severed Heskel's arm by turning the blood-dagger in her hand into a metre-long blade of impossible sharpness. As she landed on the ground and the Wight's severed limb *thudded* to floor some metres away, she only barely managed to catch his riposte with her golden arm, turning her body with the momentum of the fist's impact to avoid breaking anything.

Sig danced around the next wide swing and sent a score of blood darts into the Giant's body, where they burst apart the many-coloured and stitched flesh below his poncho-like robe, creating several fist-sized holes that would have been lethal to a mortal man. Unperturbed by the grievous wounds however, Heskel flung a knee into her chest, cracking several ribs and flinging her across the room.

Before she collided with the stone wall, she manipulated the blood within her own body to reorient herself so that she struck the wall with the soles of her feet and not her face. She immediately kicked off, launching back into the fight, while globules of blood released from her body and shot towards the Giant to create an opening for her.

Most of the blood-bolts were absorbed by the Monster's strange attire, and she only narrowly avoided having her face caved-in by ducking low under a pre-emptive strike of his remaining arm, skidding along the bloody floor on her knees. The fabric of her trousers burnt away from the intense friction and the skin on her knees stung painfully.

But, to a being like Sig, pain was a motivator, not a deterrent.

She hurled her long sword at the Giant like a javelin, willing it to split into a hundred hair-thin fragments that each pierced through his body and skin-made attire, halting him in his step towards her. Before she could will the blood needles to coalesce and finish him off, she heard a fingernail scrape across taut leather behind her.

"*Tchinn.*"

Sig turned on the young Fleshcrafter as a hiss sounded across the room. It brought to mind a pouncing snake that, after a long hunt, had found its mouse-prey cornered and without escape.

It was like an invisible pair of hands clawed their way through her stomach and she felt herself be disembowelled. No matter how much she fought against it with her own flawless control of the blood within her body, she knew that she would lose to this entity the Boy had invoked. It felt like a paper-thin wound at first, but then, from one moment to the next, her stomach opened wide like a mouth and her pink-and-red intestines spilled forth alongside chunks of flesh and fat. The blood was only held at bay for a second, before the pain made it impossible for her to concentrate.

As Sig fell on her knees on the hard floor, amidst her organs and lifeblood, she fought desperately to lift the bone gauntlet the Fleshcrafter himself had constructed.

Before she could aim the Hemolatry weapon at its creator, a powerful hand seized her fist and crushed it alongside the weapon adorning it.

Then she heard another scrape of a fingernail across the strange book in the Boy's hands and his lilting demonic speech.

"*Tchinn, if you wouldn't mind.*"

While Jakob sewed Heskel's arm back onto his clean-cut stump, he could not help but continually glance at the sunken-eyed and dark face of Sig of the Eyeless. A pool of blood surrounded her slumped body and her intestines lay before her like ropes, with the golden prosthetic frozen in the motion of trying to stuff them back into the cavity in her abdomen.

When the last stitch was done, the Wight performed the Amalgam Hymn himself and moments later he was flexing his fingers as though they had never been separated from his body in the first place.

"Mammon was wrong," Jakob observed humourlessly. "The Flayed Lady never lets go once her claws have dug in."

"**Matters not.**"

"I suppose it doesn't."

Jakob looked his companion over. His torso and legs were especially damaged wherever the demon-skin poncho did not cover.

"She really did a number on you."

Heskel grunted in annoyance.

"Mistakes are to be learnt from, not ignored," Jakob reminded him.

"**She was strong.**"

"She *was*… but she was also arrogant in assuming she was fighting only you."

"**Arrogance begets folly,**" Heskel quoted Grandfather.

"Indeed. But there is a lesson in it that we all would benefit from, not just the dead fools."

Heskel nodded shamefully.

"We should relocate. I am certain she is not the only one who predicted my thoughts."

The Wight grunted his assent and then went to roll-up and transport the Tungsten Scroll.

Jakob meanwhile was still staring at the dead girl before him: her crimson blood, the gold-flecked brown hair, and the marred-and-bruised skin. Witnessing it drew from him strong emotions, not too unlike the first time he successfully managed to cut open a body without damaging the organs. It was overwhelming and exhilarating, like a drug. He found himself wrong-footed by the feelings inside himself and the way his face felt hot and flushed.

"Before we leave," he replied, an eager smile upon his lips. "Let us not squander the gift we have unwittingly been granted."

He wanted to possess her. An ultimate affront to one who viewed servitude as the death of the soul. He hoped that she could somehow still perceive what happened to her in death, because the idea of her anguish at seeing *what* he would reduce her to made him grin from ear-to-ear. She would eternally repent for her heretical worship and beg the Watcher for salvation.

Some hours later, the pair moved through the Meat Market with their new companion in tow, her abyss-black eyes staring dully at her feet as she meandered behind them a few paces.

The slave-trade had not suffered from the incursion of monsters from below, nor the dispossession of thousands within the metropolis. Rather, it seemed to be booming, if the many shouting traders and sellers were anything to go by. If not for their Grand Undertaking, Jakob would have seized on the golden opportunity it offered, as prices were sure to be low and less questions asked thanks to the overabundance of 'wares'.

Since Heskel had deciphered the requirements for the ritual to summon Nharlla, their first stop was Haven district. It was but one amongst several stops they would make.

"Do you reckon we can acquire two of the Esoteric Tolls in Haven?"

Heskel grunted indifferently.

"I suppose we just have to see. But still," Jakob scratched the corner of his eye with the demon-flesh glove, wherein subsided the soul of a gelatinous Greed Demon of Squire rank named *Purll*, "these requirements make little sense to me."

After all, they were going to Haven in search of '*Relic of Virtuousness*', and, if they were lucky, '*An Eye that has Witnessed the Divine*'.

On the list of Esoteric Tolls they required were also: '*Thirteen Skinned Faces Given Willingly*', '*A Sincere Childhood Dream*', '*The First Branch of a Thousand-Year-Old Tree*', and a fourth one that Heskel said they already possessed, though he would not elaborate when prompted and Jakob could not decipher the Chthonic sigils himself, much to his chagrin.

"**Esoteric,**" Heskel replied, putting emphasis on each syllable of the word.

Jakob chuckled. "Esoteric to whom though? How are we supposed to gather these if we do not understand what exactly to look for?"

Heskel shrugged his big shoulders, the attire on his body shifting with the motion and the visage of his ruined and multi-coloured skin beneath startling a passer-by, who quickly hurried off while pretending to not have seen anything.

"Very well, we will have to simply trust that the Watcher will guide us well."

The Wight nodded and brought them down an alleyway to where a manhole led to the sewers below. Jakob was slightly apprehensive about delving into Grandfather's demesne, but he trusted that his Mentor had learnt from his loss at the hands of the Crown to stay clear of the uppermost tunnels of the undercity, though he doubted the Old Spider was defeated yet, as patience and tenacity were virtues he extolled. Moreover, he perceived the passage of time differently than humans and would simply bide his time to strike again. Hopefully, by then, Jakob and Heskel would be well-clear of his reach, as they had plans to leave the metropolis when they had all the ingredients for the ritual.

The short trek through the tunnels was uneventful, though evidence of battles fought in the dark labyrinth of filth were abundant. For every corpse of an adventurer or guardsmen they found, there were more than a dozen of Grandfather's chimera and halfbreeds. They would undoubtedly have been caught up in the skirmishing if not for the strange time-distorted dimension of Mammon.

"Have you determined how many days or weeks we missed?"

Heskel grunted, in a way to suggest that it was a meaningless expenditure of time to bother figuring it out.

"I'll take that as a 'No'," Jakob replied. "It must have been more than a week, perhaps even two, gauging by some of these bodies." He still could not shake the feeling that, while only half a month might have gone by in Helmsgarten, they might have spent over a year within that endless mansion of Greed.

The Wight grunted again, but not as a reply, rather a warning. Jakob stopped behind his Lifeward, then saw what he had noticed: a man who still drew breath, despite clearly being on the brink of death.

"A stomach wound," he assessed, crouching before the prone figure, whose chest moved imperceptibly with each laboured breath. "He will suffer a while more before perishing."

"**Living subject for graft,**" Heskel suggested.

"Excellent idea," Jakob replied, seeing that the man had hands that were only slightly bigger than what Sig's hands had once looked like.

A little while later, with Sig's ruined left arm fixed with the grafted hand and wrist of the survivor they had found, they reached one of the crossroads of the Haven District sewer complex. Jakob knew from their previous foray into this part of the city that the path that continued onwards would eventually lead to the cisterns wherein the Ratmen had nested, so he guided them down the narrower tunnel that curved right, which, after some more wandering, led them to a manhole ladder.

With Heskel at his side and Sig staying behind to secure the manhole exit and guard the Scroll, Jakob moved towards one of the large temple-like buildings that crowded the district.

For reasons he did not know, the Wight had been adamant that they could find the relic they sought within *this* particular church.

It was nearing dusk, with worshippers, clergymen, and faithful thronging the limestone streets in large flocks, their voices like rippling thunder. There were more of them than when last they had visited the district, but he was unsure if it was because today was a special day or because the people, troubled by the recent events, had staked their safety on a higher power that they might have forsaken during times of peace and prosperity.

Though their robes were not similar to the people around them, they fit in well enough to avoid the watchful gazes of Haven's Holy Guardians who stood at every major intersection and street in parade formations that lined the thoroughfares. They were clad in white robes and silver chainmail, wielding long ornamental halberds. The ones who guarded the temples and churches were slightly better armoured with strange domed metal caps featuring a veil of silver chainmail that fell down their shoulders and neck, leaving just their faces exposed.

Only a short procession of shrouded faithful was queued before the Heroic Saint's Church, but it was also one of the smallest temples in Haven. It was still quite a grand edifice though, and Jakob felt it rather wasteful, given the frivolous worship in question.

"So, what is the relic?" Jakob asked once they had passed through the tall open doorway. The church was built from enormous pieces of limestone that had somehow been transported here and then sculpted to feature countless reliefs of scenes that he was unsure of how to interpret. The sculptures covered both inside-and-out, and when he looked up to where the domed ceiling stood some five metres above, he saw that the sculpting covered even *there*. It must have taken decades to accomplish, he thought, which seemed a colossal waste of time.

The Wight pointed a finger at an altar that stood at the very centre of the oval church interior. Supplicants knelt side-by-side around the small glass box that sat atop the altar, as they muttered in overlapping prayers.

"…absolve us from our sins and cleanse this cradle of vice…" he overheard one of the worshippers beg the object within the glass box.

It was a mummified hand with half of the forearm attached, which was frozen in a gesture of middle and index fingers extended and the rest curled into the palm. It seemed bizarre that people were praying to the corpse of some long-lost hero, and not even the entire body at that, when True Gods watched as their planet turned and a single word from their formless lips could wipe away all life in an instant.

It was so absurd that Jakob could not help but laugh. The people nearby drew back from him, then caught on to his disturbing attire that moments before had seemed akin to the modest pure-white robes they wore. Even clothes like his could blend-in perfectly until people looked straight at it, and, clearly, his washed-out orange-yellow hooded apron was nothing alike to those of the adherents.

"Heskel. Grab the relic and let's go. I know how to find the Eye we need, just make sure to not look up."

Heskel grunted and stomped towards the altar, while Jakob walked back out of the pitiful church.

As he crossed the threshold, he spoke to the Demon that lived in his hooded apron as well as the one that dwelled within his right-hand glove: "*Marll, defend me. Purll, grant me claws.*"

From within the flesh glove, the gelatinous Greed Demon shaped its essence and sprouted bone-like white claws from the tips of the fingers, while the Demon in his robe sprouted a tail that moved around, seeking anything that might harm Jakob.

A sound of glass being shattered and people screaming in alarm and outrage came from within the domed church, causing the two statuesque guards by the door to wake from their blank-stare reveries. But, they managed only to turn before Jakob gouged out the throat of the nearest one and his newly-sprouted tail gripped the other by the face and smashed his head into the limestone wall, damaging one of the sculpted reliefs and leaving behind a chunky crimson stain.

The guard with the carved-open throat sputtered and gargled at Jakob's feet and his lifeblood quickly flowed down the ramp where faithful yet waited their turn to enter and hundreds were gathered in the longer queues that led to other larger temples. Screams were sounding from within and without, and to Jakob it was like a prelude before the true orchestra played.

Heskel emerged from within, his body covered in blood, and ran down the ramp to engage the guards that were already making their way towards them.

Jakob stayed at the top of the ramp and meticulously removed his scent-mask, while his demonic tail swished back-and-forth, killing or injuring any of the worshippers that ran out of the church entryway behind him. Then, after drawing in a deep breath and tasting the fear and blood that choked the air, he began the Hymn.

Like a preacher before a mass, he lifted his hands into the air to encompass all who crowded the plaza before the Heroic Saint's Church, while more-and-more of the Holy Guard emerged from nearby temples and houses.

"*All eyes avert thy gaze from the Great One Above!*"

The soldiers seemed to slow down as his voice echoed across the plaza, reaching perhaps most of the district.

"*Look not upon its visage, burn not thy eyes on its glare, flay not thy skin to escape its grip, bite not thy fingers to flee its temptation, fling not thy soul into its maw! Do not look above!*"

Heskel seemed the only being not drawn under the spell, as he continued to pummel his way towards where Sig the Reanimated waited dutifully some streets away.

"*Feel its gaze bristle thy skin, feel its glare burn the hairs on thy scalp, feel its tempting snare. Grab hold of its offering!*"

He let the echoes die down before drawing in a deep breath, knowing that he would perhaps never witness devastation on this scale ever again. Then he closed his eyes and shouted the final verse.

"*Behold! The Great One Above bears witness!*"

An orchestra of damnation filled the air as thousands of voices twisted together in a choir of screams, shouts, terrified yells, and unintelligible sounds of those dying as their minds were split open from within by what they saw. The sounds echoed all around him, making him wonder if indeed the entire district had looked up to witness the Watcher manifest.

He shuddered in delight when he imagined what sight he might see when he opened his eyes. From the wet ripping-and-tearing sounds that accompanied the inhuman howls, shrieks, and cries, he envisaged utter pandemonium, akin to Mammon's final moments or the Realm of the Wrathful Saint.

Slowly, he opened his eyes and looked upon the new Haven, reborn by the curious gaze of the Great One Above that held no equal. He distantly wondered if the Watcher could even comprehend the devastation that his attention caused. It was power on such a scale that no mortal King nor Demon Lord could fathom to possess.

Beyond the ramp that led to the desecrated Church of a once-was Hero, was a roiling mass of bodies, some alive and attempting to writhe their way to safety, and others spasming as they underwent a post-mortem transformation. It was hard to tell where one body ended and the next began, as the close proximity of the gathered crowd had ensured their bodies melded into clumps, as though a terrible use of the Amalgam Hymn had been performed by a sadist with no sense of propriety. Heads were spliced together, most often resulting in death to all those involved, but a pitiful few souls remained alive, despite the fact that the bodies they were attached to were dead-and-gone.

The melted human fat and flesh, as well as effluvia, lay like puddles all about, and there were partially-melted bodies and faces visible at the centre of many of them. The devastation seemed to have grown exponentially from his first use of the spell, perhaps due to the overabundance of souls offered up as a Toll. After all, the Hymn of Devouring Madness was fuelled by the devastation it caused, but it also seemed to grow stronger from it, creating a strange feedback loop. It was however also possible that each time the spell was invoked, a new Eye of the Watcher manifested and thus the effect was variable.

As he continued to stare at the aftermath, he heard the audible *crack* of bones and joints, as some of the faithful were turned into absurd creatures that defied reason, but who, despite their constituent parts being very much deceased, began meandering about the corpse-strewn plaza, searching for sustenance perhaps.

Some were like many-legged horses that manoeuvred clumsily about on hands and feet that were fused into one, and others were bizarre unipedal towers of confused flesh with twenty-toed feet that crawled like directionless spiders. It was as though entities from the darkness of space had followed the opening his Hymn had created and were attempting to discern how to exist in a world defined by physics. It was quite possible that the Eye manifesting was not the cause of the destruction, but rather that the gaze itself acted like a lamplight for these incoherent entities. It would go some way to explaining why almost every ‘creature’ that he beheld was unique and as alien to each other as they were to him.

A scarce few of the victims, primarily the former guards it seemed, were human in shape, but possessed now additional limbs or joints, and were entirely absorbed in a meaningless struggle with the others of their kind, not too unlike the first time Jakob had invoked the Madness Hymn.

He was so absorbed in studying the catastrophe that it took the arrival of a phalanx of Holy Guards at the far end of the plaza to break him free and return his mind to his task. The newly-arrived guards immediately engaged one of the bizarre abominations, as Jakob wandered over to one of the least-damaged corpses he could find nearby and severed her head with a quick swipe of his clawed glove.

He cast a scrutinising glance at his price, ensuring that it was exactly what he had been seeking. It was safe to say that the eye of someone who beheld the Watcher would fit the criteria Heskel had told him.

Grasping the second Esoteric Toll by the hair of her severed head, he went to join up with his companions.

XXIII

They were in a grimy back-alley in Smogtown, where a mist of thick fog obscured anything further than two metres in front of them. Jakob had already extracted one of the eyes from the head he had gathered, but the second one was giving him a harder time, as a crust of bone had formed around the eye-socket.

After a bit of delicate cutting with the sharp index-finger-knife of his demon-glove, he plucked it out with a sucking *smack* and lifted it closer so he could see its retina.

"**First one better,**" Heskel commented, looking over his shoulder.

"Still, it's strangely beautiful, don't you think?"

The Wight gave him a look that made Jakob wonder if toadstools had grown from his ears. Then he grunted and looked away.

Jakob was unsure when it had happened, but the Wight seemed to be regarding him differently, as this was not the first time he had felt judged by him in the recent weeks.

Maybe a bit of the Greedy Demon Lord has rubbed off on me… he considered. The idea was appalling, but not unlikely. After all, he had seen everyone around him, except for Heskel, change as a result of their exposure to Mammon's aura.

He shook his head as if to dismiss the idea and brought out the other eye, holding it next to the freshly-plucked one. They shared the same size, but the patterns within them were distinctly different.

The first had an almost fractal-like crimson bloom from its centre, with the black pupil smeared into an elongated shape so that it resembled more the eye of a snake or a goat. The second eye had a layer of dense bone covering half of it, but the rest was like a black snow-globe within which lived a galaxy of stars. Somehow, Jakob was certain that both of these eyes belonged to the Watcher himself, after all, he was an Entity said to see everything that was, is, and ever will be; so his eyes must certainly be endless in shape and design, each with its gaze fixed on something unique.

Jakob stowed the two eyeballs safely in a purpose-made compartment of his demon-flesh apron. In terms of function, his demon-sculpted attire was endless in its possibilities and usefulness. Where he had once viewed the self-thinking tail as the pinnacle of tools he would ever craft, he now considered it to merely have been an in-between stage. And though he had been apprehensive about utilising the souls and bodies of demons, given their proclivities and manifold flaws, it was obvious that he had let himself be swayed by fear. After all, the two demons whose corpuses he now wore, Marll and Purll, were docile and easily-controlled after only a few Chthonic sigils were inscribed upon them.

Heskel had opted to keep his own poncho-like apron soulless. It seemed the Wight did not enjoy the notion of wielding the leash on souls of lesser beings, preferring to rely entirely on his own powers. Obedience had been crafted directly into him by Grandfather, but Jakob was unsure how absolute such obedience truly was, given the fact that Heskel had, by Jakob's prompting, defied his Creator.

"Let me see the Relic," Jakob told his Lifeward.

Heskel withdrew it from an interior pocket of his robes and presented it before him, the object appearing very tiny as it lay within the Wight's palm.

"Where's the rest of it?"

"**This is it.**"

Jakob lifted the ring from Heskel's palm with his left index and thumb, looking it over meticulously. It was a very simple wedding band of some silver-coated inexpensive metal, given its weight and the fact that the shiny outer layer was flaking off.

"I believed the entire hand was the Relic," he muttered. "But it was simply his ring? Peculiar."

"**Clergy believe marriage virtuous.**"

"If their contracts are upheld," Jakob shot back.

Heskel grunted his assent.

"So, this qualifies as the Esoteric Toll we seek, due to its inherent vow never having been broken?"

The Wight nodded. He seemed quite adamant about the latter, so Jakob decided to believe him. After all, he had never seen his trust misplaced before, despite their disagreements.

"What comes next?"

"**First branch.**"

Jakob released a puff of condensate from his mask in contemplation. Market North did not seem to deal in such obscure trinkets, regardless of the fact that returning there would be a grave mistake, and Market West lay in ruins. It was possible that Market East which bordered Eastgate District would have such niche merchants, but it lay at the opposite end of the Metropolis and would take hours to reach on foot. That left only one viable option.

"We'll go to Mage Quarter."

Heskel nodded, no doubt having reached the same conclusion.

In the darkness of his personal tower, Sirellius ran his middle finger around the circumference of the clay bowl. The black water within pulsed with hundreds of overlapping rings that at once amplified and cancelled each other, producing a stable equilibrium that made it appear as if the rings were constantly bopping up-and-down, though this was merely a trick of the eye.

"Reveal to me the sight I wish to see," he intoned clearly. He had attempted to scry the location of Jakob the Fleshcrafter and Demon-Summoner for many days. The first week had only shown him a peculiar golden light, like dawnlight breaking through the thin mist adorning the mountains of his hometown in Lleman. However, these past few days, an altogether-different result had occurred and today was no different.

As the rings in the water contracted to form an image, they suddenly took on the appearance of an eye, though with the barest of details and clearly belonging to no creature of which he knew. Its elongated horizontal pupil seemed to stare back at him, before it blinked and the spell was broken.

With a sigh, he rose from the floor, where his knees had been cushioned by a soft rug before the bowl of water.

"**…they are guarded…well…**" said the Daemon-slave in the corner of the room. It was unfortunate that Sirellius' favourite attendant had been taken over by the Undying Guillaume, whose magic kept alive the King of Helmsgarten. Sirellius was a man long-used to setbacks though, and he had entered an uneasy alliance with the Daemon, allowing him to keep his black-eyed attendant as an advisor in rituals and rites and magic of which he himself had little-to-no knowledge.

"How?"

"**…the old…tongue…**"

No matter how many times he conversed with the vile Entity however, he still could not help twitch and shudder whenever it spoke.

"How do I circumvent it?"

"**…you cannot…the Watcher…shields them…**"

Sirellius found it unsettling that even his archaic magic, passed down through his family's bloodline for countless generations, could be beaten by some obscure language that he had never even heard of before. Though it did explain why his attempts to spy on the Underking in the past had born similar results.

A commotion from the stairwell outside his Scrying Chamber suddenly drew his attention. Moments later, a hurried series of knocks banged against the door.

"Enter," Sirellius called.

Light flooded the dark interior as a messenger and two guards entered his private sanctuary.

"Sire! Your presence is needed urgently!"

"Did the King send you?" he asked, dreading the reply.

"No, Sire."

"What is it then? I am busy."

The Messenger looked at the two guards who themselves exchanged uneasy glances.

Then one of the guards cleared his throat and said, "You had best see it for yourself, Sire. We are at a loss on how to explain it…"

"Very well, lead the way."

"Your carriage awaits by the gate, Sire."

"**…I would like…to see…as well…**"

The three newcomers turned as one, the Messenger letting out a terrified squeal when he saw the black-eyed attendant in the corner.

"You may come along," Sirellius replied. The fact that Undying Guillaume took interest in *whatever this was* troubled him to no small extent.

Sirellius had heard the reports of the Bridge Incident at the Market West / Residential District crossing, and it had been the impetus that set about locating what he had assumed to be the Underking, but had turned out to be his boy Apprentice. However, those reports were nothing when compared to what he witnessed before him, as he stood at the edge of a large plaza within Haven District.

The amount of destruction and mutilation was on a scale he had not seen since the Border War between Heimdale and Lleman to the north of Helmsgarten, which had been the reason he was sent to the metropolis as a young man, but, if reports were to believed, the perpetrator, if indeed such a person existed, was unknown. He could not shake the worry that Jakob was the Invoker of whatever tainted ritual had caused *this*, but it also was quite possible that this was an act of terrorism caused by the Underking, following his failed attempt to overrun the metropolis with his monsters.

As Sirellius stared blankly at one of the monstrosities his men had captured, he had more questions than answer. It was like a creature of myth, a fusion of horse and man, except its body was constructed from more than twelve different people, their faces covering its nightmarish visage, and their bodies and limbs twisted together like the branches of the King's garden hedgerows. Even having witnessed the Underking's chimera first-hand, he could hardly stomach looking at the *thing* for more than a moment.

"**…they are like…moths…to the gaze…of the Watcher's flame…**" droned the awful voice of Guillaume through the mouth of its black-eyed puppet.

"Again with this 'Watcher'. Who is he!?"

"**…he is the One…Whose Uncaring Gaze…Scalds the Realms…of man and demon alike…**"

"**…the Endless Eyes…in the Abyss…**"

"**…He Who Witnesses…All there Is…All that Will Be…All there Ever Was…**"

"**…the Watcher…of Worlds…**"

Sirellius struggled to fight back against the chill of existential dread the Daemon's words induced in him, but he failed. The way that an Entity as vile as the Undying Daemon could revere a Being, whose *mere gaze* could cause what he saw before him, made him feel like a child in a dark forest. It made him realise just how impotent he was and the danger inherent in the magic of the Boy Fleshcrafter and his Mentor. They had to be eradicated, regardless of what the patricidal King had ordered.

Jakob had never set foot in the Mage Quarter, but remembered some of what Veks had told him about the district in the past. Despite this, however, he could not truly appreciate just how distinct the district was, particularly when all other districts seemed more-or-less to follow the same schematics.

Though the tall edifice of the late Demonologist first drew the eye, there were countless more buildings of equal absurdity. Jakob personally found the vistas refreshing after the endless uniformity he had been subjected to thus far.

"Who would possess such an item as what we seek?" he wondered out loud. Sig the Revived trotted behind them dully, while Heskel was ever alert and on the lookout in front.

"**Magister of Horticulture.**"

"Horticulture?"

"**Study of plants.**"

"Seems a good place to start," Jakob agreed. He did wonder just how extensive the Wight's knowledge of the city was, after all, he and Grandfather had been practicing amongst the living for years before the Crown forced them underground. "Where do we find them?"

"**Southwest corner.**"

Jakob nodded, and, though the Wight could not see it, he started instinctively heading in that direction. Not a moment later did a figure running through the crowds of pack-animals, carts, and servants catch Jakob's attention.

"Sig, capture that man," Jakob ordered, before adding, "Alive."

Silently, the undead slave shot after the Runner, her golden prosthetic flailing limply behind her and her black corpseblood pooling in the palm of her reconstructed left palm. Heskel quickly followed behind, but Jakob took his time, ensuring that they had not drawn any unwanted attention.

Though a few people looked their way, they seemed to not want to involve themselves, or perhaps thought the Runner might have been a thief, given that they were as common as rats in the westerly districts.

When Jakob caught up to his Lifeward, who had brought Sig and the Runner to an alleyway out of sight, he saw that many small punctures riddled the man's legs, and the skin that was visible below his shorts was turning blackish-purple like a nasty bruise, no doubt as a result of Sig hitting him with her stagnant dead blood, which was toxic to the living, inducing necrosis and many other ailments upon entering the bloodstream.

Sig stood over the Runner, her black eyes locked on him where he lay prone, his legs rendered useless. Her hand was yet covered by the corpseblood, ready to end his life if given the command. To his credit, he refrained from whimpering, despite being in what must have been quite tremendous pain.

Heskel stood next to her, perhaps wondering what exactly they were doing.

As Jakob walked up to them, he crouched before the Messenger and simply asked, "What message were you in such a hurry to deliver?"

"Please don't kill me!"

"Then answer the question."

"Of course! I was delivering two separate instructions: One was to a team of *Royals* in Market West, and the other was to both the Guard of Westgate and Mage Quarter." He referred to the Royal Guard of the Crown by their common nickname, which greatly exaggerated their status, given the fact that they were mostly commoners with above-average martial prowess and magical powers.

"And the contents of these missives?"

"I do not read the message, Sir, I merely deliver them. Please, that's all I know!"

"Do you have the messages on you?"

"Just the last one for the guards of this district."

"Show me."

With some difficulty, the Messenger managed to unsling a compact shoulder pouch from under his form-fitting brown woollen shirt. The fabric was made of a deceptively-elaborate design, which had immediately drawn Jakob's eye when he spotted the man.

Jakob took the pouch from his hand and undid the clasp to get to the rolled-up parchment within. He took another look at the prone man and with a quick assessment knew that he would die before the hour had passed, when the corpseblood reached his heart.

"Sig. Cleanse his veins of your insidious blood. I told you he should live. I have given him my word on this."

The black-eyed servant lifted her blood-coated hand and, like tiny leeches or parasites, black tendrils no thicker than stands of hair snaked from the many puncture-wounds in the Messengers legs. He would never regain control of his legs or whatever other regions the corpseblood had infected, but he would survive.

"You will live," Jakob told the man, as he tried to look brave in what to him must have been certain death. "Heskel. Carry him out to the main street."

Heskel grunted in irritation, but obligingly picked up the lamed Courier and carried him away.

Discarding the pouch and unfurling the flimsy parchment scroll, Jakob read the message, which was written hastily in Novarocian:

To the Guard of the following sectors:

Noble Quarter
Market North
Westgate
Mage Quarter
Residential
Slums
Eastgate
Market East
Breadbasket
Crafting
Smogtown

Be on the lookout for an Adolescent wearing: the stolen robes of a Magister or flesh-coloured leather robes. Likewise, be on the lookout for a giant wearing similar attire. They travel most commonly as a pair and are known to frequently utilise the sewer tunnels to outmanoeuvre our guard posts.

If contact is made with these individuals, send an alert to your nearest Royal Guard Representative, and attempt to apprehend the pair. They are both extremely dangerous, but it is imperative that they be captured alive to face justice for their abhorrent crimes. Attempts to apprehend them should be made with teams numbering no less than two dozen.

You are thus ordered, in the name of our Glorious King, Patrych the First of Helmsgarten.

Jakob crushed the flimsy parchment in his fist, before tossing it aside, just as Heskel rounded the corner. The Wight took one look at him and the ruined letter, and put two-and-two together.

"The Promise of the Crown has no value, it would seem."

"**Virtuousness belongs solely to the domain of fairy tales.**"

"And dead heroes," Jakob replied mockingly.

The workshop complex of the Horticulture Magister, and his three apprentices, was quite expansive, containing within it: a store that was not too unlike the Apothecary that Hargraves no doubt still maintained in Jakob's absence; a dormitory with sufficient room for all three apprentices to bring their families, which two seemed to have acted on; a vast arboretum; several small greenhouses for those plants that required a specialised environment; and lastly, a well-ventilated laboratorium-like attic for distilling, refining, and mixing the various alchemical formulas they sold.

"*That* is a very odd request," replied the Magister, an attendant close behind, eyeing Jakob and his entourage warily. "I do not myself possess anything like that here."

Jakob was about to turn away from the hairy brute of a Magister, when he continued, "But, my apprentice studies trees more in-depth than I, so he may know of such a branch, or a tree of that age, at the very least."

"Fetch me Merab," the Magister told his attendant. It took him a moment to realise he had been issued an order, so the Magister clapped his hands and sent him from the room with a scalding series of critiques about his work-ethic.

He turned back to Jakob, stroking his thick grey-stained black beard with his long fingers. "Of course, an establishment such as ours is not in the market to give out free information. We do after all have better things to do."

Heskel stepped forward and withdrew an item from his robes that he set down before the Magister, who stood behind the counter of his apothecary. The sculpture produced a heavy *clunk* on the wooden top.

"Is, is that?"

"Yes."

The Magister gleefully lifted the severed demon claw up in front of himself, the flawless golden surface glinting in the light of the many candles all about the shop. They still carried with them a few

petrified-and-golden body parts from Mammon's mansion, as they had been easy enough to bring with them. It was a peculiar facet of the Demon Lord's aura that all who perished in his vicinity turned to gold rather than decay.

The attendant returned some minutes later with another man in tow. He was not as thickset as his mentor, who was still admiring the golden limb, but rather was tall and slightly pot-bellied with a light-brown tan.

"Merab. These customers are seeking information about how to locate a… an err… *what* was it again?"

"The First Branch of a Thousand-Year-Old Tree," Jakob said.

"That is pretty specific," the apprentice replied. "It is not something I collect, but I do know of a few trees that have lived to that age. As well as some even older than that."

"It has to be a thousand years old," Jakob demanded unflinchingly.

"Well…" Merab started, but then contemplated silently for a moment, before answering, "There is a Sacred Grove not too far west-northwest from Helmsgarten city, next to a township named Rooskeld. I have only been there once, but their Sacred Grove is well-known for the giant tree at its centre. As I recall, they have their millennial festival beginning next year after Harvest."

"How fortuitous, wouldn't you say?" the Magister said cheerfully.

"That will serve me well," replied Jakob. He could wait a year to gather the Branch, and spend the meantime figuring out how to obtain the two other Esoteric Tolls, whose nature was far more obscure and hard-to-come-by.

"Then that settles it," announced the Magister. "Now, as payment, how about we say I keep a finger of *this*?"

"Keep the entire thing."

The Magister was momentarily dumbfounded, then recomposed himself and lifted his gaze from the golden claw to look Jakob in the eyes. "Is a deal of silence implied in this?"

"Indeed."

"Very well. I shall forget to have seen your personages."

"As shall I," complied Merab, seeming to easily follow his mentor's lead. Though, given the peculiarities of Magisters and the strict limitations placed on them by the Crown, they were perhaps not unaccustomed to dealing in secrecy.

As they headed for Westgate, Heskel voiced his concern. "**Trust not humans.**"

"Am I not human?"

"**You are more than.**"

"You are kind to say that, but, regardless, I do not trust them with anything worthwhile."

"**They will tell on us.**"

"And so what? What matters it if the Crown knows we are heading west? We will be close enough to Lleman that they may simply believe us to have continued across the border. They would not bother hunting us *that* far."

"**They will.**"

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XXIV

In the end, it had been quite a simple matter of obtaining transport to Rooskeld. They did not even have to ask for guidance, as, before they neared the caravan market within Westgate, dozens of drivers yelled out destinations and fares. A few of the more cunning caravanners yelled out to the crowds of prospective passengers with foreboding warnings of staying in such a dangerous city as what Helmsgarten had become.

"Ride to Rooskeld! Ride to Rooskeld! Escape the danger and worry of the big city! Only forty-two Novarins!"

It was not long before Jakob, Heskel, and undead Sig were seated within the tight stow of a wooden carriage. Rusted metal strips were secured carelessly with thin nails to the wooden frame, giving off the impression of structural stability, though Jakob knew it would not hold against even modest winds, let alone provide any meaningful cover should they come under attack during transit. The canopy was likewise not in the greatest shape, but their trip would only last a day and a half at most, so he did not care. Besides, having lived in the frigid sewers made even such shoddy transport seem like overindulgent luxury to him.

A few other passengers had been about to board, when they saw the trio and promptly left to find a different carriage. The driver glared daggers at them, until Heskel, with a nudge from Jakob, handed him the payment for their trip: a golden orb that had once been an eyeball. Afterwards, they were treated like royalty, though the driver still waited around a while longer, perhaps hoping some senseless passengers would board regardless.

"**Waste time,**" grumbled Heskel.

Sig stared blankly into the air, as though a puppet with her strings cut. Jakob was looking at her, once again satisfied with himself at how he had reduced such a proud heretic to *this*, and did not bother respond to his impatient Lifeward. At last he had found a punishment for her Eyeless faith that he thought fitting.

Then Sig turned her black-eyed head slowly to look out the opening at the back of the carriage. The sudden animation surprised Jakob and he followed her gaze despite himself, managing to catch the exact moment a passenger boarded.

A ruffled bush of crimson hair was the first thing that caught his attention, then he recognised the face and the dimpled smile, but he quickly rose from his seat when he noticed the eyes that mirrored Sig's own.

"**…Jakob…we meet again…**"

"Guillaume. What are you doing here?"

"**…I was drawn…to her…**"

"You want her for your collection?"

"**…yes…**"

The way the body of the Daemon's puppet stood completely motionless, his mouth and eyes not moving a hair's breadth when he spoke. The way he was so clearly just a facsimile of the living. It unnerved Jakob no small amount. Heskel quickly got in front of him, misunderstanding the situation.

"I have forgotten to introduce you," Jakob said flatly. "Heskel, you may treat him as a neutral party, for now. Guillaume is an Undying Daemon whose service I summoned, on behalf of the Crown, to return to them an inconsequential Prince."

Heskel looked wrongfooted by this and only relaxed his threatening posture slightly. "**Why help?**"

"They would have slain me if I refused. Besides, I deemed it a decent way to get them off our backs, though it seemed not to have lasted long…"

"**…the Prince…now a King…it has been amusing…to watch…**"

"Why are you *here*?"

"**…when I sensed Her…when I saw your Divine Work…I felt myself drawn…to you…once again…**"

"Mister, are you getting on or not??" asked the driver from behind Guillaume suddenly.

"He is with me," Jakob answered the man.

"Very well, get seated, we'll be leaving shortly."

As the driver went around the carriage and hopped into his seat up front, Jakob returned to his seat and Guillaume sat opposite Sig. Heskel however remained standing. It was strange to see him so disarmed and unsure.

"Heskel, sit down."

The Wight grunted disobediently, but Jakob quickly tightened the leash to quash his mutiny in its infancy.

"Now."

Heskel grumbled but sat down, so that he faced both Jakob and Guillaume from the side. Moments later, the carriage took off, bumbling across the paved streets of Westgate.

"Why are you being so difficult?"

"**Suffer not the Daemons, for they lack the sensible restraints of True Demons.**"

"**…we have a similar…saying…about humans…**" Guillaume remarked.

"You may quote Grandfather as much as you desire, but would that he had entreated with a Daemon such as Guillaume and perhaps he would not have been buried within the bowels of the city to save his own life."

Heskel was struck mute by this degrading reduction of his Master and Creator. In the end, he had no retort however, as Jakob spoke only the truth.

Decades prior, Grandfather had fought the Crown and lost. In the final fight, he had suffered tremendously, leading him down a desperate path to prolong his own life and stave off the encroaching shadow of Death. Jakob was not simply made an apprentice to ensure the Old Spider's legacy and craft lived on, no, he was Grandfather's last hope: a hope of salvation from the limbo he had ensured on himself. But there was doubtlessly little about his self-induced interment that Jakob could fix, after all, Grandfather himself could not solve his conundrum and he wielded an arsenal of magic far greater than Jakob and was possessed of a cunning and intellect unmatched in all of the world.

But it was clear that he was slipping, given how irresponsible and unhinged his behaviour had become when he learnt of the tomes Jakob had obtained. Something that Grandfather had never said, but which Jakob had learnt, was that he valued freedom above all else; above knowledge, power, and even the reverence for the Great Ones. He wished to obtain the ability to leave his laboratorium and survive, but it seemed such would never come to pass.

Though Grandfather would not reveal which Great One he had prayed to, begged to, sacrificed to, and supplicated before, in order to obtain salvation, Jakob had a fairly good idea. He had prayed and a Great One had responded, but the salvation came in the form of a Faustian Bargain, one so devious that no one but the Flayed Lady could have devised it.

Grandfather had been saved from what to all mortals was inevitable, but, he could never leave his laboratorium. Within the narrow space where Jakob had been summoned so many years ago, his

Mentor existed, never straying beyond its stone walls. He lived vicariously through his servants, chimeras, monsters, and his apprentice.

One time, Jakob was unsure when, the Old Spider had tried to leave, believing his internment a mental one made to fool him, but the moment he crossed the boundary, half his body turned to ash, thus reducing him to the husk he now was.

And Heskel knew this truth well. He had to have seen through the veneer of his Creator. He had to have seen the whimpering and pathetic old man who hid there, hoping that creating monsters would protect him from the one monster all men fear.

"Guillaume," Jakob started. "If you agree to aid me, you may have Sig."

"**…what aid do you…seek…**"

"We are summoning Nharlla."

There was a pause before the petrified undead facsimile responded, but then it came, building like encroaching thunder in the dark, a drawn-out and maniacal laughter.

"**…I will aid you…if I get to witness Nharlla…descend to this mortal plane…**"

Jakob smiled beneath his scent-mask. It seemed that he needed not have been so cautious of the Daemon.

"You revere the Great Ones?"

"**…they are the primogenitors…of us all…**"

Jakob nodded enthusiastically. "Indeed."

"**…you must know…I will dedicate myself…fully to aiding you…**"

"That's good."

"**…to that end…I will inform you that…the King seeks your imprisonment…**"

"I am aware," Jakob replied indifferently.

Heskel looked between them uneasily. Jakob knew he must have guessed as much already, but the confirmation was no doubt still troubling to him. Particularly given the fact they *had* already succeeded once.

"**…I will utilise my…other vessels…to stall them…**"

"You can consciously operate more than one of your corpse puppets?" Jakob asked, the prospect seemed impossible to him, but then he also did not know the limits of the Daemon's powers. After all, despite Demons and Daemons following prescribed formulas, in terms of power and temperament, they yet retained manifold quirks and powers that oftentimes were unique to the individual creature.

"**…yes…I currently possess eighteen…my power multiplies with their numbers…**"

It was little wonder that an Undying Daemon could decimate a nation in days if allowed to run rampant, Jakob considered darkly.

"Will they notice the absence of one?"

"**…due to my grip…on the life…of their King…they allow me much…freedom…**"

"And they cannot track you?"

"**…no…**"

"Very well. We are going to Rooskeld, a township to the west where we hope to find one of the Tolls of the summoning rite."

"**…may I see…the instructions…**"

"**No,**" Heskel replied adamantly. He was clutching the Tungsten Scroll jealously, as though begging the Daemon to take it from him.

"Guillaume. You may be an ally, but you have not earnt that right. Talk is talk, and though your kin are not known to boldly lie, there are things we cannot trust you with, even if we bind you with a thousand contracts and oaths."

"**…I understand…I simply desire to witness…the Avatar of a Great One…**"

The child-like sincerity of the Daemon's desire made Jakob grin deviously beneath his mask as an idea formed in his mind. Through the opening at the back of the carriage, he saw the gate that Westgate was named after shrink into the horizon.

XXV

When they stopped at a fortified village, within the walls of which they were spared the predation of nightly stalkers known to frequent the roads, they were but one amongst three-dozen carriages. It seemed that the dirt highway that carved through the land towards Rooskeld, and the border of Lleman beyond, was so heavily-travelled that whole communities had formed along this crucial pathway simply to take care of the caravaners, who ferried people and foodstuffs and raw materials.

Though offered to accompany the driver to some local tavern and stay the night, Jakob curtly declined, preferring to stay outdoors, where he had escape-routes more easily-accessible, should the Crown had caught his scent. They were yet within the reach of the King, and Rooskeld lay another full day's travel away, so complacency now would be the ultimate folly.

"**…would you…bring me…a caravaner…**" asked Guillaume suddenly, after staring into the abyss-black eyes of Sig for hours in silence.

"You wish to expand your web?"

"**…yes…**"

"Only if you show me how you spread your essence and create new puppets. My contract should prevent it, so I'm curious how you circumvented the clause I wrote."

"**…of course…**"

"Heskel," Jakob started, knowing he did not need to say more. The Wight grunted and left the stow, the whole vehicle lifting from the sudden absence of his enormous mass.

A few minutes later, Jakob looked back at the Daemon, whose puppet was yet again staring at the blank-faced Sig.

"You wished to possess her, but you have not transferred your essence and made her truly yours."

"**…there is an ember…of the Eternal…in so pure an Unliving…**"

Jakob inclined his head slightly, trying to comprehend Guillaume's true meaning.

"**…I could never make…such untainted…a vessel…of the Eternal…**"

"You believe yourself tainted?"

"**…by the formless will…of the Eternal Serpent…I am become…arbiter of undeath…**"

"**…the Eternal birthed me…but I am no longer…a part of Its essence…**"

"**…a copy of the Great One is what I remain…**"

"**…in her is a purity…an ember…a tiny fragment you cannot hold…and it calls me…sings to me…it is indescribable beauty…**"

Jakob was unsure whether the Daemon was being truthful, though he certainly seemed to believe his own words. He had many times heard from Grandfather and Raleigh about the melodramatic and self-aggrandising proclivities that Pride Demons possessed, and wondered if *that* was what the Daemon now expressed. After all, it seemed not only absurd to claim himself born of a Great One, but something bordering on blasphemy. But, Demons were not wont to lie, though they might bend the reality of things, and Daemons were on the whole utterly unknown when compared to their progenitors and the libraries that described Demonkind in microscopic detail. It frightened him that there might be some grain of truth to Guillaume's words.

"Have you experienced this before? You must have, I simply used a basic rite to reanimate her corpse. There should be nothing unique about her."

"**…once…when last I was summoned…decades past…**"

"**…I have lived mostly…in the stagnant sludge…of my abode…between the realms of…Pride and Sloth…**"

"**…though this Mundane Realm shuns me…I prefer it to my abode…here I feel closer to the Eternal…**"

"**…here I hear the song…and she is but one of Its instruments…**"

Though Jakob struggled to fully comprehend what Guillaume meant, the implication seemed to be that, those reanimated through Necromantic rites wherein the visage of the Eternal Serpent was invoked, were like beacons linked to the Supreme Great One whose existence made the magic possible. Jakob had once heard Heskel refer to the eyes of all living things as being the eyes of the Watcher of Worlds, and it seemed perhaps self-evident for that to be the case if the Watcher was the Supreme One whose existence permitted sight to all those born under his gaze.

Likewise, it was said that the Flayed One, betrayal incarnate though she were, was the Great One whose existence allowed for the blood that flowed within the veins of animals. In a way, She was also invoked in Hemolatric rituals, since the Covetous Saint, whose existence was jealousy and envy made manifest, herself owed fealty to the Flayed Lady, from whom the power of the blood flowed.

The carriage shook and took with it Jakob's existential wonderings, when Heskel plunked a chubby black-haired woman down on the wooden floor of the carriage. The woman was blissfully unconscious, no doubt drugged by the brew they utilised on their subjects to rob them of their faculties.

The Wight grunted, then said, "**Show us.**"

Without skipping a beat, Guillaume rose from his seat and walked across to the prone figure. She suddenly seemed to awake, as though sensing the Daemon's burning gaze. She looked up and locked eyes with the red-haired black-eyed Undying, who knelt before her as though about to pray for her sins.

Then something like a thick cord of hair grew from under Guillaume's index fingernail, squirming as it grew in length, before releasing its connection to his body and falling down on the woman's face. As it fell it became a tiny droplet of tar that landed on the woman's cheek, where it broke into a million pieces that quickly found entry into her body through her eyes, the pores of her skin, her nostrils, mouth, ears, and hair follicles. The woman, for her part, was still staring at the black eyes of Guillaume, as though spellbound, having not moved the slightest.

A second or two passed, and then it was over.

The female caravaner rose from the carriage floor, her eyes black and sightless, before she turned around and left through the back, moving around Heskel who had only managed to get one foot on the step before the presentation was over.

"Terrifying," Jakob remarked.

Heskel grunted apprehensively, and, Jakob was surprised to note, with a hint of dread.

Guillaume stood just behind him, still as the grave and his usual attendant corpse-doll replaced with one of the cowled sorcerers whom Sirellius himself had witness become enthralled. The clean-up of the Haven plaza was still underway, with two of the abominable creatures slain, three psychotic guards detained, one of the towering centaurs of bone-and-flesh-and-human-faces chained and dragged away for study, and, distressingly, a hulking seven-legged goliath on the run. The latter was being hunted down as it moved south, its current whereabouts estimated to be Market West, though it seemed to be going in a straight path towards the Slums, for reasons Sirellius could only dread to understand.

"**…they are like the Elphin…half man…half demon…their helmets hide…their true nature…**"

Sirellius supressed a shudder at the Daemon's words. He felt very out-of-his-element. It seemed things only continued to spiral further-and-further down into the abyss of despair. It reminded him of sixteen years prior, when the Underking had been forced into the deep, expected to rot after agreeing to be exiled there. But even back then, their losses had not been so extreme. Even *they* had not come to lend their aid back then…

But now *they* were here, row-upon-row of gleaming silver plate-armour inscribed with the sigils of the Eight Saint, and their Commander, *the Archduke of Octland* and *High Bishop of the Church of the Eight Saint*, Octavio. As Octland was a principality of Helmsgarten that shared a border with it to the southeast, Octavio was still beholden to the King, not to mention the Pope of the Church, who resided in the cathedral of Heimdale's capital, but Sirellius was beneath him. However, as a show of respect, Octavio seemed to defer to him, rather than order him around.

"*Sirellius.*"

"Yes, milord?"

"*Why doth thy present-self cavort with daemon-kin?*" he asked in Octef, the language of his faith and nation both.

"It is said that to fight an enemy, one must know it intimately. And Guillaume here acts an advisor. After all, the perpetrator of this defilement of our holy centre of faith is the very same who summoned him."

"*Doth that not him an enemy make?*"

"I do not believe so, milord."

Octavio's eyes narrowed. They were a piercing-and-glowing white, visible through the double slits that ran diagonal over the front of his strange helmet, in a double-layered V from the nose-ridge to his temples. The armour of the Elite Corps of the Church was form-fitting and rounded in the front, but flared outward in sharp jutting spike in the back, making it akin to silver water frozen as it fell down their bodies. In the exposed joints were a fine and intricate mesh of chainmail, beneath which was soft and expensive pure-white cloth. Their backs were an obvious weak-point, as the armour covered only the front of their bodies, and just chainmail covered them from nape to lower-back, but it was iconic of their credo: "*Turn not thy back to the unholy and profane.*"

"*I see. Now, Sirellius, enlighten me about those who have brought such devastation to our most holy place.*"

Sirellius swallowed and then started to explain the events of two decades prior.

Guillaume looked up from his fixed stare and regarded Jakob, who himself had been letting his thoughts run wild to endure the monotony of the journey.

"**…Sirellius has brought…strange ones…to his city…**"

"Strange ones?"

"**…they are almost…demonic…but human still…**"

"How so?"

Heskel was following their exchange intently, seeming to sense trouble.

"**…with humans…the natural aura is…fragmented into vices…demonkind are singular…fixed into singular desire…these strange ones are likewise…**"

"**What desire?**"

"**…untainted white…purity incarnate…**"

"You know them?" Jakob asked his Lifeward.

Heskel nodded gravely. "**They are powerful. The Swords of Olemn.**"

"Adherents of the Eight Saint?"

"**…the Eight is likewise…a Saint of Vice…his adherents yet remain ignorant…to this truth…**"

"Does that make his followers demons?"

"**…in a way…or so it seems…**"

Jakob suddenly wondered if perhaps his decimation of Haven had bought him adversaries worse than the Crown itself, but, it hardly mattered, if he could keep out of their sight until he had called forth Nharlla. None could challenge him then.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XXVI

Carmine regarded his Knights, as they were arranged around him in the tunnel. The air was ripe with offensive smells, though none of them seemed perturbed by such mundane things. Their minds were as one and focused taut like a bow, whose arrow indicated their target.

He nodded once to his Second, Smythe, and they began to intone the beseeching words of the ritual.

Eight voices combined into a heavenly chorus, with Carmine, as the Knight-Lord, leading them with his powerful and angelic tenor through the verses in their mother-tongue, Octef.

"*O Saint, purest of all.*"

"*Olemn, holiest one.*"

"*Give us guidance.*"

"*We are Thy swords.*"

From the centre of the isotoxal octagram, a single shard of light manifested, like a featureless eel swimming through the air. The sprite circled the confines of the octagram drawn in fine powdered silver, before flitting down the tunnelway.

The group immediately followed, with Carmine leading the fore, so that every member could see his exposed back, where naught but chainmail mesh covered his body. Aside from his helmet, which sported additional backwards-facing horns, his armour-plate was identical to theirs, but his strength was such that they together would not be able to best him in combat. His Knights knew this, and the flaunting of Carmine's exposed chainmail was an invitation for any of them to challenge his authority, though he knew they would not.

Unlike the adherents of other Saints, the Knights of Saint Olemn were an unshakeable bastion, who in the four-century-long history of their order had never once surrendered, retreated, nor deserted. The same could not be said for the local Holy Corps however, as they had called upon Archduke Octavio and his Elite Knights, instead of seeking the heart of darkness within the depths of their city themselves.

Even now, seven other squads of Knights, each led by a Knight-Lord, were pursuing different leads to unveil the perpetrator of the Haven Defilement. The honour of going after the Underking had been awarded to Carmine's unit, while the rest of his brethren sought out the new King, searched for a nest of mutants in the eastern districts, investigated the Market West district, and many other tasks of great importance.

Archduke Octavio himself remained in Haven, like an avatar of Saint Olemn, come to appease the unrest and treat the wounded-and-injured with his magic.

Carmine was unsure if he deserved his current task, given that he only recently had received his promotion to Knight-Lord and attained the power that came with the rank. To his eyes, there were many other Knights more experienced and talented, and yet he had been elevated above them, for no reason that he himself could ascertain. His brethren had congratulated him though, sulking and complaining never being their way.

Suddenly, the light eel went left where the tunnel network met a T-junction, and Carmine kicked off from the ground, catching his plated heel on the curving wall and running down its slope, ensuring his momentum did not suffer. It was hard to see in the pitch-darkness of the sewers, and they were left with no choice but to stay within the reach of the guiding light, lest darkness consumed them.

Some hours later, the light eel came to an abrupt halt, and Carmine skated across the damp-and-slick tunnel stones, where moss, fungal growths, and decades-old effluvia were in great abundance. Some moments later, his Knights arrived as well.

They were all changed from the Glass Forest Ritual that each of them had undergone upon their admittance into Archduke Octavio's Elite Corps and, as such, running for hours was no more strenuous to their bodies than it was for the Octland Eagle to soar across the open skies.

Before the Glass Forest, Carmine had worn a great mane of crimson hair, like his father, and his skin had been an olive tan. Now he was white-haired and pale. Every pigment in his body had become uniformly white, as he drank from the stagnant and ice-cold pond at the heart of the forest, over the eight days the Ritual demanded. Even his irises had turned white, and, as he rose through the ranks of the Elite Corps, a glow had begun to grow from within them, as though a portal to the Heavenly Realm of his Benevolent Lord had opened within.

Like most in the Order, he had begun as a Man-at-Arms, and, with every achievement and triumph, his inner strength had grown, as well as his rank. Knowledge that he had never attained through reading nor lectures were finding their way into his mind, as though gifted to him alongside the blossoming glow in his eyes.

"*Smythe.*"

"*Yes, my Lord.*"

Carmine paused at the honorific, remembering a time not too long ago, when they had been equals and spoken as brothers between one another.

"*There is a force here that obscures our guiding light.*"

"*I feel it, my Lord.*"

"*Pick a man to summon a Lanternlight, we proceed into the dark with but our Faith as guide.*"

Yet more hours passed, as Carmine and his Knights bored into the depths. Even though they were without a guiding sprite, they were possessed of supernatural intuition and thus continued to find the paths that led them to the place they sought.

When they reached the deepest they could go, as no tunnels led further into the bedrock of the mountain across which Helmsgarten draped its walls and districts, the air had become so oppressive and awful that a Knight was chosen to perform a continuous Purification ritual, so that they might breathe without fear of corruption reaching their lungs.

They scoured the floor of the sewers, its endless labyrinthine halls appearing as though hewn from the mountainous rock itself, though by whose hands he had no guess, as the work was the project of a thousand's years excavation.

Within these depths, two of their number occupied with Lanternlight and Purification rituals, they came upon their first opposition.

"*Smythe, with me!*"

As they ran, side-by-side towards their foe, they both chanted:

"*Light of Purity, imbue my blade. Let glow Thy Benevolent Beacon. I am the bringer of Thy Salvation! I am Thy sword!*"

From crossguard to the blade-tip, a light grew outwards, extending the length and widening the cutting edge of their swords.

The monster swung one of its six triple-jointed arms at them, but Smythe easily deflected the blow with his sword, allowing Carmine to continue unimpeded. A tug of precognition made him

pause abruptly, just as a second arm carved through the air with a bone claw, missing his chestplate by a handspan. Then he shot forward again, another precognitive tremor allowing him to perfectly deflect and sever a third arm, before finishing off the creature with a single slash to its bulbous body.

The Bearer of the Lanternlight had halted his ritual and likewise imbued his sword with the holy light of their Lord, but the Knight performing the Purification was still carefully reciting the litany. His group had naturally split into twos facing each cardinal direction of the hall, ensuring an omnidirectional offense, which allowed each of them to worry only about what stood before them, knowing their brethren would protect their backs.

The Fleshcrafter regarded the tumorous growth on the wall, through which he could see what any of his servants saw. Next to him was a stone the size of a clenched fist, which was riddled with glowing-red sigils.

"*Raleigh.*"

The stone remained still, though he knew he had its attention.

"*How would you like to feast on the Knights of Serenity?*"

Glowing fissures formed across the surface of the stone, while it rumbled from within, as though overtaken by miniscule earthquakes.

Carmine had reached the lair of evil within the sewer depths, though only Smythe remained by his side now, the rest of his Knights consumed beneath an unending tide of monsters, chimera, and demonspawn.

Smythe had lost his right arm and was forced to wield his blade in his left, though gratefully-little of his silver blood had spilled from him, before Carmine could seal the stump closed.

It was a terrible thing, Carmine reflected, to see such skilled Knights be rendered down to their constituent parts by creatures who were by themselves no better than rats. It brought to mind the gruesome stories of children who died after falling into the great ant-hives near the southern border of Octland.

If retreat and self-preservation had been their way, they might have escaped with their lives, but the men of Archduke Octavio's Elite Corps were known for their strict adherence to their given tasks, and they would see it fulfilled, even if it cost them their lives in the process.

After following a narrow passageway, the pair came to a large area filled with machinery, tools, slabs upon which corpses of many types lay, vats overflowing with murky fluid and pulsating with inner life, and countless scuttling half-human creatures tending to everything.

"*We have found it, brother,*" Carmine remarked.

"*Yes, my Lord.*"

"*We may die in these depths, but we will be reunited by His side,*" he told his second.

Like himself, Smythe seemed eager to fulfil their given task, as well as the prospect of Divine Deliverance from their mortal coil, if they died worthwhile deaths.

Without looking back at the ceaseless cacophony of scratching claws on stone and the lumbering-and-scurrying steps of the swarm that chased them, they charged forward, their blades of light carving through any obstacle in their way.

The Fleshcrafter lifted the knight up before him, admiring the specimen. A flicker of life was still within him, even after being subjected the Flaying Hymn, which brought excitement to his black heart. It had been a long while since he last had been able to work with *so pure* a subject, as his sewer demesne was antithetical to untainted life.

"*Long has it been, since an Outrider of the Eight Saint crossed my path.*"

The man lifted one of his skinned arms, putting his slender fingers on the Fleshcrafter's hand.

"*What is your name? I will remember it well.*"

"*Knight-Lord Carmine.*" Despite it all, the flayed man yet had strength in his voice.

The Fleshcrafter laughed mockingly. "*No Knight-Lord are you, though a fine vessel you will be.*"

With two of his arms he seized the top and bottom jaws of Carmine's face, wrenching them open. If skin had still remained on the Knight-Lord's body, it would have torn along the cheeks, but given his lack thereof, the jaws opened wide on their hinges. With a fourth hand, the Fleshcrafter picked up the trembling stone of petrified flesh that held Raleigh's spirit within.

Then, in one powerful thrust, he rammed his arm down Carmine's open mouth, burying the stone in his stomach, before withdrawing the bony limb that was now slick with blood and bile.

With paternal care, he set down the skinned body and then watched the transformation take hold, as Raleigh's soul battled with the embers of Carmine's. This time, he would not limit the vessel containing the Wrath Demon, thus allowing it to transform itself with its devastating aura and utilise the full range of its might.

"*I hope this pleases you, Raleigh.*"

A wet-and-angry gurgling voice replied, "***You understand my desires well, Fleshcrafter.***"

The carriage stopped for the final time, after passing through the southern gate of Rooskeld. The walls of the city were modest when compared to those of Helmsgarten, but still stood four metres tall.

The four of them disembarked amidst a roar of caravaners yelling out their routes and the murmur of newly-arrived travellers who spoke excitedly while they stretched their travel-worn limbs.

"**…where do you plan…to go now…**"

"I think we will find a place for a laboratorium first, then we can see about this tree."

"**…an ever diligent…student of the flesh…you are…**"

"Heskel and I must ply our trade, lest our hands forget the motions. We also have need of a way to construct more servants, if the tenacity of the Crown and these warriors of the Church is true."

Heskel nodded. "**See if apothecary needed.**"

"Indeed. If we can repeat the guile of Market North within this city, then we shall be spared much trouble."

"**…I will search…for new vessels…so my eyes can be yours…**" Guillaume announced, then left with Sig in tow, the reanimated servant now following his commands, after Jakob had given him the reins to control her.

As he watched her leave, the sight, for reasons he could not understand, made his chest hurt. Her abyss-black eyes were locked on the back of the Daemon, as though he was the only thing in her world that mattered now.

XXVII

Jakob did not have to inquire around the affluent parts of town for long, before he found someone willing to help him set up in an abandoned house. Though he would not ply his trade under the cover of an apothecary this time around, but rather a Doctor's Clinic, where he would serve as Physician and Surgeon both.

Once again, he found himself in the peculiar position of aiding people with their ailments, rather than utilising their bodies and constituent parts for his own machinations.

It took the better part of the day and night to refurbish the ground floor of the house, so that it had a small receiving-and-waiting room, a workspace for surgeries and general consultations, and a storage that he hoped to fill with materials for his nocturnal Fleshcraft. The second floor was left as-is, with a decrepit washroom, a dusty study full of worm-eaten fiction on unsteady bookshelves, and a bedroom with two beds next to each other.

After the refurbishing, Jakob set about finding additional space, as his consultation room could hardly accommodate everything he needed to create new constructs and monstrosities, and eventually ended up buying the next-door three-story with the last golden statue in their possession: a golden femur. The top floor and attic there were turned into barely-acceptable workspace for his true craft. Heskel continued to work diligently to renovate this second house, so that Jakob would have his hands free to focus on constructing new creatures when the clinic was closed.

Already after only a couple of days, word of his new clinic had spread across most of the town and his waiting room was full of everything from life-threatening injuries to persistent coughs. The receptionist-and-secretary, Pernille, quickly showed herself adroit at dealing with the mass of people and scheduling their consultations and surgeries based on urgency. She was a hire forced on Jakob by the nobleman who had given him the abandoned house in the first place, though she had already earnt her employment. He was unsure if she was related to the noble or not, given the ease with which she dealt with the lower castes of Rooskeld.

"Magister," the Receptionist called from the doorway, while Jakob was in the middle of excavating a half-metre-long splinter from the thigh-meat of an unconscious patient. Despite the fact that a wrong move would potentially damage the man's femoral artery, he answered her, having learnt already that she only came to him when it was important.

"What is it?"

Pernille seemed to hesitate, before answering. "There is a man here to see you. He's accompanied by a strange woman, and they both… there's something *wrong* with their eyes."

"You can let them in," Jakob replied, then, with a deft motion, pulled the splinter from the man's leg, putting it down on the table next to him. As she left the room, he bid Purll transform his glove fingers into needle-like spikes, which he used to knit the patient's wound shut. A quick utterance of the Amalgam Hymn ensured the skin would not reopen.

Before Jakob could administer the concoction to rouse the patient from his induced sleep, Guillaume entered with Sig in tow. The red-haired corpse-doll was dressed in new clothes, as was the undead serf. He now wore a form-fitting black tunic with matching trousers, and she was dressed as a funerary widow with a veil over her face that fell from a wide-brimmed hat.

"**…you are quick…to adapt…a true child of Nharlla…it would seem…**"

Jakob had not given the comparison much thought before, as he always thought it blasphemous to compare oneself to a Great One. Though the comparison was an easy one to make, as Nharlla, the Disfigured One as he was known, was a being of infinite guises, said to have once been a mortal actor, though Jakob wondered if perhaps that origin was not a fanciful reimagination of the truth of things. After all, the Great Ones were the wave of impetus upon which the lesser beings, such as humans, were driven forward, encouraged to greatness they themselves could never have spontaneously imagined. And not just humans either, as the Saints of Vice were clearly strict adherents to various Great Ones, given their innate abilities and quirks.

"They are automatons," Jakob replied, quoting Heskel's words. "They accept anything that seems to fit in, and I simply exploited that to my benefit."

"**…may I make a…request…**" Guillaume abruptly asked.

Jakob turned to regard him fully, his eyes moving away from Sig.

The corpse-doll walked to one of the tables and held his hand above it. A multitude of *pings* and *plunks* sounded, and when he moved his hand and its obscuring shadow, there remained about twenty pellets the size of a pinkie-finger nail. They were black as moonlit blood.

"**…would you gift these…to your patients…**"

"You wish to have me transform people into your legion?"

To Jakob's astonishment, it was Sig who answered, her mouth moving in a mechanical fashion as it sounded out the words. "They, will, be, dormant, in, their, transformation." For some reason, he felt disappointed at how blank and lifeless her voice sounded. It was as though her vocal cords belonged to a machine that knew how to only replicate words.

"*How* did you teach her to speak?"

"**…she required no teaching…**"

Jakob frowned at the response, as it would imply she simply had not wanted to speak to him, but that ignored the fact that reanimated servants were known for being mute. To his knowledge, simple undead did not even possess the self-awareness to facilitate speech. "That is impossible. Undead such as her have never been able to speak."

"**…perhaps…a fragment of my aura…has caused this…**"

"**…perhaps the Supreme Great One…the Eternal One…has chosen to acknowledge me…**"

Both possibilities were unsettling in different ways, though the latter seemed improbable. If a Great One chose to gift an undead with a voice as a reward for the life-long adherence of its creator, then surely it would have happened before, and the Eternal Serpent was not exactly known as a being that interacted with its adherents. It simply was a force of the endless cosmos, synonymous in many ways with the formless black between stars. The first was the more likely scenario, though it meant that each of the corpse-dolls of Guillaume exuded enough of his natural aura to alter reality, which over time would have devastating effects on the natural world.

"If I let you influence my patients, I will require something in return."

"**…you are known to me…as a fair dealer of contracts…what you desire I will give…**"

"I need you to inform me if the Crown or Clergy warriors track me down to Rooskeld. Additionally, every patient I give your essence to, I will need you to expel whatever ails them, so they believe I have cured them fully, and thus will not seek my treatment again. As it stands, I have been too busy to locate the Esoteric Toll we came here to find."

"**…these will be done…**"

"Also…" he paused, the question only coming to him since Heskel was absent and therefore unable to judge him for his weak sentimentality. "Does Sig remember anything from before her death?"

"I, know, only, what, I, am, told."

"I see. I have one more request."

"**…enlighten me…**"

"Don't bring her around here anymore. I do not wish to lay my eyes upon her ever again."

"How have you been finding your new employment?"

Pernille hesitated before answering. "Magister Jakob is certainly talented. In the last week, I have not seen a sickness, injury, or mental anguish his consultations could not alleviate and cure."

"But?"

"He keeps very strange company, his bodyguard being the most sinister of them. The way he stares at me makes chills run through me."

"Magisters must be allowed their peculiarities, dear."

"Yes, uncle."

Count Bastian smoothed the front of his lapel. His coat was flawless and without a wrinkle or crease, but it was less of a thoughtful action and rather more of a habitual mannerism.

"There is another thing…"

"Yes?"

"I feel as though… I do not quite know what to make of it, but… he has been paying me a lot more than my last employer."

"How much exactly?"

"A thousand Novarins per day."

Count Bastian nearly choked, then laughed heartily. "That is no bad thing, is it?"

"No, but…"

"Pernille, dear. If he rewards you thusly, you must not look too closely at why. Just consider yourself expectant of such payment because you are valued. Of course, only as long as he continues to treat you with due respect."

"No, no! He has been nothing but a gentleman towards me," she insisted.

"Then what harm is there? Amass yourself a fortune, so that you have plenty to start a family and live out your motherhood with naught to worry you."

Pernille smiled slightly shamefully, but when her uncle gave her one of his charming grins, she let up somewhat. "Thank you, uncle. You always know what to say."

"Make sure you thank him properly though. Who knows, we both may come to rely on his talents eventually."

"What's this?" Jakob asked, holding the brown vellum bag by its rope-straps. The bag itself was of a kind he had not seen before, and no doubt quite expensive to produce.

"It's a gift, as thanks for the opportunity to work here and how you have been treating me. Have a look inside."

He set the bag on one of his vacant worktables. An hour prior, a man had lain there in the throes of death, but Jakob had diligently scrubbed it down after, quickly learning that many of his patients found a blood-filled consultation room off-putting.

Within the bag were two books, a strange pair of glasses with multiple overlapping adjustable lenses on one eye, and a smaller vellum pouch. Lifting the glasses out, he immediately tried them on. The lenses on the right eye were like those of a telescope, allowing him to see things enlarged many times their normal scale.

"Where did you get these?"

"They belonged to my grandfather. He was a jewel-maker."

"I will find good use for these," he answered. Already, his mind was full of ideas on how to produce the same zoom effect using hardened membranes, such that he could create a construct with the ability to see far into the horizon. Given that he worked his fleshcraft mostly through long-learnt practice and thus did not require to see things in great detail, he doubted he would find much use for them there.

Next he pulled out the two books. One was about animals endemic to the region around Rooskeld, and the other was a historical overview of the town over the last three-hundred years, seeming to detail several wars, the changes in mayors and noble families, and the ways their traditions worked.

"My uncle picked those."

Jakob nodded simply, then pulled out the final item. After opening the pouch, he scented the faint fragrance of the dried flowers within. He could already guess their use, despite not recognising the plant.

"These are regional flowers, called hibiscus. We dry them and use them for tea."

"Can you make some for me? I would like to taste it."

She paused for a moment, surprised, then smiled enthusiastically and went upstairs to find something, before returning with a spotless ceramic pair of drinking vessels. She had spent the recent days cleaning up the second floor, talking much about how it was not befitting of Jakob to live in such a dirty house. He had not told her that he had not used the upstairs area once, opting to sneak a couple hours of sleep every night after working in the laboratorium Heskel was still renovating.

After filling an iron pot with water from just outside their house, where a well sat available to anyone on their street, she prepared a fire in the little fireplace that occupied the corner of the consultation room.

Some minutes later, they both sat outside in the reception area on two cushioned chairs, sipping their hibiscus tea.

"It needs *something*," she complained, returning to the upstairs to grab additional things.

Jakob swished the tea around his mouth, savouring the flavour, finding its fruity tartness more to his liking than the flavour of the calendula tea Sirellius had served him.

When Pernille came back, she had a jar with translucent-orange viscous *something* inside.

"What's that?"

"It's honey? From bees?"

He tilted his head to the side quizzically. He had drawn his hood back, letting his mostly-bald pate breathe for once.

"You've never tried honey before??" she seemed almost incensed. Before he could reply, she pulled a silver spoon from her pocket, jammed it into the thick goopy mass and basically forced it into his mouth.

Jakob's eyes lit up as he tasted it. "It's sweet," he said with the spoon in his mouth.

Pernille crossed her arms and nodded thoughtfully. "A life without honey in your tea or on your buttered bread is not a life worth living."

He pulled the clean spoon from his mouth. "Can I have some more?"

Sensing a convert in him, she smiled victoriously. "This time, put it in your tea and stir it around for a moment."

After following her instructions, he was surprised to find that the sweetness perfectly accented the tartness of the hibiscus.

He reminded himself to tell Heskel and Guillaume not to touch her. Perhaps it was the loss of Sig, or maybe it was the growing emptiness inside him, but he felt a strange overprotectiveness for the girl, despite her being easily six years his senior.

"Pernille," he said, his voice serious.

"Yes, Magister?" she replied, suddenly seeming to regret her overly-convivial manner before her employer.

"Bring me more things like these. It seems I have much to learn."

She laughed warmly. "Of course, Magister!"

XXVIII

Jakob stood at the crest of the hill at the end of the trail, with Heskel at his back and Pernille in front. Before them lay a huge clearing with a single tree at its centre, the forest floor covered by its hundreds of outstretched roots that seemed to be scaring off all other vegetation.

"Here you have it: the Sacred Grove!" Pernille announced, seeming proud of the landmark.

Heskel grunted, impressed.

"Fascinating," Jakob added. "Do you know which of its branches were the first to sprout?"

She turned to regard him, confused by the question. "That's a peculiar thing to ask," she said. In the last two weeks that they had known each other, she had grown more confident in herself and realised that Jakob valued her honesty.

"There are not many trees in Helmsgarten. I am unfamiliar with how they grow."

"Oh. I see. Unfortunately, Magister, I am no wiser on this subject."

"**Ground up. Bud become branch.**"

"So the bottom branch would be the first?" Jakob guessed.

Heskel grunted affirmative.

"He knows a lot," Pernille said, surprised.

"Heskel is possessed of great wisdom, but is often miserly with sharing it."

"I will remember, Magister."

Jakob grinned beneath his mask. He found it amusing how she refused to address him by his name, despite his urging. He had never referred to himself as a Magister, but it seemed that anyone capable of stitching flesh and performing alchemy earned such a title in Rooskeld, at least in the eyes of the noble-born.

"Let's go closer."

"But we can't, Magister."

"Why not?"

"It is not allowed, except during the annual Sacred Grove Festival. Unfortunately, the next one is not until next year, many months hence. It is the millennial celebration next year, did you know? It will a month-long festival."

"What if I disregard this rule?"

Instead of replying, she pointed to various well-camouflaged towers that nestled into the treeline and had completely evaded his wandering gaze when they arrived.

"Guards?"

"The Priests of the Sacred Grove take their duties very seriously, and they have been known to slay those who trespassed on their holy territory."

Jakob scratched below the chin-covering portion of his scent-mask, wondering how they could escape these priests and obtain the branch. Then an idea for a unique construct came to mind, but he needed to perform some experiments first. Fortunately, the treatise on the Rooskeld wild had given him plenty of useful insight that he could study for a way to develop the mechanism he had in mind.

"Find me some grasshoppers," Jakob told Heskel in Chthonic. Pernille did not bat an eye, already accustomed to their private conversations in the foreign tongue.

With a compliant grunt, the Wight left their company.

A few days later, Jakob had finished the mechanism, his latest prototype being a simple-looking arm of dense bone. However, the looks were deceiving, as the forearm contained many moving parts, such as an internal spring system he had devised after studying a grasshopper's impressive leaping ability and using the zoom lenses Pernille had gifted him to inspect it up-close in great detail.

When the forearm was pumped back on the elbow-joint, so that it touched the upper arm, the internal spring stored up enough energy to launch a tiny spike through a hollow tube that went all the way through the forearm to the palm of the hand. To prevent misfires or self-destruction, the hand locked in place when the spring was engaged. The joint of the thumb was the trigger that released a small gear and let the spring expend all its stored-up power at once.

As for the projectile, he had reused some of the same Hemolatric rituals as what had operated within the arms of Stelji, though instead of simply manipulating blood, the magic employed in this arm made it so that a certain amount of blood was drawn from a large artery that snaked all the way through the arm to where the spring sat within the forearm. When the blood was pushed through the barrel and left out through the opening in the hand, the ritual circle drawn on the palm would turn the scattered blood into a quarter-meter-long spike.

From the few firing tests he had performed, it seemed that the potential energy the spring stored way surpassed his expectations, as attested to by two holes in the backwall of the third floor of the laboratorium house. The blood-bolts had moved with such speed and force that they had torn through not only the wooden wall, but also the external brickwork-and-plaster.

"Now we have a way to deal with the guards," Jakob concluded.

Heskel nodded. For once, the Wight had simply observed him work, letting him do everything himself, and not even giving advice the few times he got stuck on something. It made Jakob proud that his Lifeward had seen that he was finally capable of working unassisted.

"The question now is, who should wield it? We are low on Demon's Blood, so an Abeyance would be a bad idea. A purpose-made construct might be more advisable, but the resources to build one are not readily available to us in this town..."

Jakob had thought to use the Daemon's blood for their rituals, but after one spectacular failure, in which the backlash of the ritual had vapourised half the body of their would-be Wrought Servant, it was clear that an interbred demonspawn was no reliable source of pure blood.

"**Guillaume.**"

"We already tried using his blood. It won't work."

"**Make him wield the weapon.**"

Jakob broke into a fit of laughter at the suggestion.

"Ingenious."

"**…the terms of our contract…seem to steadily grow…**" Guillaume observed, after Jakob had refitted his red-haired corpse-doll with the new prosthetic weapon.

"To obtain the Toll within Rooskeld, we need your help. It is for the purpose of summoning Nharlla, after all, and our contract was unrelated to this undertaking."

Guillaume neither blinked nor nodded, but Jakob knew he would not retort. Even a Daemon, possessed of the mixed-and-conflicting qualities of its parents, still found a simple acceptance of straight-forward agreements, and given that Guillaume desired to witness Nharlla descend to the Mundane Plane, he was easily swayed to aid Jakob and follow his orders.

He struggled to supress a grin beneath his scent-mask. *If only he knew what I have in store for him.* The thought of how he planned to have Guillaume assist the summoning, by becoming one of

its Esoteric Tolls, '*A Sincere Childhood Dream*', made Jakob shiver with exhilaration. But that was for later.

"There is another matter, in which we require your expertise. It too pertains to the list of Tolls."

"**…you only have to ask…**"

"We have to obtain '*Thirteen Skinned Faces Given Willingly*'."

"**…you wish for me…to gift you…the faces of my dolls…**"

Heskel grunted in acknowledgement.

The corpse-doll made a sound that was akin to a chuckle, in the same way that metal scratching glass was akin to singing. It hurt Jakob's ears and seemed to interfere with his breathing.

"**…they would not…be given willingly…**"

Jakob met his eyes, realisation hitting him. "Why not?" he asked, despite already knowing the answer.

Guillaume tapped himself on the temple. "**…their pleading screams…echo within…they hate me…they hate you…they beg for the eternal sleep…**"

"The people whose bodies you control… they are alive?"

"**…they do not appreciate…my gift…they do not love the Eternal One…**"

Jakob felt his mouth dry at the prospect. It was the worst fate he could imagine. To be trapped within one's own body, while a Daemon used it for its own machinations, its very nature making death an impossibility. An eternity of spectating through one's own eyes.

Heskel was less sly with his reaction, a predatory growl rising from within his throat. It spoke volumes of the horror being possessed by Guillaume would result in that even Heskel seemed to fear it.

After regaining his composure somewhat, Jakob concluded, "Then I have no idea how to obtain the faces. I would imagine even utilising an Abeyance would not mean that the person willingly offered up themselves."

"**…there is another way…**"

"*I was saddened to hear about the passing of thy father. Octland will forever mourn him.*"

"What do you want, Octavio. Why are you even here?"

The Knights attending Octavio bristled at the coarse reply, but knew enough about the way of things to not utter their grievances, lest their heads be cleft from their shoulders.

"*Surely, you understand that the tragedy in Haven precipitated a response.*"

Patrych ignored him. "It is customary to kneel before your King. Octland is still a vassal of my Crown, last I checked."

"*Prince Patrych, I do not yet acknowledge your ascension. As I recall, it was but a month ago word of thy passing reached my ears. Thy father earnt my respect, but you are yet known to me as an imprudent whelp. The rumours swirling around thy miraculous resurrection are ones which my Church intends to fully investigate. A King that cavorts with the spawn of the Septet Sinners is not long for this world.*"

Smouldering with rage, King Patrych slammed his hand into the stone armrest of his great throne, the *boom* echoing across the great hall. "Such treasonous speech will be punished, regardless of your stature! Your nation shall become ashes! Your fields shall become barren! Your head will fly from atop my banner as I take back your pathetic lands that you never once deserved!"

As one, the gathered Royal Guards drew their weapons, tensed their bowstrings, and began chanting their magic. In response, the seven Knights flanking Archduke Octavio took up positions so that, with their liege, they formed a star pointing in the four cardinal directions.

"*Long live the Eight Saint! Long live Octland!*" Octavio's men roared as one.

"*Saint Olemn, we are Thy swords, through us scourge the heretics!*" Octavio chanted loudly in Octef.

As pure, blinding light shone around the eight Knights of Saint Olemn, the archers released their arrows, the sorcerers cast their destructive spells, and the guards surged forward, outnumbering the Knights three-to-one.

At the head of the Royal Guard came King Patrych, his powerful loping steps shattering the marbled floor with their heavy impacts. His heirloom greatsword slew the first Knight to get in his way with a single blow. Though the King lacked talent, his superhuman strength more than compensated for this, and his reaction speed made any attempts at retaliation futile.

Octavio began backpedalling towards the great doors of the throne hall, while his Knights died for him. His two swords glowed fiercely with his Lord's benevolent light, and each of his swipes and slashes through the air sent cleaving crescents of dense light to strike his assailants from afar.

Though covered in scratches, parts of his armour torn off, and blood seeping through the chainmail where magic had penetrated and bit into his flesh, Octavio had made it out of the castle and the Royal District alive.

Retreat was antithetical to the credo of his Church and Faith, but he knew his Lord valued other pure desires than just courage and self-sacrifice, such as the preservation of the greater good and the protection of his adherents, many of whom were defenceless.

After sheathing his blades, Octavio lifted his armoured palm to the sky and launched a condensed missile of pure light. His men across Helmsgarten City would see the signal and converge on Haven, from where they would fight their way out of the metropolis, if necessary, bringing their many sheltering faithful with them.

It was clear to him that Helmsgarten had become a den of sin, and that a despot now wore its crown. But he had only brought a minor contingent with him and thus needed to return to Octland, where he would contact the Pope in Heimdale and prepare for a Holy War. The Sinners would be scoured from Helmsgarten so that order and propriety could be restored.

"*Lord Olemn, Purest One, grant me strength. The lapse in my attentiveness has allowed for this evil to fester and take hold. Let me atone by returning Thy light to these heretics.*"

"**Certain?**"

"Yes. You heard what Guillaume said. We need *this*."

"**Do not trust.**"

"I will be fine. By the terms of our initial contract, he is unable to hurt me in any way, physical or metaphysical. And you are bringing the Scroll with you, so Guillaume will want to keep our agreement intact, lest he be denied his wish."

Jakob felt apprehensive about letting Heskel venture out on his journey alone, but he would be faster without him, and, truthfully, Jakob had not yet recovered from the strain of the treatment by the Crown Guard, nor the long stay in the corrupting realm of Mammon, two events which had left deep marks on his body and soul. He needed the simplicity and relaxation his disguise as a doctor

afforded him. Further, it was imperative he remained now that his role was fixed. Further, he needed to figure out how exactly he would go about retrieving the branch, as taking out the guards from a distance was but one of several challenges, given that preliminary study of the ancient tree had shown its bark to be akin to hardened steel. If he attempted to obtain the branch without a foolproof plan, defeat seemed all but inevitable.

"As soon as you have a name, return to me."

Heskel nodded solemnly. Then he seized Jakob in a surprisingly-gentle embrace. Before Jakob could reciprocate or question it, Heskel had let go and leapt from the third-floor window, immediately swallowed by the darkness outside.

With a cup of lukewarm hibiscus tea in his hands, Jakob sat in front of the window, staring at the horizon as the sun clawed its way over the distant mountain range. He considered the task he had given Heskel, and though he felt a certain amount of trepidation about being so long removed from his Lifeward, he knew it was the best way to accomplish their undertaking.

Guillaume had told them that they could achieve their Esoteric Toll of 'faces given willingly', by summoning an Enthralling Daemon: a dangerous amalgamation of the conflicting vices Pride and Lust, which rivalled an Undying Daemon like Guillaume in terms of the ability to inflict mass destruction through turning people into servants. However, unlike Guillaume's sadistic way of turning people, an Enthralling Daemon made its servants obey it willingly, simply by exuding its alluring and compelling aura.

Jakob had already designed the ritual he would need, as well as how he would utilise the Daemon by trapping its soul within a mask that would transfer its enthralling powers to the wearer. But, there was a critical element missing: neither he, Heskel, Guillaume, nor even Tchinn, knew the name of any Enthralling Daemon.

It was possible to summon an entity by only adding vague specifics in the wording of the ritual, but this way of summoning was crucially lacking in safeguards to the Invoker. When the entity in question was a Daemon of conflicting vices, whose power was on such an absurdly-devastating scale, such a ritual would result not only in Jakob's enthrallment and, no doubt, death, but also the enthrallment of the entirety of Rooskeld. He had not even entertained the idea for a second, as it was quite literally suicide, with an apocalyptic aftermath. Even he was not so callous as to doom the entire world on a whim.

Therefore, they needed to find a name of an Enthralling Daemon, which was easier said than done. Fortunately, Heskel had mentioned that there was a controversial magical academy in southwest Lleman, which was known to have an extensive index of demons and which frequently performed suicidal summonings with few limits to grow their library of spells and ensnare demons for use in weapons.

Magical weapons were a big part of Llemanian warfare and, thus, their nation was rife with such academies, but, the fact that the particular academy Heskel had mentioned was considered immoral, pointed to them going beyond simple summonings, thereby making it the most likely place to locate the name of an Enthralling Daemon.

Without Heskel by his side, Jakob suddenly felt he needed to craft a new construct. And though they had not yet stockpiled enough materials, he knew how to get enough for a human-sized creation. All it would take was a stroll through the impoverished corner of Rooskeld with a jingling coinpurse in the dark of night.

XXIX

"*Where void rules, light the ember of Unlife.*"
"*Where void rules, sprout the seed of thought.*"
"*Where void rules, fill it with conscious noise.*"
"*O Eternal Serpent, Birthe Sentience!*"

The flames of the corpse-tallow candles reached towards the ceiling, casting their unsettling light on the entire room, before bending inward and diving straight into the figure curled in a foetal position at the centre of the hexagram.

Slowly, and with ponderous and careful motions, the bone golem got up from the floor and lumbered towards him. It had a heavyset frame, thick arms and legs, and a squat featureless head.

Jakob had originally wanted to make a simple humanoid automaton to help him in his work, but he had decided on a more purpose-made servant after dragging the two corpses, whose constituents parts were now part of the golem, halfway across the town on an improvised sled.

Grandfather employed similar constructs, though his were crafted through genetically-spliced artificial wombs, whereas Jakob relied more on his own ability to hand-craft every minute detail. Many of Grandfather's chimera were born flawed, whereas Jakob's creations were only as flawed as he allowed them to be, either through carelessness or poor design. As Jakob improved, so too would his constructs, while Grandfather's chimera would remain flawed, unless their constituent genetic inputs were refined, which the Old Spider seemed reluctant to do, given how he apparently cherished the flaws bred into his creations.

One day, Jakob would best his mentor even in the field of Chimera Fleshcrafting.

He put a hand on the head of the golem, as it stood before him, awaiting his command. It was a head taller than Jakob, which, given his diminutive stature, meant that it was more-or-less the height of an adult man, though easily twice as wide.

"Your name will be… *Wothram*."

"Pernille," Jakob called to his assistant, when his latest patient had left.

She quickly entered his consultation room. "What is it, Magister?"

"I would like to introduce you to my newest servant." He indicated the bone golem which stood stock-still up against the wall behind his operating table. "*This* is Wothram."

Pernille looked at the golem with unmasked dread, then it stirred into action and reached for her. With a squeal she backed away from it, almost leaving the room.

"What…? What…? What *is* it!?"

"He is a golem, who will aid me while Heskel is absent."

"Is he harmless?"

"Yes. He's very obedient, albeit still a bit eager, but that will pass with time."

"I… I, ehh, I did not know you could create *something like that*."

"There is no need to fear him, Pernille. He is a simple tool to be utilised. Watch." Jakob turned to the Golem, which was staring at its outstretched hands with its blank head, seeming to be contemplating what it had done wrong to scare the Receptionist. "Wothram." The Golem immediately turned to regard him, its arms falling by its side. "Pernille here may need your aid, and so you are to obey her to the fullest extent of your capabilities, so long as her commands do not interfere with mine."

He turned back to his assistant, who seemed to have sidled even closer to the doorway. "Try to give him a simple command."

"I… I don't think this is right…"

"Pernille," Jakob said, seriously. "This is as much for your benefit as mine. After all, there are some things Wothram will be more adept at than me. Remember the incident with the irate patient? If Wothram had been present then, you would not have required the help of the guard to restrain the man."

"I… understand, Magister."

"Now, give him a command."

"Wothram."

Immediately the Golem turned to regard her, and Pernille froze like a deer staring straight at the hunter whose bow was trained on it.

"Wothram. I need my desk and chair moved slightly closer to the wall of the reception area."

The Golem looked around, confused.

"It will help if you show him."

"Wothram," she repeated, as though speaking to a child, despite the Golem being taller than her. "Follow me, I'll show you."

As she went out into the reception, the Golem lumbered after her, mimicking the way she opened the door.

Given enough time, the Golem's Sentience would grow to the point of being able to anticipate when it was needed, but for now it was yet a fledgeling, even more so since Jakob had not connected his own mind to it, like he had done with his first application of Birthe Sentience. Given that the mind-link he had shared with the Centipede Construct had nearly killed him with the backlash of its death, it seemed now an obvious flaw in its design. But then, mistakes were to be learnt from.

The man ran across the understory with tremendous haste and finesse, dodging every tree, bush, and boulder in his way, though his large frame belied these athletic capabilities.

She had been tracking him for a while, initially drawn to him because he cast off a scent she had not tasted in a long time. As a resident of the Goeten Wilds, she was no stranger to visitors, who used the cover of its vast canopies to cross the otherwise heavily-monitored border to Lleman. But demons, True Demons, were a rarity, though that was the scent this newest visitor gave off as she tracked him from above.

A long-lived huntress of the forest, she had immediately gone downwind from her prey, as though it was second-nature. But she was not a huntress by birth, but circumstance and her pariah status had forced her into this role for the sake of survival.

She wanted a closer look at the newest visitor and the message it carried in a scroll over its shoulder, so, as she leapt from branch to branch, tracking the prey below, she readied one of her triangular barbed arrows and, mid-jump, sent the missile soaring through the forest where it impacted with the calf of the nimble brute.

Ciana fell from above, lancing into her prey with the longsword she had inherited from her father. Instead of shearing straight through the neck-tissue of her quarry, however, he managed to catch the strike with his forearm, raised pre-emptively to shield his weak-spot.

She let her momentum withdraw the blade from his multi-hued flesh as she landed on the understory with all the grace of a felid. The brute immediately swung a massive fist at her centre-of-mass, but she moved into the blow and rolled aside from it at the moment just before impact, then speared her sword through his armpit.

As the blade rested there, surely ruining both lungs and possibly even the heart, the brute unexpectedly swung for her again, forcing her to abandon her blade within his body as she danced out of reach.

His right arm hung limp, where her blade had carved into him, but otherwise he maintained all of his fighting fervour, somehow even faster than moments prior, as though the pain spurred him on.

After another swipe at her body, he launched his knee towards her head, snapping a tree in half when she evaded the blow.

Such power!

It had been a long time since she had fought someone who could keep up with her, but she was disturbed by the brute's utter lack of self-preservation, given that a blade rested deeply within his torso and the barbed arrow still stuck out of his left calf.

Ciana avoided another swipe of his left hammer-fist, then slammed into his elbow joint with the heel of her palm, audibly snapping the bones in the joint.

While the brute's size belied his nimble nature, her small lithe frame likewise belied her incredible strength. She might have looked human, if not for her sharp ears, tiny horns on the right side of her forehead, hooves, long fingers with strong claws, and the single gossamer wing that always floated behind her, ignorant to the laws of physics.

The sudden *slam* of the brute's right fist into the side of her head sent her sprawling across the ground. It took her a moment to realise what had happened, but by then the brute was already on her, his right hand seizing her by her chin and pinning her to the ground with his immovable weight bearing down on her.

He pretended his right arm was limp, just so I would let my guard down!

"Before you kill me, tell me your name."

"**Heskel.**"

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Heskel had not killed her, despite seeming to have every intention to. Ciana was unsure why, but it was clear that he could have killed her with his strike to her head, if he had not been reining-in his strength. She had never before met someone so adept at using their strength, as every powerful man or demon she had fought had always been the victims of their own power.

"Why have you not killed me?"

"**Fast. Strong. Talented. You are these things.**"

"So? I am hardly the only one to whom such words could be applied."

"**You are Elphin.**"

Ciana laughed a bitter and cynical laugh. It had been long since she had met someone who knew *what* she was. But they always wanted the same.

"So, you'll take my wing first then?"

The Brute tilted its head as though misunderstanding her and needing clarification.

"You know *what* I am, so you want to harvest my body for all that it's worth…" she said, as though he needed to be told what she knew he wanted. They all wanted to take from her, until nothing was left. It had been that way ever since she was cast out from her father's village. Even after all this time, she still felt as though she had waited for this moment to come every day that she awoke.

"**No.**"

"No? What do you mean 'no'!?"

"**Elphin rare. Sacred. Untouchable.**"

This time her laugh was not a bitter one, but rather the genuine kind that arose unbidden from the root of the belly. "You're a fucking conservationist, is that it!? That's so absurd!" she mocked, then laughed even harder.

"**My Father believes Elphin are the epitome of mankind.**"

The suddenly-verbose explanation gave her pause.

"You have a weird dad."

Heskel withdrew the sword from his torso and handed it to her. It was completely unstained, as though his corpus contained not a drop of blood within. Then he withdrew the barbed arrow, and gave her the two pieces of it as well, seeming almost apologetic for breaking it. He followed up this bizarre display with a mind-jarring chant that made the wounds on his body seal themselves shut.

"You're a very strange creature," she commented. "Also… why do you stink of demon?"

"Magister…? What is *that*?"

"Another tool."

"But…"

"You can speak your mind, Pernille."

"Why does it look like a woodlouse?"

"It seemed the most convenient design for a construct of this nature. The carapace has several hidden compartments within where blood, medicinal fluids, water, and other such things can be stored in thin membrane pouches."

"It's for assisting your work then?"

"Indeed. A tool must be created with a function in mind, else it will be meaningless and without application," Jakob explained, omitting the fact that most of the samples his newest plate-sized construct collected would go towards rituals that required blood tolls.

After all, the disappearance of the two destitutes in the slum, whom he had killed to create Wothram, had sparked a week-long search by the local guard, who seemed quite eager to serve even their lowliest constituents. Thus, his newest construct was made for gathering materials in a discreet manner unlikely to raise suspicion. Of course, it would take longer to obtain blood this way, but he was forced to adapt if he wanted to maintain his disguise and continue to experiment during the night.

And given what he had planned next, he would need quite a lot of blood.

"You may send in the next patient."

"Yes, Magister."

"If you wish, I can show you how it works."

"I… erm. I think I would rather not know."

Jakob nodded understandingly. It was probably better that way.

"**Why follow?**"

"You said you wanted to keep me alive. So, I figured, if I hang around you, you will keep me safe."

Heskel grunted in annoyance.

"If you want me to go away," Ciana replied with a devious smirk, "You will have to kill me."

The Brute stopped and for a moment she thought he had decided to take her up on the suggestion, but then he pulled off his strange poncho of demon-skin and gave it to her.

"Do you want me to put this on?"

He nodded.

"What is it with people and nakedness? I swear, you humans are such prudes."

Heskel took off running again, his bare multi-hued and stitched flesh no better than her milky-grey bare skin, but she decided to do as he wanted.

The strange robe was warm and soft against her skin. It was surprising to her how the Brute was so gentle, given how easily it seemed he could kill her if he wanted. Even her face, where he had hit her during their fight, was already void of pain.

She quickly ran to catch up to him. "Where are we going?"

"**Svalberg Academy.**"

"We need to go further north then."

Heskel slowed down.

"**Lead. Be quick.**"

Ciana grinned at him, then took off, going as fast as she could, until she found a tree that she could scale. To her surprise, the Brute followed her into the canopy, more than able to keep up with her.

"I have been there before," she explained, even though Heskel did not seem to care, so long as they simply made it there quickly. "It's funny how everyone seems to think we Elphin have magical powers."

The Magisters at Svalberg were cruel and twisted monsters, who, when Ciana had been captured and sold to them as a child, had attempted to use her in many rituals, as though her body was a catalyst from which a fountain of potential would emanate, if but the right words were spoken. Once the

Academy Magisters realised she was no more magical than any other common child, they had sold her again, as though she was simply a horse changing riders.

Her next master had been a nutjob and a sicko, but she had lived an almost-normal life with him for a few years as his hidden-away adoptive daughter, until she matured into adulthood and he had forced himself on her. She had gouged out his eyes, cut out his tongue and castrated him, then hung him from the tallest tree in their village. Since then, she had been by herself, trusting no one.

All *that* was more than six decades in the past, but then again, her mixed heritage gifted her with an abnormally-long lifespan, so she looked no older than a woman in her early thirties, despite being close to eighty years old. Ciana was a rarity even amongst her outcast species, as most Elphin never made it past fifteen, given how they were always abandoned by their human parent or slain by their demon progenitor shortly after birth.

She had met and loved a few male and female Elphin in her long life, but, like all of her misbegotten kind, no offspring ever came to bear as a result. Elphin, the twisted and pitiable offspring of Demon and Human, were cursed with infertility and doomed to live transient and brief lives ripe with grief and despair.

"**When my task complete, I will gift you magic.**"

Ciana came to a stop on a branch, which swayed back-and-forth with her halted momentum. She turned to look at Heskel behind her.

"How?"

As though he was quoting someone, he said, "**Elphin are unique. They possess immense power, but are incapable of accessing it by themselves. They are a lock without a key. I have the key.**"

"You would do that for me?"

Heskel nodded.

"But why?"

"**Elphin sacred,**" he repeated, as though it was burnt into him as an inviolable command.

"I'll help you with your task."

Heskel grunted, then said, "**Lead to Svalberg. Quick.**"

With a powerful kick, Ciana launched off from the branch and flew towards the next. The Brute followed close behind.

XXXI

He tried very hard to keep the impotent rage from his voice, but fragments still spilled through. “My Liege, *what* have you done?”

“My father made you weak, Sirellius. His inaction and constant talk of peace dulled your edge.”

The Old Advisor shook his head. If only the young King knew the truth of things. Sirellius and the Royal Guard had been employed to smother flames of revolt and slay monsters of myth, while the people of Helmsgarten, most of the Crown family even, were none the wiser. King Ubrik had been viewed as a jovial ruler, who had grown fat on years of peace, but the late King had been a fiendish master of public relations and rather enjoyed the way his enemies and allies underestimated him. It meant he always held the upper hand. And, if not for this quirk of his, he would not have quelled the rebellion in Octland, revived Haven district and the belief in the Eight Saint, and earnt the life-long respect of the Pope and Archduke Octavio. Unfortunately, children had the misfortune of not having witnessed the achievements of their fathers, and thus Patrych had grown into an envious and vile prince, whom Sirellius was now forced to serve.

“You undid the work he spent *decades* to achieve, all within a single month.”

“*Careful*, Sirellius. To my ears that sounded very close to traitorous speech.”

“My Liege, you may take the head from my shoulders if you wish, but know that with my death, so too yours will follow.” Realising that he held the King’s life in his hands as surely as the Daemon held his, he had grown bold, bordering on suicidally-insolent.

Patrych’s perfect features twisted into a scowl, but he knew the truth Sirellius spoke, after all, he had kept him away from the throne hall when Octavio had come calling at the gates. He had planned it all. Vile he might be, but no fool was he.

“You will prepare my soldiers for war.”

“Thousands will die, all to please your greed.”

“I don’t care.”

“Very well, my Liege. It will be done.”

“I will kill Octavio myself.”

“You intend to lead the army?”

“A ruler leads from the fore, Sirellius,” King Patrych patronised him. The Patrych that Sirellius had known, before he died of syphilis and was resurrected by Jakob the Summoner, had been a slothful lecher unfit to even lift a sword, let alone lead accomplished soldiers to battle. More than just his body had been brought back from the beyond the gates of Death, as the *thing* that now called itself King was not the man he had known, but rather a twisted facsimile.

“I will gather a host to do you honour. It will please them to follow you to war, my Liege.”

Though it had been risky, Jakob had, with the help of Wothram, slain two more destitutes. To confuse the diligent guards however, he had left a confusing scene behind, which was sure to point them towards another doctor in town, who already seemed to have a habit of killing some of his patients, when they could not pay him, and harvesting their organs for profit.

After about a week of assiduous work every night from when his clinic closed and until dawn, he had produced a bone puppet that could convincingly pass for human, when clothed. It was shaped

like a woman, with similar proportions to Pernille, though slightly shorter, so as to not be very intimidating. Its face was a static mask with lidded eyes and a thin-lipped smile. It was equipped with fingers that each contained various tools, such as bone scalpels, scoops, saws, and such. Additionally, it could release slender blades from its forearms, if it was forced into a fight, which could be utilised similarly to how Holm had used his blades, though these were better at stabbing than slashing.

The truly-ingenious aspect of the puppet, however, was its ability to work as the vessel for any soul-core slotted into the recess below its shoulder-blades. Additionally, a Birthed Sentience occupied the hollow of its head, which would observe and study whatever actions the puppet performed, so that it later could be swapped for the soul-core and eliminate the need for a contract-bound demon to be involved.

As for the soul-core, an expensive glass ball, it lay before him, at the centre of a pentagon adjoining the septagram on the floor of the third-floor laboratorium. Unlike when he summoned Mercilla directly into the Flesh-Hulk, he was going to first summon the demon and then form the contract that bound it to the soul-core. This way, if an interruption to the initial summoning happened, it would not ruin his construct that he had spent a lot of time making and which parts were hard-won, despite being from tainted samples.

"Wothram, the barrel, if you would."

The Golem carried the blood-filled barrel over to him, setting it by his right elbow.

Jakob took a deep breath of his scent-mask, before taking it off and stuffing it into a pocket of his apron. Then he plunged his right arm into the metre-deep barrel. He lifted his left palm towards the septagram, and then intoned the ritual in the lilting speech of the demons.

"*Scorned and slighted, hated and despised!*"

"*Zelesti of Vicious Spite, heed me well!*"

"*Let manifest thy wretched visage!*"

"*Obey my harkening call!*"

A sick green light filled the room and a disgusting creature ambled forth from the rend in the dimensional wall between the realms of man and demon. It was vaguely female in figure and sense, but its triple-jointed and pestilent arms and legs made it seem more like the nightmarish creatures that invoking a Great One Above occasionally manifested as a by-product.

The contract inscribed along the lines of the septagram lit up as the gaze of the demon passed over them, and, then, it tilted its horned cyclopean head to regard him.

"*I get fed?*"

"You will be fed blood, and the despair and suffering of my patients, so long as you cure and save them."

A thick metre-long purple tongue snaked out the bottom of its malformed and narrow head and swiped away a glob of yellow pus forming below its one eye.

"*I accept this contract.*"

Jakob felt the blood around his fingers within the barrel swirl around until it became a vortex of motion and started bleeding out the walls of the container impossibly, flying in curling thin streamers through the air before connecting with the soul-core glass orb, which swallowed it all, despite physically being incapable of containing such a volume. In the same moment, the abominable Envy Demon was sucked from the central pentagram and into the core within the pentagon.

When both the Demon and blood were gone, the light of the ritual faded. The glass orb had taken on a murky-green hue and a single black eye with its glowing-green diamond pupil swivelled around within.

Jakob breathed a sigh of relief, then found his scent-mask and reattached it to his face. Envy Demons were pernicious at the best of times, but he had decided on Zelesti for two reasons: Firstly, and most simply, he had never before summoned a Demon of Envy; and, secondly, they were uniquely suited to the task he wanted, as the pain and suffering of Jakob's patients would please them greatly, thus eliminating the need for much additional reward.

Zelesti was a Squire of Vicious Spite, so a modestly-powerful demon, but still several orders of magnitude weaker than Raleigh had been. But unless properly warded against, even the weakest Envy Demons could inflict debilitating sicknesses, such as gangrene, tuberculosis, cataracts, dementia, insanity, and other horrible ailments. Given that Envy Demons hated and despised everything, they were extremely difficult to sway to servitude unless their specific temperament was accommodated.

He had only thought to use such a demon as his surgery assistant because it was said that Envy Demons could often be found in hospitals and surgery wards, whenever they manifested in the Mundane Realm, as they were innately drawn to suffering and despair. Similarly, Wrath Demons were drawn to battlefields, as they lusted for the intense moment between life and death. Occasionally, Pride Demons could also be found on battlefields, as they were boastful creatures who enjoyed displaying their mastery of weapons.

Grandfather had told him that the realm of the Proud Saint was full of towering peaks and mountains, upon the tops of which the strongest of their kind stared down disdainfully at their weaker brethren, who fought endlessly at the feet of these colossal structures.

The Realm of the Coveting Saint was sure to be far more brutal a place, though he had never heard it described by Grandfather nor in any of the ancient tomes he had read during his apprenticeship. Given that the Envious Demons clearly venerated the Flayed Lady, he imagined their realm was full of constant betrayal and backstabbing. And the fact that many of their kind were as despicable in form as Zelesti, it made him wonder why it was said that the strongest Demons of the Seventh Realm of Vice were beautiful beings without equal, who could slay mortals with a single gaze upon their visages. If not for the tremendous risk associated with their kind, he would have liked to investigate more.

Jakob shelved these ponderings for now and walked over to his newly-crafted soul-core. As he lifted it from the floor, he felt a piercing cold spike through his gloves, scalding his skin below. He ignored the pain and carried it to where his construct-puppet lay face-down on a worktable.

After shifting the plate keeping the recess in its back inaccessible, he inserted the glass orb, the ritual lines and blocky script within lighting with the accursed green glow of the Envy Demon. He shut the plate closed again, then took a step away from the prone construct.

It was only a few moments before Zelesti began to explore the physical world with the limbs of the puppet. Slowly, the puppet pushed itself off the slab and waddled across the floor to where a partially-assembled construct of rodent and dog bones lay. With a *click*, the blades in both of her arms popped free and Zelesti began smashing and slicing the bones while cackling to herself.

"Enough!" Jakob demanded.

The demon-puppet froze mid-slam, then twisted its head all the way around on the neck socket to look at him with the lidded eyes of its static mask-face.

"I need only speak a word and your control of the construct will vanish."

Zelesti leaned back from the mess she had made, then turned her body around so that it too faced Jakob. With the slender blades still out, she took two slow steps towards him. There was a predatory aura emanating from her.

He knew she was testing him. She was unable to hurt him, as per the contract, but Envy Demons were fond of intimidation tactics. Even if she could not harm him, he might act rashly if he believed she could, and *that* was something for the demon to exploit.

"If you do not put away those blades, I will take your soul-core and bury it at the bottom of a well."

She took another step towards him, not obeying.

"I also know an Undying Daemon, who will devour your soul, if I ask."

There did not follow another threatening step, but instead the blades retracted back into her forearms and locked with another *click.*

It said something when even Envy Demons feared a Daemon like Guillaume.

They had crossed the Lleman border a while back, the forest known now as the Heartblack Forest despite ostensibly being the same forest that Novarocians called the Goeten Wilds on the Helmsgarten side.

Though Ciana deemed herself tireless, she was beginning to falter from the pace set by Heskel, who urged her forward every time she slowed even marginally. She was unsure what exactly he was, as he seemed human in nature and temperament, but smelled oddly like flowers and demons, and had the ceaseless stamina of an undead serf.

For some reason, she wanted to impress him though, so she kept pushing herself to the limit, even as her body screamed in protest. Even as the long shadows of the evening fell across the forest. Even as hunger and thirst ravaged her from within.

Just a few hours more, she told herself.

When they eventually escaped the canopies of the Heartblack Forest, they came out into untamed farmland that, due to decades of border squabbles, had been deemed too contentious to set up fields of crops and cattle in.

They moved through the thick grass and wild flowers wet with morning dew, before eventually they saw the outskirts of Svalberg and its Academy in the distant horizon.

Ciana was grateful when Heskel bid her halt.

Surprisingly, he handed her a bladder made from the skin of a human, and which was full of blood.

"**Drink.**"

Though she had never before considered imbibing the lifeblood of humans, she obliged and quickly found herself draining the pouch to the very last drop, the coppery tang of the lukewarm liquid filling her belly to bursting.

Within a minute, however, the blood seemed to absorb through her stomach lining and into her body, flooding her with renewed vigour and strength.

"**Elphin share many of the Demons' strengths, but none of their weaknesses.**"

"I have never before drunk blood," she replied. "I had no idea it held so much untapped power."

Heskel simply nodded.

"Now what?"

"**Must find name.**"

"What kind of name?" she asked, though truthfully she had some idea, given where they were heading.

"**Daemon of Lust and Pride.**"

"Daemon?"

He grunted in affirmation.

"Are they mixed breed, like me? Like Elphin?"

"**Yes, but their powers are unique and dangerous.**"

"Why do you need the name of such a creature?"

"**The Great Undertaking.**"

"I don't know what that means."

With a gentle nudge of his large hand against her back, he pushed her forward. "**To Academy. Lead.**"

"But I don't know where they keep such names…"

Heskel made a sound, like an audible frown.

"I haven't been there since I was a child."

"**Lead.**"

Despite not knowing where exactly to go, she strode forward with powerful steps, transitioning into a full-on sprint within moments. She did not want to let him down, even though he was a stranger. Because, somehow, he knew more about her and her kind than she herself had gleaned from nearly a century of being alive. Something instinctively told her that she needed him to fulfil the desire that all Elphin shared. The one thing that all living creations of their world shared beyond the inevitability of death: the instinctual need to attain immortality for their species through procreation.

The Academy was smaller than she recalled from her past, but, then again, memories formed as a terrified child had a way of morphing into something larger and more terrifying every time they were relived in nightmares and day-terrors.

Regardless, the Svalberg Academy was still a towering edifice of large windowless wings and many overlapping and non-sensical floors that were accessible through exterior walkways that connected in ways that begot insanity in those seeking to make sense of the layout.

Ciana wracked her mind, trying to locate even the merest glimpse of those traumatic years in which she might have seen or heard about where they kept the names of their many summoned and yet-to-be-summoned demons. She recalled vast libraries and crypts full of macabre paraphernalia. But many of the more pertinent memories were overshadowed by the self-protective fog of amnesia that her child-mind had created to keep her fragile sanity intact.

"They have… libraries… I think."

Heskel grunted understandingly, then walked to one of the walls of the easternmost wing where they had been able to sneak up close without being noticed by the floating imp-lights that patrolled the grounds of manicured hedges and flowerbeds.

With a couple punches he broke down the stone bricks and made a hole big enough for both of them to crawl walk through.

Barely a minute passed before they were swarmed by demonic sentries and irate Magisters, but the Brute shrugged off all their magical attacks with his bare flesh, and those errant strays that found their way to Ciana were repelled by the robe he had given her to wear.

She quickly drew her sword and moved forward with her companion, laying into the successors of her erstwhile torturers and their misbegotten demon slaves.

Just like when the Brute had fought her, he proved an unstoppable force that slew every challenger with frightening ease, though Ciana also made a show of her own excellence with the blade and the mastery of combat honed through many desperate years on the run.

As they mowed down the sentries of weak imps and laggard golems, while moving through the ornate halls of austere architecture and maniacal decoration, Ciana was assaulted by the memories of her childhood.

She remembered the lashings of tails and the burning tongues and frigid claws of the imp-slaves that abused her when the Magisters left them to their own devices. She remembered the way some of the female professors and students would ingratiate their way into her life, treating her momentarily as someone worth loving and adoring, only for the rug to be pulled away and it being revealed that they were toying with her.

With the sword her father had left behind, when she returned to their village and found him slain for cavorting with demons, she carved a bloody crest through the eastern wing of the academy. Tears streamed down her cheeks, stinging her skin like boiling water, but she did not relent for a moment, feeling the cathartic release of decades'-worth of hate be released with this ritualistic cleansing of her once-was sadistic masters. Though most of her torturers were no doubt long deceased, it did not matter, for their spirit resided in their successors and in the very fundament of the Academy.

Ciana vowed to burn it all down.

They eventually found their way to a vast library, once no more sentries or Magisters and their students contested their passage.

With a passing glance, Heskel decided that the hundreds of rows of shelves lined with books were all useless. In truth, she did not care if he found his prize or not. He had become her means to this new desire she had unearthed.

With a lit torch, she ran down the length of the repository, letting cleansing fire devour ancient treatises and dissertations on demons, unwieldy tomes of the Academy's long history, biographies of self-proclaimed experts in esoteric fields, and other texts that did not deserve to be studied.

When she left the hall, with Heskel in tow, the Brute made a sound of discontent.

"What?"

"**Fear the one who burns the texts of history, for they ignore the lessons of the past.**"

"I don't care," she replied honestly.

"**Not all knowledge is worth the paper on which it is written,**" he continued, contradicting his previous statement.

"Are you quoting someone?"

Heskel nodded. "**My Father and my Master are at odds. Their philosophies are at war.**"

"You said your father is the one who holds Elphin sacred? Can I meet him?"

"**Once, I would have brought you to him. Today, however, he is sick and disturbed. My Master will be a more benevolent teacher of what you seek.**"

"Sick? Do you seek to cure him? Is that why you want to find this Daemon's name?"

Heskel shook his head. "**Not all sickness can be cured. The Name I seek, I seek on behalf of my Master.**"

"When we have found you this Name, and made Svalberg a land of ash, I will follow you to your Master."

XXXII

Naught but black smoke and fiendish heat lived in the east wing following Ciana's spirited journey through its halls, torching all that she came across.

Heskel followed close behind as they crossed the threshold into the centre hall, where an organised assembly of demon-slaves and imp sentries surrounded a score of Magisters and their students. Before the defence could charge and corner them, as smoke and flames followed eagerly at their backs, the Brute lifted both his palms at the nearly-sixty-strong ensemble.

"**Stay behind me.**"

Ciana obeyed dutifully, having no idea what he was about to do. A few impatient bolts of fire and ice flew past them, though, as a whole, the assembly seemed content to let them surrender and beg for mercy, knowing how many of them were sure to die if they challenged the pair in open combat.

A deep hum emanated from Heskel, and, though she did not understand his alien language, she felt the meaning reverberate in her chest as he sung out-loud the words of his spell:

"***Nwetrou, Dweller of the Deep, I come bearing gifts to the mouth of your cave!***"

"***Nwetrou, Devourer of Suns, I have brought to your event horizon a feast for the ages!***"

"***Nwetrou, Leviathan of Leviathans, I pray you will gorge yourself upon my offering!***"

"***Nwetrou, open thy Devouring Maw!***"

The air froze in Ciana's lungs, and, for the merest of moments, she saw herself and all that surrounded her lifted off the floor, as an instant surge of water flooded the grand hall. When she blinked, she was on the floor again, nothing different than just a second prior. But then she looked up and saw an enormous shadow swim across the floor, cast by some creature that was invisible to her eyes.

A loud *slap* came as Heskel smacked his hands together, and then the shadow manifested into reality, tearing through the veil that separated everything logical from everything antithetical to reason.

When Ciana witnessed the Entity, it birthed a migraine that felt like ice-cold nails hammered through her cranium, and she felt blood drip eagerly from her nostrils, as well as burning tears running down her cheeks.

Legions upon legions of eyes, each with the complexity of a galaxy, studded the side of the Leviathan as it broke through the floor, its shadowy skin shedding brackens and underwater plants that immediately turned to water upon contact with reality. Large fins covered in strange flexible protrusions ran down its underside and a single giant fin ran down the length of its spine. Below the bottom of its maw, which opened around the entire group of Magisters, demons, students, and imps, were hundreds of tentacle-like feelers that looked almost like a beard. Above its top jaw were even more eyes. She was terrified at how many of them looked upon her and Heskel, an unfathomable intelligence scrutinising them.

With a tectonic blow that sent a devastating shockwave across the entire Academy and environs, the Leviathan snapped shut its great maw, before diving back into the floor again and leaving behind nothing except a dark bottom-less pond where before had stood a formidable defence barring their passage.

Ciana took a single step back, but found all the strength in her body drained and the migraine taking hold—

She awoke in the arms of Heskel, who seemed to have travelled far across the Academy grounds since summoning the otherworldly Entity in the centre hall.

"What… happened?"

The Brute came to a halt and set her down on her own two feet, though it took a few minutes for her regain her balance.

"**Chthonic Hymn,**" he answered.

"You summoned that *thing*?"

Heskel nodded. "**Nwetrou is the Lord of the Depths. By invoking him, an aperture to his realm is born. Svalberg will be swallowed by water.**"

Ciana was not sure she truly understood what he meant, though it seemed that he had acquiesced to her selfish demand of destroying the Academy, though not by turning it to ash, but rather by feeding it to some otherworldly Devourer.

"If it will be flooded, don't we have to hurry?"

"**The aperture to his depths will be slow to expand. Time is nothing to a Great One.**"

She looked around and realised where they were.

"Are we going to check the crypts next?"

The Brute nodded and they set off down the northern wing.

Jakob sampled the newest selection of pastries and cakes that Pernille had brought, while carefully sipping the scalding tea she had made over the fireplace.

"*This one* is excellent," Jakob remarked, lifting the half-eaten cake in the air.

"I thought you might like that one. Unfortunately, only one baker in town knows how to make it, and he only makes it once per week, as it is apparently quite labour intensive. It's called a *Fragilité*."

"And the tea?"

"Lemon, blood-orange, and camellia."

Jakob had never tried such peculiar flavours before. Pernille was truly his guide in the world of acquiring new tastes. Ever since meeting her and having her prepare these afternoon teas and cakes for him every day, he had completely lost the desire to eat corpse-meal ever again.

"Erm, Magister…"

"Yes, Pernille."

"Would your… *assistant*… like some too?"

Jakob twisted around in his chair and saw Zelesti leant against the doorway to the stairs leading down to the consultation room. Though the construct, into which he had planted the Demon's soul, possessed an inexpressible face, he could easily read her body language and the reluctant desire she exuded, wanting to be included in their afternoon tea.

"Zelesti. You don't have a mouth."

"*I care not.*"

Jakob scratched his stubble. Envy Demons were like petulant children it seemed. Their bothersome personalities certainly explained why Grandfather had opted not to introduce him to such a demon during his training.

"Pernille, would you mind getting another cup?"

"Of course, Magister."

The Receptionist quickly found another cup, teaspoon, saucer, dessert plate, and pastry fork. After setting them on the knitted tablecloth, she fetched a chair from one of the backrooms on the second floor that she used for storage.

When she returned with the chair, Zelesti stalked over and took a seat, her lithe and dainty puppet-form undermined by her unhinged mannerisms. After having tea poured in her cup and a slice of gooseberry tart served on her plate, Zelesti stared at Jakob and Pernille for a while, as they themselves indulged in their desserts and beverages.

"More?" Pernille asked, when Jakob had drained his cup. He gave her his cup and she refilled it with a smile.

Meanwhile, Zelesti stared between the two of them, observing their interactions and the ways they moved. Then she eventually lifted the cup to her sculptured lips, pretended to drink, and settled the cup on the saucer.

"*Aaaah.*"

Next she lifted the tart to her mouth, getting crumbs and gooseberry jam all over her chest and mask.

"*Delicious,*" the demon announced, mimicking their behaviour like a child.

Jakob sighed and scratched his stubble absentmindedly.

"Pernille."

"Yes, Magister?"

"Would you mind buying me a razor when you go out next?"

When they reached the stairs leading down into the depths below the Academy, Ciana froze as the terrors of her childhood assailed her once again and she felt her resolution falter. She did not want to venture down those steps, because an irrational fear told her that she would not ever leave if she did.

Heskel's massive hand pushed her lower back forward. It was an impatient and cold-hearted gesture, but in it lay a proud strength that seemed to promise that nothing could harm them.

Ciana took a deep breath and then took the stairs one at a time, while the Brute moved ahead of her with echoing steps that sounds like bellowing drums as they reverberated down into the underworld.

After what felt like an hour, they reached a plateau at the foot of the stairwell and were greeted by a long serpentine hall that seemed to run back down the way they had travelled above ground. Along the way, the crypt was lit by eerie white flames that, despite their peculiar composition, scarcely gave off any light.

"This is different from how I remember it," she said. During her interment within the crypts, they had been merely a short hall that ended in an oval chamber. She considered that perhaps her memory was flawed, but when she looked at the stones, they seemed to have been laid recently, with the ones underfoot barely scuffed, unlike the ones of the two wings they had crossed, where the marbled stone was worn smooth.

They eventually reached a dead-end in front of which stood two immobile human-like statues. The Brute wasted no time, charging straight for the rightmost one, but before his fist could pulverise its head, the twin statues awoke with a reddish hue suffusing their sculpted bodies like a second skin.

The right statue caught the Brute's fist and slammed its free hand into his head with such force that, when Heskel's face met the stone wall, the stones cracked from the impact. He quickly grabbed

the next punch aimed at his mask, and, with a show of his tremendous strength, lifted the statue into the air, before slamming it down on his knee, splitting the dense body in half.

Ciana had only managed to scratch the other statue guardian with her sword and had realised that her skills were no match for a body that could not be cut, so she devoted all of her attention to simply avoiding its devastating attacks.

After breaking the guardian in half, Heskel crushed its head with his heel and, with a series of punches, reduced the one that Ciana was fighting to clumps of inert stone.

She nodded her thanks, before wondering out-loud, "What do we do now?"

Heskel looked around the dead-end, then began sniffing the air. Ciana quickly imitated him and caught the scent on the stagnant air. It seemed to be coming through the walls.

"Can you break down this wall?" she asked, pointing to the dead-end.

He walked right up to the wall and slammed his fists into it, though, aside from an echo that travelled down the length of the serpentine tunnel, nothing seemed to happen. Unperturbed, however, he continued wailing on the wall, until the same reddish light that had been emanating from the statue guardians began to appear in a spider-web pattern all over the stones. For a couple of minutes, Heskel pounded on the wall with tireless single-mindedness, before his efforts bore fruit in an explosion of light and the total disintegration of the stone wall.

As the dead-end wall fell apart, a large octagonal room was revealed, within which a solitary figure was chained to the ground with chains of stone covered in demonic script that glowed with an inner light. In the far end of the room, three Magisters cowered behind an overturned desk.

The trio cast a barrage of spells at them, but Ciana quickly moved across the space, giving the central figure a wide berth, before cutting them apart in a masterful display of swordsmanship.

Behind the upturned desk and dead Magisters, stood a handful of bookcases and shelves, which were brimming with strange-looking tomes, crumbled parchment rolls, and pages so ancient they seemed as though a gentle breeze would break them apart.

Ciana had assumed the Brute would immediately join her to study the texts, as this seemed their best bet at finding what he was looking for. Instead, however, he was standing before the chained figure in the middle of the room.

"What's wrong?" she called.

He did not have yell for his voice to reach her. "**Elphin.**"

Ciana felt a spike of ice pierce her body at the word. She had not even noticed. She set down the leather-covered tome she had been holding and came over to where he stood.

She was unsure how Heskel had realised the figure was an Elphin, as its horns had been torn off, its hands and hooves were removed, and, most crucially, its wing was missing. An Elphin without its wing was a soulless husk, she had seen it enough times to know that the pitiable creature before them was not long for this world.

It was hard to tell if she was looking at a male or female Elphin, given the young age of the chained figure, but she assumed it was female.

"Why does she smell like—?"

"**A Daemon…**"

"Is that what they smell like?"

Heskel nodded.

The scent was like a mixture of all the demons she had had the misfortune of scenting over her lifetime, but there was also an underlying fragment of something else. Demons generally smelled

according to the Vices they exemplified, meaning those of Pride, like Ciana's mother, had a regal and authoritative smell to them, while those of Wrath smelled like blood and ash.

Ciana could distinguish both of these smells, as well as the smells of burnt fat, cloying decay, acrid metal, ozone, lavender and roses, but also *that* peculiar fragment of something utterly alien.

When the creature opened its eyes, the right one held two pupils that moved independently of each other, red and emerald green, and the left eye was milky-white.

"What happened to her?" she asked.

"**Mass possession.**"

"Possession? As in Demons?"

Heskel nodded solemnly. "**Elphin sacred. For this, Nwetrou is too kind a punishment.**"

"What should we do with her?"

He shook his head gravely. She understood what that meant.

XXXIII

After putting the disfigured and possessed Elphin out of her misery and thereby releasing the many souls within her, the Brute went over to the old tomes and scrolls. He spent a long time going through it all, but then he found what he was searching for. A scroll with a list of Daemon names and what seemed like short descriptions of them and how to summon them.

"Have you found the Name you seek?"

He grunted affirmatively.

"So, what now?"

"**Summon here.**"

Ciana took an involuntary step back in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"**This Daemon peculiar. Must do it here.**"

She spent a few agonising moments wondering if she had helped someone who was exactly the same as the Magisters that had experimented on her and killed so many others like her. She eventually came to a conclusion and steeled herself.

"What can I do to help?" she asked.

"**Can you read?**"

"Not well, no," she replied. She knew how to speak Lleman, Novarocian, and Demonic, but she had never fully learnt to read any of the languages, picking up only the words and such from Lleman and Novarocian that were necessary for her solitary life of staying away from major population centres.

Heskel grunted, but then came to some decision. "**Repeat after me as I work.**"

She nodded and followed him to the centre, where the lifeless Elphin girl lay, the chains removed from her and the pervasive stench of the possessing demons gone.

To her immense dismay, Heskel's 'work' turned out being the skinning of the Elphin using a ritual knife taken from one of the dead Magisters.

"What are you doing!?"

"**Necessary.**"

"Didn't you say Elphin are sacred to you!?"

He did not turn from his task, knelt before the lifeless body and carefully and methodically moving the blade to loosen the top layer of skin from the dermis below. Then he began to speak, as though quoting someone, "**Listen well. We honour the dead by using every part of their bodies. We use their bones for blades and tools. We use their skin for clothes and bags. We use their tissue and organs for offerings. We use their blood for rituals and rites. To let decay have the dead is to eternally damn them.**"

"I… but…"

"**Repeat after me,**" he then said, brokering no argument, before reciting some strange litany that, even with her understanding of Demonic, was almost incomprehensible.

She continued to repeat the litany, like a prayer, over-and-over, while he worked the harvested skin of the Elphin into some strange shape with his bare hands and muttered esoteric hymns.

After a few hours of repeating the litany, she had memorised it perfectly, and the Brute had worked the Elphin skin into a beautiful, albeit terrifying, mask of hardened grey leather covered in white splotches.

Unlike the tanneries Ciana had had the misfortune of coming across, Heskel's work was odourless and impossible to look away from, in the same way that observing woodworkers had in the past spellbound her.

After the Elphin Mask was completed, the Brute took the body and moved it to the back of the room, near the dead Magisters and the ancient texts. He then drew out a large pattern on the floor where the Elphin had been chained to earlier, using the blood of the three Magisters as paint and a brush made from their hair.

Ciana stepped back towards one of the walls so that she could take in the entire thing. It was both haunting and alluring in equal measure. The linework was flawless despite the crude tool in his hand and the patterns were eye-catching, with the crimson lines stark against the grey stone floor. She had seen some rituals in the past when she was a prisoner of the Academy, but none had been as complex nor as masterfully painted.

In the centre of the symbol was a strange sigil that looked like a septagram drawn incorrectly, except it had been made with deliberate care, despite the fact that the lines did not cross like they were supposed to and there were several more lines crisscrossing the points of the star than necessary. She also found the lack of candles confusing, as she had always assumed these were necessary for such rituals.

At the centre of this bizarre septagram was a small circle, wherein the Elphin mask had been placed. Another ring surrounded the outer circle of the septagram, without connecting to it, and from this circle sprouted four wing-like triangles, within which were written the curly script of demonic, though to what end she had no way of knowing, illiterate as she were.

She wandered over to where Heskel was re-reading the scroll he had found.

"What now?"

"**Need more blood.**"

"Why?"

"**Offering.**"

Like two avenging spirits, Heskel and Ciana scoured the last two wings of the Academy for survivors who had not yet made the wise decision of running for the hills.

They eventually found a half-dozen students, who they easily killed and drained of their blood, but even all their blood was apparently not enough for the Brute, who carried squelching skin-pouches sloshing with lifeblood as they continued hunting.

Towards the end of the day they found about a dozen more Magisters and students, who were hiding amongst animal pens holding slaves. Ciana was both relieved and troubled by the fact that all the slaves were humans, as she had secretly been holding out hope of rescuing a young Elphin after they had been forced to slay the girl in the crypt out of mercy.

Heskel had broken the locks on the pens, but left the human livestock unharmed. After draining the bodies and having to construct another pouch for holding the many litres of blood, the Brute started back towards the crypt, while Ciana told the frightened prisoners which way to go to escape the Academy and find civilisation. Many of them were so emaciated that she doubted they would survive long, but hope had a way of sustaining people beyond their natural limits, so anything was possible.

Once they were back within the confines of the crypt, Heskel constructed a large trough that circled around the summoning sigil, by gouging-in the floor. He poured the fifty-plus-litres of blood into this hastily-made trench, so that there were now three rings to the entire painting, the outer one obviously being the largest.

With this final step done, he took Ciana by the hand, and they stepped over the trough so that they stood before the second ring with the four wings. He bade her kneel on the stone before the drawing, then he drew a ring large enough for both of them to fit in, before drawing a line that connected their ring to the trench and then through the second ring and connecting to the septagram.

He took her hands and put them on the dry linework in front of them and then said,

"**Recite.**"

Ciana took a deep breath, drawing the memorised litany from her mind, then, with careful attention to the syllables and the sing-song flow of the demonic tongue, she began to recite.

"*Belamouranthyne, heed my singing bell!*"

"*Lady Legion, whose gaze enthrals even Kings, see what offerings I brought!*"

"*Belladonna Flower, O how I long to taste thou essence, let me witness thy blooming!*"

"*Belamouranthyne, I sound the bells of ecstasy and rapturous merry, let their sounds carry thee forth! Let thy illustrious figure manifest in this realm that is thine by right! Let these humble eyes of mine behold thy splendour!*"

Immediately, the blood in the trench around them started lifting into the air above them like a sentient crimson wave, before surging into the very centre of the summoning sigil, which was glowing a soft violet along its lines. The blood began swirling around like a waterspout within the septagram and reached all the way to the ceiling, but the chaos quickly settled and fell inward, taking on the form of a voluptuous female figure, who was holding the Elphin Mask aloft. The gaze of this born-of-blood figure moved over them, before settling on the script within the four wings of the second circle. As it read the text, the letters set alight in a violet fire and became charred black.

Then there came a melodramatic sigh, followed by a voice that reminded Ciana of a prostitute she had once known. "***To be summoned by an untouchable sort such as you… But, alas, I find your contract favourable. May you use me well, half-spawn.***"

Then the figure of blood was pulled into the Elphin Mask and vanished from sight. The mask, which had been held between her fingers, clattered to the floor, seeming to have gained a significant amount of mass from the completion of the ritual.

Neither Heskel nor Ciana moved for a few minutes after, even though the violet glow was gone, and the crimson linework had become coal-black.

The Brute was the first to stand and take a step out of their circle, and she thought she saw a moment of hesitation from him, as though he feared what they had brought into the world.

He turned and seemed to regard her with newfound respect.

"**Well done.**"

XXXIV

He was in the middle of patching up a patient's mid-section, when there came a polite knock on the door to his consultation room.

"Zelesti, if you wouldn't mind?"

The Demon-construct waddled over to the door and opened it, coming directly face-to-face with Pernille. She let out a tiny squeal, which seemed to amuse the Demon.

"Am I disturbing, Magister?" she asked, after regaining her composure.

"Not at all. What is it?"

"There's someone here to visit you…"

"Is it Guillaume?"

"Yes, and he has brought friends…"

"Let them in."

"Of course, Magister."

Moments later, a black-eyed Guillaume entered, six of him in total. He was familiar with the visage of the corpse-doll that had travelled with him and Heskel to Rooskeld, but the other five figures, two men and three women, were all new to him.

Jakob waved Zelesti over to him and bade her finish up with the patient. For once, the Envy Demon seemed happy to oblige, perhaps sensing the true nature of Guillaume. Wothram stood stock-still in the background, and two of the five figures were staring intently at him, perhaps sensing an ember of the Eternal Serpent within his Birthed Sentience.

"Is there a problem?" Jakob asked, as he wiped his gloves with a cloth to remove the blood.

The red-haired corpse-doll stared up into the ceiling, as though watching something. Jakob followed his gaze, but sensed nothing.

"**…we are being…observed…**"

On pure instinct, Jakob's right glove turned into a vicious set of claws. "You fool! Why would you bring its attention here! Nothing can observe *me* directly, I have made sure of it!"

It had been merely a whim. A way to destress from the planning of war. Some minor fancy that he thought might help him sleep better at night, but now it was revealed to be far more than that.

Sirellius had used his scrying bowl to learn where his once-favourite servant had gone. It had pained him to see that smiling boy be overtaken by the Undying Daemon, but he had kept him around for sentimental reasons, and so his absence was noticeable, even after a different mind occupied his body.

He had hoped to learn that his former servant was going around exploring the metropolis on behalf of Guillaume, but when he had looked into the water of his clay bowl, he had seen a different place entirely, one which he knew quite well from his extensive dealings with its noble-born: Rooskeld.

He had watched the corpse-puppet move around the streets, gathering other converted puppets to itself, before going into some nondescript uptown clinic. Once in there, he had recognised Count Bastian's niece, Pernille, who seemed to be working as a receptionist. But then things had taken a turn, as he had seen, from his bird's-eye-view, a bone construct open the door to the main operating

room of the clinic, and within this room stood a figure in strange robes, but who was unmistakably Jakob the Summoner.

In the same moment that the realisation had struck him, the corpse-puppet of his former servant had looked straight into Sirellius eyes, as though capable of viewing him through his scrying waters. It took him a second to realise that it was not something the Daemon was capable of, but, rather, the other corpse-puppet who was standing in the room behind Sirellius was the modus by which the Daemon could see itself.

With reflexes he thought himself too old to possess, he whirled around and cast an incantation that sent a spear of translucent mist straight into the corpse-puppet behind him. When the magic subsided, a large hole had opened through the face of this once-human figure, and black blood gushed from it as it collapsed to the floor, well-and-truly dead, finally.

Sirellius did not waste a moment to rouse the Royal Guard of the castle, and, within four days, they had hunted down every last one of Guillaume's corpse-puppets in Helmsgarten. They had also secured his vessel in the castle tombs, so that no more Undying Slaves could be created, and a large contingent of Knights were formed under Major Tress and sent towards Rooskeld, with orders to kill every black-eyed corpse-puppet they encountered, as well apprehending the Fleshcrafter. Though it was insubordination, Sirellius had told Tress that she would not be punished if the Boy was to perish in their captivity.

It had taken every ounce of Jakob's self-control to not immediately slay Guillaume and his manifold undead mannequins. There was no doubt in his mind that the Daemon wished to bring the attention of the Crown back onto Jakob, so that he could utilise his many seeded-and-prepared soon-to-be puppets and ingratiate himself with Jakob.

As the Undying Daemon prepared for war in Rooskeld, awakening its hundreds of subjects created through Jakob's giving of the blood pellets to his patients, Jakob himself finalised preparations to gather the Branch from the Sacred Grove.

In an uncharacteristic move, he urged Pernille and her uncle to travel to Lleman to visit relatives, and though the Receptionist seemed unwilling, she trusted his judgement and obliged.

Three days after Guillaume's transgression, Heskel returned to Rooskeld. Jakob greeted him thankfully, when he entered the third-floor laboratorium next-door to the clinic.

The Wight lingered by the doorway for a moment, his naked multi-hued skin exposed completely, which concerned Jakob, as he thought his quest might have not borne fruit. But then Heskel urged someone behind him forward, and a woman entered, wearing his demon-skin poncho, which covered her entire figure and sagged deflated in the shoulders.

It took him a moment to notice her peculiar appearance, but then he nodded, pleased with his Lifeward. He put a hand on his chest and addressed the newcomer.

"My name is Jakob," he said in Demonic. "I have not met an Elphin before."

The woman bowed deeply and then replied, in a shaky tone, "I am Ciana. I am here by the grace of your manservant."

"You do not need to bow before me, Ciana. And Heskel is not my servant, he is my protector and companion."

Jakob turned to his Lifeward. "Have you succeeded? Have you found a Name we can use?"

Once again, the Wight urged the tiny Elphin with a tap of his hand on her back. She moved forward only a step, but then drew an item from within her borrowed poncho. It was a mask made from human skin, utilising a form of Fleshcraft that Jakob himself had not utilised in ages, but which was capable of turning skin into a rigid form through compounding layers forcefully and utilising Necromantic rites such as Ironflesh, in concert with the Amalgam Hymn.

"What is this?" he asked, hefting the mask in his hand.

"**Tool. Daemon within.**"

"You summoned and sealed a Daemon within this?"

Heskel nodded.

"It seems we were of one mind: I too had considered using a mask as the vessel. Now, tell me more. I wish to hear all about it."

XXXV

Nøgel looked over the railing, staring at the black waters of the ocean, the distant horizon still yet to show signs of land. He felt a tremor travel through the fingers of where the corpse-glove had fused with his flesh, the arcane sigils that had once covered it now fused into the skin of his palm.

Once, he had thought himself cursed, but after living a long life he knew that it was a gift of the greatest proportion. To think that he, who as a boy had been ridiculed for his congenital disability, was now the recipient of cosmic truth and power, was impossible to truly comprehend.

But he had learnt the necessity of keeping his power secret early on. As a result of his guarded nature, he had no one to call a true friend, but, then, such were the possession of weaker men, and he had a higher calling.

Even though he was beloved by poets and bards, treated with respect by Kings and Royals, and adored by the masses, none of it mattered in the face of what was now his true calling. Even the irreplaceable badge on his necklace was like a trinket that a lesser species had fashioned, crude when compared to the majesty of his corpse-glove.

When the Divine spoke directly to his mind, he was called "Envoy", but when the Mundanes referred to him, he was called "Hero". He found the latter a great irony, but as a Rose-Gold Adventurer, a one-in-a-thousandth of a one-in-a-ten-thousandth, he supposed that it was a convenient moniker, if only to grant him passage to all corners of the Mundane Realm, so that he might spread the teachings of his Benefactor to those minds that were receptive, few as they were.

It seemed an odd thing, but, in the Great Game of the Timeless Ones, humans were an important tool for obtaining cosmic power, though, truthfully, Nøgel had no clue as to why. But his place was not to question, only to obey, and he served willingly.

Another tremor flowed through the fingers of his corpse-glove, and he turned instinctively towards the cause of it. The powers in his right hand, gifted to him through cosmic providence, seemed ill at ease when anyone dared lay their eyes on him in anything but adulation, but Nøgel found he did not care. In truth, very little stirred his stone heart, his emotions, good and ill, ground away into nothingness by the decades of harsh non-stop fighting to attain his current rank.

The Captain seemed momentarily stunned by Nøgel's gaze, but then cleared his throat and announced, "Milord, we are approaching pirate waters. We had best stay on guard, as those that hunt these waters are led by Garven the Bloodletter."

Nøgel turned away.

"**Let them come. If they wish for death, I will grant it to them.**"

"As you wish, Milord. We will maintain course for the port of Hillfang."

With a bored sigh, he returned to leaning on the railing.

Whooping cheers and jeering calls sounded off the sides of their small vessel. Even though it was built for speed on the open waters, the nimble boats of the pirates were so much quicker and had easily caught up and surrounded them.

The pirates were spindly and frail, as a life on the open water was not an easy one. Nøgel wondered briefly if most of them had even eaten in the previous two weeks, though it would not matter when he was done dealing with them. In truth, their weak constitutions made his task much simpler since he needed not use much of his power.

Nøgel nodded once to the Captain, who promptly inserted the wax plugs into his ears. Sharm was one of the few people who had witnessed his power and lived, but he was clearly not eager to test his resolve again, which seemed prudent.

With floating steps across the creaking deck of their vessel, Nøgel stepped to the prow, mounting the railing above the simple figurehead of an eyeless Caecilian from which the boat derived her name. He took-in the quarries as they thronged their three sleek ships and waved their poorly-crafted-and-no-doubt-stolen swords in the air, while continuing to berate him. They were not to know their words fell on deaf ears.

"**You have apprehended the vessel bearing a Rose-Gold Adventurer travelling in the business of continental affairs on behalf of the Kingdoms of Heimdale, Helmsgarten, and Lleman!**" he announced to the assembled mass, drawing the unmistakable badge out from under his simple baby-blue linen shirt and woollen black vest.

A tall and scarred figure stepped in front of his men on the central ship, wearing an eager grin. It seemed this was their leader, though he fared no better than his men, and, from the look of him, an illness was eating him from within. Nøgel had seen the same signs enough times before to recognise it as a cancer of some form.

"Prepare to be boarded and hand over your valuables!" the man yelled.

"**If it is food you seek, we have scarcely enough for the final leg of our trip. As for coins and treasure, we carry none aboard.**"

"You misunderstand me, gentle-sir," the man replied haughtily and with a dark grin creasing his ugly jaundiced face. "You lot are not long for this world! They don't call me *Bloodletter* for nothing, after all!"

The pirates all laughed at this, but Nøgel struggled to see the humour in it. Some titles were carried by unworthy shoulders, and it seemed this Bloodletting Garven was no different.

"**You have chosen death,**" he replied. It always seemed fruitless to attempt diplomacy, but it was ingrained in him to try, even if it mostly proved futile.

Before any of them comprehended the gravity of his words, Nøgel lifted the palm of his corpse-glove towards them and invoked his Patron Deity in the arcane tongue:

"***O Keening One, render thy aural onslaught!***"

Nøgel had always wondered what sound this spell of his made, but he doubted it was worth learning, and, given his disability, he would never know, unless The Keening revealed it to his inner ear through which he heard it speak its wisdom.

For many kilometres, the rings in the water would spread from the devastating quakes, and whole settlements of undersea mammals and forest-dwelling birds along the coastline would scatter to the corners of the world, given their sensibility to his gifted power. More locally, the seafloor was vibrated and upturned like in a vicious storm or tsunami, and those who were unprotected against the sound emitted from his sigil-covered hand would be obliterated from within, their corpuses reduced to frail husks and their errant souls fed to his Benefactor as renumeration.

When Nøgel lowered his hand, large splinters floated in the water where once ships had been and hollow bodies lay lifeless amongst the rubble, cored like apples and bobbing on the water, too light to sink. He stepped off the railing and returned to where the Captain cowered, his head in his arms, as though such a thing could protect him.

With a tap, he roused the man.

"**We can continue unimpeded now.**"

The sun was hidden by the mountain range that ran along the western horizon, when Nøgel left the port town of Hillfang atop a zealous young buck, whose antlers must have recently fallen off, given its bare head. Sharm would stay in Hillfang for a couple months, but Nøgel doubted they would be reunited before then, given that his tasks seemed to be of the sort that would not easily be solved. He enjoyed the challenge of diplomatic tasks, despite his unique power being unsuited for anything but total annihilation, but such tasks were always drawn-out.

As the hooves of his eager mount thundered across the understory of a dark forest, he mulled over the missives he had received from his contacts across the continent.

The Pope of the Eight Saint in Heimdale had written frantically about a war brewing between Octland and Helmsgarten, due to the brazen new King of the latter nation. Nøgel knew that Archduke Octavio must surely share some blame as well, given his recalcitrant nature and strict purist mentality. It was always troublesome to deal with his kind, touched and warped as they were by this new upstart Saint of theirs. Saint Olemn had yet to become Vice Incarnate, like the seven Saints before him, but he was still wet behind the ears and, given the history of the previous Septet, it was only a matter of time. Purity was after all just another way to frame authoritative control as something *just*, but the way they dealt with internal matters in their fledgeling principality was demonic in its own uniquely-horrible way. At least their Pope was flexible and accommodating to outside pressure, but perhaps that was also why he resided in Heimdale and not Octland.

His second letter had come from one of his oldest acquaintances' grandchildren, who it seemed was now a Major in the Royal Guard of the Helmsgarten Crown. She had spoken of the brazen murder of the Guild Master of their local branch of the Guild; monsters and demons running amok in the metropolis; a boy who could manifest otherworldly horrors; and a dark secret behind the recent ascension of King Patrych the First.

The final missive concerned a decades-long investigation undertaken by a Gold-Ranker named Harland, whom Nøgel had mentored back when he was still a Gold-Ranker himself. Harland had been obsessed with a bogeyman of mythical proportions, known as the "Wicked Doctor of Lilibeth". In his message, he wrote briefly about his findings, and how he had connected this Wicked Doctor to a different bogeyman two nations distant, who was called "The Llemanian Widowmaker". Of the three messages, this was the matter that interested Nøgel most, given that the incident in Lilibeth half a century prior had exhibited signs of arcane magic that still influenced that region of Heimdale with strange bottomless lakes and entirely-new breeds of invasive wildlife.

He pondered what link there could be between these two bogeymen who operated within the same decade, given that the Widowmaker had simply been a notorious serial-murderer. But Harland had mentioned that he would reveal all that he had gathered when they reunited.

Suddenly, Nøgel's buck began to froth and sputter from the intense strain, and he slowed it to a halt, before dismounting. When he pulled his corpse-glove from its head, it abruptly kicked into a skittered retreat, vanishing amongst the ferns and brush in moments.

While deer were certainly fast, they seemed to tire far quicker than well-bred horses, but it was also not entirely under his control what creature manifested itself to aid him, and he was not one to refuse what the Gift provided him.

Nøgel fired splayed his fingers before curling his right hand into a fist, lifting it above his head, and uttering the litany of "Beckoning Bell".

"***O Keening One, sound the bell that provides to the seeker the aid they require!***"

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

From his curled hand came a susurrating wave that washed over the blackened bark of the nearby trees and ruffled the crisp leaves and brush, vibrating all it crashed against, until, minutes later, reaching the ears of a willing beast-of-burden, which came to find him.

As he beheld the grizzled bear, he wondered if perhaps his Patron was not being a bit too vague in providing suitable aid, but, regardless, he mounted the beast and continued west towards the Octland border.

XXXVI

Ciana remained as still as possible, while Heskel worked the fine brush across her naked skin. When the young Master, Jakob, had informed her what they required for the ritual, she had thought herself moments from being abused by a yet-another sadistic mind.

But, and it was odd for her to admit, given that she was in the centre of Jakob's laboratorium and surrounded by nightmarish 'living' creations of bone-and-flesh, they were being very gentle towards her, in a way that comforted her fragile spirit.

It had been many years since someone last cared for her in a way that did not obviously benefit them. Even her own kind, Elphin with similar sob-stories, had not treated her *this way*.

Without turning her head, so that Heskel's pen would not be disturbed, she asked the Fleshcrafter, "Are you certain this will work?"

Jakob, who was working on the concentric rings and strange symbols that covered the floor they had cleared for the purpose of this ritual, answered a simple, "No."

"What happens if it does not work?" she wondered, dreading the answer. She knew enough about Demonological rituals to know that a wrathful punishment was incurred by those who invoked a flawed ritual, as well as by the participants, unwilling more often than not, who took part.

"Safety measures have been taken, fret not."

"**Worry not, you are safe,**" the Brute concurred.

"You have become very talkative of late," Jakob remarked.

Heskel continued the precise linework over Ciana's abdomen, and only replied with an obstinate grunt. She supressed a shiver as he ran the fine hairs of the pen across her flank and up the small of her back, before connecting the unseen drawing there to a ring around the root of her soul-wing. As always, her wing floated on some unseen wind that was felt by nobody else.

"How do you two know each other," she asked, trying to stop her body from trembling as traumatic memories flooded the front of her mind. Despite all this time, she did not react well to her bare skin being touched. Even something so gentle as a brush…

"Heskel is my Lifeward, gifted to me by Grandfather."

"Lifeward?" She had never heard the word before. "Like a surrogate parent?"

Heskel grunted in what might be considered amusement.

"She has a point," Jakob remarked.

"**A child follows its parent, not the other way.**"

"I would follow you, if that was your desire," he remarked sincerely. The candid way the pair spoke to one another was a type of bond that Ciana ached to possess.

Heskel's brush froze, before lifting from her naked skin, allowing her to release the tension in her body somewhat. She angled her head to view the Brute's masked face. The way he stared intently at the young man made her body ache only more.

"**Truthful?**"

Jakob paused his careful work as well and looked up from where he knelt on the wooden floor. "Would I lie to you? Is *that* my way? Grandfather may have thought you nothing more than a serf, but you are capable of being his successor, but, alas, he is too short-sighted to view you in such a way."

A harsh and guttural staccato emerged from the massive figure. Ciana had never heard a laugh like Heskel's before, but she found she rather enjoyed its genuine mirth.

"**What have you done with Jakob?**"

The young man looked quite taken aback by the reply, peeling his mask off and gazing with deep concern at his companion.

"Heskel… was *that*… was *that* a joke?"

Tress tugged abruptly on the reins of her thoroughbred Cloudvale Charger. The muscular beast dug its hooves into the gravel road, creating deep furrows in its wake. Her two nine-man squads of Guardsmen slowed their own mounts in response, and as one they dismounted and followed the Major to the gate of the fortified village.

Given that their mounts were bred for stamina and the strain of a sustained charge, the party had no need to find respite within the stone walls of this place, unlike the caravaners whose burdens were great and beasts often malnourished and mistreated.

"Major," one of his subordinates began.

"What is it, Arn?"

"Were we not travelling to Rooskeld? Why have we stopped here?"

"Have you hunted a Daemon before, Arn?"

"No, ma'am. But we all have experience hunting demons, and our orders—"

"Then, shut your mouth, Arn. In the field, the orders of your leading officer are law!"

"Yes ma'am!" he obeyed and performed the double-handed Eagle Salute.

Tress turned to the men who had been observing the exchange. It was not an easy position for a woman, having to win the confidence of hard-headed men, many of whom had many years on her both in the Guard and the Adventurers' Guild. However, she knew that to be flexible when challenged, was to invite only more of its kind.

"Listen up, you lot!"

Each and every Royal Guard snapped to attention at the tone of her voice.

"I was gifted my rank as a badge of my ingenuity and outside-the-box-thinking, not because I can beat each and every one of you in a duel. I will extend the same question that I asked Arn to you lot: have any of you hunted a Daemon before!?"

Only one hand was raised. It belonged to a man who had once been a renowned Silver-Badge in the Guild, before joining the Guard. If not for his rigid thinking and the fact that he tended to defer all decisions to everyone else, he would have made a great First Lieutenant or Captain.

Tress nodded and Halkov answered simply: "They are multifarious and unpredictable, unlike their progenitors who are single-minded."

"Thank you, Halkov. We are hunting a Daemon, you understand?" she locked eyes with Arn as she said it, but to his credit he kept his gaze fixed ahead, unflinching. If he made it through this unenviable task they had been given, she might recommend him for elevation to Second Lieutenant. An inquisitive mind was important, and though some of his sincere questions bordered insubordination, he was also a good person to have around, when things took an unexpected turn.

"Daemons are as unknowable as the most cunning fugitive you can imagine, but they also possess many powers that we are not fully cognisant of, but we know that *this* Daemon has the ability to infect the minds of others, turning them into willing slaves."

"Ma'am!" Arn replied, lifting his hand to indicate himself amongst his fellows. "Does this mean we are stopping here, due to it being a prominent location on the road towards Rooskeld?"

"That's correct, Arn. Now, form up. Assume everyone who encounter is potentially hostile. We will split into groups of three, with Arn's group following me. Understood?"

"Yes, ma'am!" the men replied enthusiastically.

After leaving their mounts by the gate, utilising their ill-tempered and untrusting nature to effectively blocking this single entrance into the village, the six groups of Royals spread out, with Major Tress' travelling straight down the main street.

The village was eerily-silent, considering that nights were when the exhausted caravaners let loose and made merry with their fellows and the slaves of pleasure the many taverns offered. She privately wondered what would happen if the Archduke of Octland learnt of such places, given their strict punishment of adultery and premarital relationships. Though, now that Octland were at war with Helmsgarten, such fortified villages became strategic strongholds, so perhaps it would not be long before she found out.

She was pulled from her thoughts by a man stumbling out of a doorway, a single candlelight from within casting its glow on his face. It was frozen in horror.

Instinct took over, and Tress moved forward with a burst of speed, her slender steel shield on her right arm covering her helmeted face, while she withdrew the gothic mace from its sling. She squeezed the leather grip tightly in anticipation, but before she could make it to the frightened man, a deep gouge had formed in his chest and a female figure, with abyss-black eyes, stood on the threshold of the little house. Her right arm had a long blade of some dark matter growing from the middle of her forearm.

Arn sent forth a spear of ice, which severed the woman's arm at the elbow, but before the frightened man's corpse had even hit the ground, a new blade of darkness grew from the stump.

Tress hammered the heel of her armoured boot into the dirt street as she reached the possessed woman, then spun and crushed her head against the flimsy wooden doorframe with the bladed ball of steel at the end of her mace.

She had only just wrenched her weapon free, when the fallen civilian lurched upright, with black blades growing from his splayed fingers like claws and an abyss staring out from his eye-sockets. Tress was already pivoting to catch his claws against her shield, but, before they even collided, a scalding flame stripped the layers of skin, fat, and flesh from the figure, making him stumble backwards, as the bubbling matter fell off him in big globs.

The final member of Arn's group came forward with his steel-tipped spear, and rammed it through the burnt-but-still-alive Undying Slave, crunching bone and piercing the man's heart. But it seemed not to kill the creature, as he grasped the spearman by the throat and digging his bladed fingers into the meat there. Before the Undying could kill her comrade however, Tress swung her mace into his cheek and the exposed bone, destroying his boiling brain with the impact, but continuing to pound her weapon into his destroyed face until he no longer moved.

Arn came up to his fellow, already prepared the bandage the punctures in his neck, but, as he unfurled the blood-absorbent linen, the spearman dropped his weapon and started scratching at his throat, while his muffled screams echoed inside his silver close-helm. Then he went eerily silent, and despite the dark night, Tress saw his eyes fill with black, like a pond rapidly filling with ink.

She raised her shielded arm and roared, "*Wind of Cloudvale, contain my foe!*"

At the same time, Arn backed away and lifted his arms and shouting, "*Winter frost, erect a wall!*"

Not even a second passed from when Tress' containing cyclone had enveloped the transforming Guardsman and Arn's sheet of impenetrable ice covered him and his flame-wielding fellow, before enormous blades of blackened and crystallised blood emerged from inside the transforming spearman, annihilating his body while attempting to launch these horrifying blades at his assailants. But Tress' wind-barrier held fast and moments later when she lifted the spell, naught remained but bone fragments, errant flesh and fat, and crumbled silver armour.

Arn's barrier fell away as well, and the three of them were left to stare mutely at the destruction of their comrade, after only a drop of Daemon-blood had infected him.

"Arn. Go and collect the groups to our left, I'll go right. We'll return to the gate and, as a unit, we'll decimate this village. Make sure they know not to get too close to the Daemon's slaves!"

"Yes, ma'am!" he acknowledged and ran off with the flame sorcerer in tow.

This is worse than I feared… Tress admitted to herself.

Jakob looked over the lines for a third time. Despite his assurances to the Elphin, there was the distinct possibility of a destructive backlash, if what they were attempting should fail. But, for all his complaints about his mentor, this was a project that he had worked on for so many years that Jakob partially wondered if his release into Helmsgarten was not simply for the purpose of performing this ritual and seeing if his hypothesis was true.

Once, when he had been eight, he had found old letters from a woman that Grandfather seemed to once have had a relationship with. He had no idea what had happened between them, or where she was, if she still lived, but it was clear that it had imbued the Old Spider with a burning desire to discover how to unleash an Elphin's caged potential. If he had dared ask, he wondered if Grandfather would have punished him or been forthcoming, but, alas, Jakob would never know, and, when he had inquired Heskel about it, the Wight had revealed that he knew as little as he did, having also once read the letters, but never having dared to ask.

When he arose from the floor, the Elphin tensed expectantly. She looked very timid, but, from what Heskel had told him, she was incredibly skilled with a blade, having easily matched Sig, without utilising any of the magic that should have been inherent to her due to her lineage. But they would fix that for her.

The Wight came up beside him, then grunted appreciatively.

"Is it ready?" Ciana asked.

Jakob nodded.

The blood symbols on her body had become tacky as they dried, and it was pinching her skin uncomfortably. The way the Brute and young Fleshcrafter stared at her, made her feel a unique sense of unease, finding suddenly that she could empathise with the cattle traded at market fairs. Despite having shown no signs that she should distrust them, she wondered now if she had been masterfully led into a honey-coated trap.

She took a deep breath.

"It is imperative you remain still for this," Jakob told her.

Ciana nodded imperceptibly. "What do I need to do?"

The Fleshcrafter took off his strange mask and grinned. "You need not do anything."

He knelt to the floor before her, as though placing an offering by her bare and scuffed feet. Then he touched his ungloved hands to the outer ring of the elaborate pattern within which she stood.

In the lilting tongue of her birthmother, he spoke the litany of the strange ritual they were attempting. She followed the strange wording and usage of the language with some difficulty, but for the most part understood what it was: a simple plea, masking as a ritual.

"*Here stands your progeny, O Saint of Pride, First of the Fallen.*"

"*Here stands a lost child, whose heritage is denied, whose bright flame is smothered.*"

"*Here stands the living embodiment of your splendour, but, alas, her shine is waning.*"

"*I implore you, O Proud One! I beseech you in genuflecting reverence! Deign to gift this errant child of yours the light that will guide her true! Return to her that which by birth is her right!*"

A tremor washed over the room, but Ciana remained stone-still, even as the air became charged and full of infinite potential, even as the dried dark blood set alight in a pure aquamarine glow that singed her body with its heartless cold.

Then, abruptly, a voice answered back to Jakob's call.

"***A child of mine she is not, though half the blood of my progeny doth run within her. I shall return to her a half of the gift my children are owed. Rejoice in my benevolence. Adulate me in song. Do not forget the service I have done for your sake. Your payment to me is yet to come, Jakob of the Mortal Realm.***"

The light vanished and the blood, which covered Ciana's body and the floor, crumbled into dust, like thousand-year-old paint.

She was about to ask the genuinely-shaken Jakob, who still knelt by her feet, if the ritual was successful, but then she *felt* it. A surge of potential filling a bowl within her that she only now realised had been empty all her life. It was power, undiluted and fully-and-truly hers. A power she deserved.

Even when she thought the metamorphosis complete, the power kept entering her. A fever haze flowed through her body, flushing her pale-grey skin, and her back burnt like a blossoming wound dug by crude tools.

Jakob looked up and took in her transformation. Awe filled his eyes.

It seemed foolish now, but he had not realised the implications of the ritual until after he had invoked it and received a reply. Grandfather was surely mad for having come up with it in the first place, because, the Entity that was invoked was none other than the Proudful Saint himself. It was a bargaining plea to a Higher Being, whose existence bordered the threshold between Demon and Great One. A Being whose summoning, if indeed possible, would permanently alter the figment of reality and warp the minds of all within. Even now, he felt the burn of the Saint's gaze upon him, as though he was forever marked.

He was greatly troubled by the fact that the ritual's Toll was now expected of him, despite Jakob having assumed a Toll was unneeded, given that nothing was summoned or invoked in the true sense of the word, but rather a plea was made to right a wrong. He wondered just what sort of renumeration the Proud Saint, first of his kind, would require of him. Such a being, like the Great Ones Above that he mimicked, tended to think in the grand scheme of the future, so the repayment was sure to be something that would cause profound ripples, which would benefit the Saint hundreds or thousands of years hence.

Jakob was still staring at the result of his injudicious plea. Ciana had remained physically unchanged, but her aura was different, and her wing, that manifested fragment of her soul, had grown

into a two-metre-long paper-thin appendage that now ran all the way down to her feet, glimmering and glowing.

He got to his feet unsteadily and backed away a few steps, so that he stood side-by-side with Heskel. They were both witnessing the true form of an Elphin, the realised desire of their Mentor and Creator. Though her slender pale skin and seemingly-underdeveloped figure belied the strength that now resided within her, they both had enough experience with demons to pick up the tangible change in the room. The massive wing was the only visible change, but then, the wing represented her soul, so its transformation was a given.

"How do you feel?" Jakob asked, still trying to clear the echoes of the Proud Saint from the depths of his mind.

Ciana looked down herself, lifting her fingers and studying herself. It took an amusing couple of minutes before she noticed her wing in surprise. Then she answered, "I feel strong. Stronger than ever. It is as if I have knowledge that I have not learnt."

"Such as?"

"It sounds weird, but I looked at one of the books lying on your table over *there*. I understand what it says, but I have never seen those letters before."

Jakob followed her pointing claw. "You now understand Necroscript? Fascinating. What else?"

"My breathing is different, I think?"

Heskel then asked, "**Have you found Magic?**"

Ciana looked at her right hand for a moment, lifted it in front of her and pinched the air, dragging her hand down in a straight line. In her pinched grip was a bizarre vibrating fragment of sound.

Jakob looked to Heskel for an answer, and the Wight tilted his head down ever-so-slightly.

"**The Aural Onslaught.**"

"Is that whose magic she now possesses??" Jakob muttered, reverently. It was a rare thing, but, given that Great Ones were the Primogenitors of Demonkind, a few of their kind, generally the strongest of them, possessed powers belonging to the Great Ones aligned with their Vice. In the case of Pride Demons, the Proud Saint included, their Primogenitor was The Keening, a formless figure that represented sound, vibration, tectonic quakes, hearing, and manipulation.

"Is that bad?" Ciana asked concerned, waving the blade of vibration before her experimentally.

"**Strong.**"

"You have been gifted a tremendous power," Jakob concurred. "With a blade of sound and vibration, you can cut through anything and cause devastating damage to anyone around you, *if* you attune the sound of your blade to the right signal."

Despite their assurances, she suddenly seemed terrified of her new power, and started shaking her hand to make the barely-perceptible blade disappear. In doing so, she accidentally cut straight through one of the tables they had moved for the ritual. The wood was carved through with so sharp a blade that the two halves came away with a perfectly-smooth cut.

"How do I make it vanish!?" she asked in panic.

Jakob chuckled at the sight of so tremendous a power in the hands of so careful a creature. "Imagine yourself releasing your grip of the blade, while simultaneously relaxing your fingers. It might work, at least if it's similar to other spells of the same kind."

Though it took her a few tries, Ciana eventually managed to make the blade disappear.

"I don't think I should use this power," she said. "It seems more likely to hurt me or you."

"Power is meant to be used," Jakob scolded her. "Do not forsake the gift you were given, for to do so is to spit in the face of your progenitor."

Heskel nodded. "**I will teach you control.**"

"Good idea," Jakob concurred. "Once she has learnt to control it, we will finalise our plan to acquire the Branch."

The Wight cast him a warning glance. He knew the unsaid challenge, so Jakob continued, "That is, Ciana, if you would be interested in helping us with our Grand Undertaking."

The Elphin looked up from her hand and locked eyes with Jakob.

"I will follow you wherever you go. I owe you more than I can ever repay for this."

Jakob nodded and Heskel grunted something that seemed almost merry, though he was sure he had simply misinterpreted the nonverbal answer.

"Also, I will make you some fitting attire. Having you walk around *like that* will only invite trouble."

Ciana only laughed in reply.

XXXVII

Tress observed the ruins of the village left behind in the wake of their thorough annihilation of the possessed caravaners and citizens. Of the eighteen Guardsmen she had been delegated, only thirteen were alive, though fortunately Arn was amongst the living still.

Tobias, their falconer, had released his messenger bird to return to Helmsgarten with Tress' urgent request for reinforcements, outlining exactly what *kind* of enemy they were facing, and hammering home the necessity to utterly destroy it, lest the Daemon spread its vile corruption to their entire nation and become too great a foe for them to handle.

The fact that over eighty villagers and caravaners had been possessed by its influence was a worrying sign of what they might find as they continued on to Rooskeld. Certainly, apprehending the Fleshcrafter was now the least important task they had. The strength of the Crown hinged on their ability to curtail the Daemon's ruthless expansion.

"**…why have you closed…your clinic…**"

"Don't be daft, Guillaume. You know why. After all, you brought the Crown's eye to us. To *me*."

"**…I need more…vessels…**"

Jakob regarded the corpse-puppet before him. It was not the usual red-haired man, but rather a woman who had once been a baker in town, and whose pastries Jakob had been delighted to eat in the company of Pernille. But he was not angry with the Daemon, though his desire to help him had expired. Besides, he was no longer needed for retrieving the Branch, though he might still serve as the catalyst for a different Esoteric Toll, for which his presence was not required, which suited Jakob just fine. Still, he was careful to not upset his unsteady alliance with the insufferable Entity.

"You are perfectly able to make your own, without my help."

"**…my methods are…frowned upon by humans…**"

"I don't care. You have already doomed this town. Go wild, if it so pleases you."

"**…will you stay and fight…alongside me…**"

"No. Nharlla's summoning takes precedence."

"**…let one of my vessels…accompany you…**"

"So long as the Crown is tracking you, that seems unwise, given that I wish to remain out of their sights. That is why I came to Rooskeld in the first place, after all."

"**…I insist…**" The grating-and-awful voice of the Daemon grew in volume, as though trying to overman Jakob. But Heskel and Ciana, not to mention Wothram and Zelesti, stood behind him, waiting for the slightest sign of danger to interfere and neutralise the eight corpse-puppets in front of them.

"We made a promise, Guillaume. You have violated it by intentionally alerting the Crown to my presence."

"**…it was not…intentional…**"

"That is not how I see it," he answered sternly. "The way I see it, you thought that bringing their attention to me would ingratiate me to you and make me consider you as my protector. But you have gravely mistaken our relationship. I invited you into my confidence as a gift and not because you have something that I require. I did *you* a service."

"**…I will kill the king…**"

"Why? You wish to remain in this mortal realm, and it will sever your only tie to it. My ritual is very singular in that objective. Forfeit his life or that of Sirellius and your puppets will have their strings cut as you are cast back into the ooze you call an abode. But if it suits it, regardless, go ahead. Neither the King nor Sirellius are people whose passing I shall mourn."

"**…then…**"

As one, the eight Undying Slaves grew blades of black blood from their arms and heads, as well as sprouting additional thorned limbs from their shoulders, backs, and torsos.

Jakob did not even have to utter a word, as Ciana quickly moved in front of him and drew her hand down through the air in a clawing grip of splayed fingers. There followed a buffeting wind of intense vibrations shaking the air and the eight figures before them had their internals reduced to dust. The black blood fell away from their bodies in lifeless globs and the figures collapsed slowly, suddenly hollow on the inside and their tie to the Daemon obliterated.

"It has come to this," Jakob announced with sober finality. "Let's make haste for the Grove. By my estimate, Guillaume has over three-hundred vessels in Rooskeld alone, and no doubt countless more in the surrounding villages."

Using the Elphin Mask at Jakob's urging, Ciana had turned male guards and citizens into willing thralls that would ensure the Daemon's army would be slowed enough for them to abscond with the Branch of the soon-to-be Thousand-Year-Old Tree. It was frightening how simple the power of the Enthralling Daemon, Belamouranthyne, was, and how total its dominion over the minds of men took hold.

A quirk of this particular Daemon, according to Heskel and the ancient scrolls he had brought back from Svalberg Academy, was that its power and summoning could only be invoked by a woman, and its enthralling lure worked only on men. There had been another Daemon on one of the scrolls, but from the short description, Heskel had deemed her too difficult to handle, which Jakob concurred with, given that she was described as vindictive and incapable of having her aura fully suppressed even with several powerful seals.

The group of five, with Ciana in the lead, eventually reached the Sacred Grove, which lay an hour's walk up a trail that snaked to the top of a hill.

Jakob wasted no time and told Zelesti, "If you wouldn't mind, please make a hideous mess of the men who cower in those lookout towers."

The Envy Demon cackled maniacally and ran off, her sculpted feet pounding off the many overlapping coils of tangled roots. Only ten seconds after her emergence into the clearing of the great tree, a thick metre-long arrow slapped into the forehead of her mask face, snapping her head back. She immediately turned towards the source and took on a burst of speed.

The archer who had struck her could be heard screaming in anguished wails, and pleading for his life, moments later. His cries eventually died out, but, by then, two-dozen warrior-priests had emerged from their towers and were running in the direction of the commotion. None of them seemed to notice Jakob's group, which gave them plenty of opportunity to make their way to the base of the large tree, while Zelesti slaughtered her way through the brave Priests of the Grove.

With a powerful throw, Heskel launched Ciana into the air, so that she landed on the bottom branch that hung nearly four metres above ground. No sooner had she landed on the thick limb of the ancient tree than the branch, the very first of its many branches, had been severed nearest to its base with the power of her Vibrating Blade.

The *slam* of the six-metre-long limb against the root-covered understory below resounded through the entirety of the Grove and perhaps could be heard on the fringes of Rooskeld.

The Priests, six of whom lay dead, split into two, with ten of their number running frantically towards Jakob, Heskel, Ciana, and Wothram, hefting decorative spears and triangular wooden shields. They screamed in outrage at what Jakob had done to their sacred tree, but Ciana quickly leapt from the ruined branch stump and landed amidst their number, her form-fitting and flexible bone armour absorbing the impact easily, obliterating them within moments with a quaking tremor that travelled all the way to where Jakob stood, tingling the soles of his feet. Her ability to utilise her newfound power with so tremendous accuracy and care astounded him, but it also proved that Grandfather's theory had been right, and that Elphin were owed incredible power if they could simply be connected to it.

Not for the first time, he wondered who her Demonic Progenitor was, as a child inherited the power of their parents, and, as such, the Pride Demon, half of whose blood flowed in Ciana's veins, was possibly the rank of *Duchess* or *Marchioness*, twice- and thrice-removed from the rank of Lord respectively.

When Ciana returned to his side, her bone carapace was spotless as the day he and Heskel had constructed it. It was almost like a second skin, with the face sculpted to look like hers, with her eyes and mouth closed as in sleep, but slits allowing her to still see and breathe. Holes in the right side of the helmet allowed for her horns to poke through, and a hole near the nape allowed for her silver-blonde hair to fall through in a long ponytail. The gauntlets covered her fingers, but allowed for her claws to reach through at the end, similar to her horns, and her wing likewise had an aperture on her right shoulder-blade, where it was rooted, to emerge from. Lastly, her hooves were reinforced in the bottom, similar to how a horseshoe ensured integrity in the hooves of a horse. As far as armour went, it was quite a bit more durable than Heskel and Jakob's robes of skin, but it also reflected Ciana's new role as their vanguard, graciously awarded to her by Heskel, who, it seemed, had tired of being the brawn of their party.

"How are we going to carry *that*?" she asked, as Zelesti was finishing up with the last two Priests in the background, her gleeful massacre echoing all around the clearing with its warped laughter and plentiful shrieks of pain and despair.

Heskel grunted in reply, but Jakob quickly overtrumped him.

"Wothram, if you would."

The Wight made a sound, as the Golem began lifting the long branch. He struggled for a few moments with figuring out how best to go about it, but settled on hefting the end onto his wide shoulder and dragging its length behind himself.

Jakob chuckled as they returned to the path leading out of the Grove, "I have not made you obsolete. In fact, such menial tasks are beneath you, or so I always thought."

"**What have you done with Jakob?**" he questioned.

"…Not this again," he replied annoyed.

Ciana simply laughed at the interaction.

With seven additional squads to reinforce her two partially-depleted ones, Major Tress set off for Rooskeld, already two days behind schedule.

They left the ruins of the fortified village in the hands of one squad of guards, though she was unsure what they could do if they encountered more of the Daemon Slaves.

The sixty-plus Royals rode through the night. Well aware that, come dawn, they would lay siege to the town of Rooskeld, from where they would spread out in smaller units once the main evil was exorcised from within, to strike at the manifold pockets of Daemon Slaves that were sure to be hiding in the hamlets and villages nearest the border.

From Sirellius' curt reply to her request, Tress had been told to let the Daemon scum roam beyond the Lleman border, but to absolutely exterminate any and all traces of it within their nation. They had been given the go-ahead to strike with impunity and not fret about civilians caught in the crossfire. To be benevolent and hesitant now might after all return to strike them later and do untold harm. It was considered necessary for the Greater Good, and Tress wholeheartedly agreed. The incident with the Underking and his vile spawn had shown her what unpreparedness and the tolerance of vile heretics would lead to, and she aimed to keep that knowledge firmly ingrained in her heart, so that she would never forget.

Of those Guards she had been delegated, many did not yet understand *what* they were dealing with or why such drastic measures had to be taken, but, come dawn, they would follow their orders with the terrible knowledge that they were to be the bastion between vile powers and humanity.

Roused by her inner turmoil, Tress, whose Charger thundered at the head of their army, roared out loud:

"We ride for the sake of our fair Helmsgarten! We are the cleansing light that abhors all evils! We are justice incarnate! We are the Royal Guard of our Proud King, Patrych the First!"

Her delegation roared in sympathetic shouts of passion.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XXXVIII

His name had once been Carmine, but no longer did his body match his given name. No longer did the gracious gift of his Lord mar his skin and paint it white. No, he had become disfigured by the core in his belly, which the abominable Fleshcrafter had cursed him with. And his thoughts were no longer his own, occupied as they were by the hateful Demon, Raleigh.

Carmine had become a spectator in his own body.

He felt every prick of pain acutely. He felt the euphoric high of the Wrath Demon as it soared through the air and thundered across the hills in loping strides.

He heard the guttural voice as it berated him for being weak. He heard its hateful voice urge him to fight back, but, struggle as he might, Carmine was powerless, rendered entirely mortal by the stone in his stomach that held the soul of his possessor.

He saw as his skin, once pale and pure, was tainted black and crimson with a new dermis growing to replace the one stolen by the Fleshcrafter. He saw through his eyes the wanton slaughter perpetrated by the Demon on all who stood in his way.

The Fleshcrafter had given the Wrath Demon a task, but it seemed to have been forgotten, as Raleigh now sought out a faraway battlefield, bounding his way across the landscape of Helmsgarten towards the east, where Octland's border lay.

Do not hurt my people! Carmine begged, over-and-over. But, every time, the Demon only laughed in reply.

Nøgel was surprised by the endurance of his ursine mount. The grizzled bear had carried him from the middle-of-nowhere Heimdale to the Octland border without stopping once. As thanks for the trip, he hunted down a rabbit and tossed it to the beast, who gleefully tore into the meat and devoured it in slobbering and crunching mouthfuls.

He ran the last few kilometres to the capital of Octland, through the forested fields and untended soil of long-gone farms. There was only really one city in the principality, with all the smaller villages and towns having been absorbed into it by force after its founding some hundred-fifty years past. Of course, at its founding it had been a sovereign nation, but too much outside pressure and border skirmishing had led to Octland eventually signing a treaty with Helmsgarten's former King. Possibly small farms existed on the fringes of Serenity, but certainly none numbering more than three-dozen habitants.

As he reached the gates of the limestone city, it took some moments for the guards to recognise him and his unmistakeable badge of office. But, once they *did* notice, they scampered like panicked mice to open the way for him. A man such as Nøgel was not made to wait, after all.

He smoothed his short grey hair with his left hand as he walked down one of the countless avenues that led to the centre of Serenity. The city was built like a compass, with four cardinal thoroughfares travelling in-and-out of its centre, where the Archduke held council, his office of state shaped like a compass-rose.

Smaller tributary streets and avenues ran parallel to these four cardinal roads. Unlike the main thoroughfares, these tributaries were where the denizens of the country lived, with their proximity to the city-centre indicating their stature within the Ecclesiarchy of the Eight Saint. There were no non-

adherents within Octland, for to live in the fold of the city was to be a believer in their Divine Truth. Though Nøgel doubted that all its citizenry were as zealous and fanatical as Octavio's Elite Corps, all of whom had undergone the ruinous transformation in the waters of the Glass Forest.

After he jogged briskly down one of the main arteries of the city, the sculpted and chiselled surfaces of the limestone growing in detail the further towards the core he went, he drew the gaze of many patrolling Men-At-Arms, denoted thusly by their wingless badges.

Nøgel was not surprised by the full contingent of Knights who awaited him before one of the four entranceways into Octavio's compass-rose palace. Their badges held the double set of wings that indicated their stature in the Elite Corps and at their fore was a lone Knight-Lord, who held his helmet under his arm, while his men kept theirs on.

"*Sire Nøgel,*" the Knight-Lord began, "*We were unaware of your plans to visit our fair city. You unfortunately have arrived during tumultuous—*"

"**I have no time for formalities. I come in the name of your Pope.**"

The Knight-Lord immediately stood upright and attached his helmet.

"*Apologies. We will take you directly to the Archduke. Form up!*" he yelled at his men, who split into four, forming around Nøgel like an omnidirectional barrier.

He paid it little attention and simply let himself be escorted into the great limestone edifice and its central chambers where the regent resided whenever he was not abroad, preaching the word of his church and helping those less fortunate than him.

As Nøgel came to the doors to the eight-sided central chamber, the contingent fell back and their Knight-Lord moved into the room first to announce his presence, shortly thereafter he entered himself, the guards in the room and the Knight-Lord departing at a gesture from the Archduke within.

"*It has been a while, Nøgel. For what matter has the Pope sent you?*"

"**Octavio,**" he replied, by way of greeting. "**You know exactly why I was sent for.**"

Jakob looked at the carriage Heskel had managed to find for them. They had hidden amongst the trees outside the Rooskeld town walls, while the Wight had gone in alone to search for transportation that might fit their enormous burden.

"Will we ruin the Toll if we separate it into smaller pieces?" Jakob asked, looking at the six-metre-long Branch. He did not wish to leave even a tiny piece behind, but he also knew they could not transport it in its current state.

"**Does not state,**" Heskel replied, without needing to look at the scroll.

"What do you think?"

He nodded simply, seeming to agree to chopping the branch into sizeable portions that wouldn't poke out from the back of their carriage.

"Ciana, would you mind? Split it into three pieces of equal length."

The Elphin moved over to where Wothram had laid it to rest on the ground, then, with two quick swipes through the air, it was severed into three. Jakob still could not help but marvel at the awesome power she now wielded. To possess a fragment of a Great One's power with such ease was truly no small feat.

"Let's get it on the carriage and get a move on," he insisted. "The more we wait, the more likely we are of being spotted."

As Wothram and Heskel moved the heavy chunks unto the bed of the carriage, the horses at its front stamped about erratically, perhaps unsettled by Jakob's company or maybe sensing the transformation of the township beyond the walls nearby.

Ciana was sniffing the air, grimacing every now-and-then as she caught a whiff of the Daemon within. "The smell is everywhere."

"If he had the hundreds of vessels I helped him obtain, he must have transformed the rest by now as well. That gives him thousands of puppets under his command, and he himself told me that his power multiplies with every vessel he obtains."

"You seem to know him well."

"I was the one to summon him," Jakob answered. Ciana seemed surprised by this response.

"For what reason?"

"I was tasked with resurrecting a prince."

"Really? A prince??"

Before Jakob could answer, there sounded a loud, distinctly-familiar, *snap* and a cold pain suddenly flooded the wrist of his left arm. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as he looked down at his hand, seeing a tiny sliver of abyss-black crystallised blood poke out of his palm. Only a split-second later he realised what had happened and acted accordingly.

"Wothram, protect us from snipers! Ciana, cut my arm off, quick!"

Jakob held his arm before her, seeing the black fragment slowly absorb into his bloodstream and travel up the length of the limb. To her credit, Ciana did not hesitate for an instant, and sliced through his left forearm just below the elbow joint, her Vibrating Blade leaving so perfect a cut that his severed flesh and bones gleamed, and even the blood seemed slow to emerge from the open-ended veins.

Wothram quickly ran in front of Jakob and Ciana, holding his massive frame in front of them, as yet another *snap* sounded from beyond the town walls and the impact of its projectile slapped ineffectually into his reinforced bone-plates.

Heskel moved up close to them as well, but when he saw that Jakob and Ciana had things under control somewhat, the Wight started invoking some Chthonic Hymn that he had never heard before.

Jakob stared at the severed piece of himself as it lay in the dirt below. The fingers quickly started flexing with unholy life and the skin took on a dark pallor, before transitioning to grey and then black.

"Destroy it, utterly," he told Ciana. She pointed her palm at the spasming limb and, before it could turn into a weapon of the Daemon, she let loose a concentrated blast of vibration that reduced it to motes of dust in seconds, producing an awful whine that gave Jakob an instant migraine. He had meanwhile managed to stop the flow of blood by performing a very precise incantation of Stoneflesh on the tip of his stump.

Standing next to the Bone Golem, whose arms were still outstretched and sheltering Jakob and Ciana, Heskel finished his invocation:

"***Nwetrou, Leviathan of Leviathans, I pray you will gorge yourself upon my offering!***"

"***Nwetrou, open thy Devouring Maw!***"

Both Jakob and Ciana gasped for breath as, just beyond the wall where the sniper had stood atop a roof, a massive shadow coalesced.

Heskel slapped his hands together and from belowground came an enormous creature straight out of the worst thalassophobic nightmares. A leviathan belonging to the darkness of the cosmos; a devourer of endless appetite; a maw that hunted any whose vessels travelled the oceans above the deep caves it called home. It was the undeniable Primogenitor of Gluttony, though Jakob had only ever heard its name uttered once by Grandfather, when recounting his adventures in Lilibeth. He was

awestruck by its majestic form as a jaw the size of four houses closed on a portion of the Rooskeld noble quarter.

He wondered if his Ambusher had survived, though he greatly doubted it, but it mattered little, for Guillaume was legion.

"Get in the carriage!" he yelled, the pain yet not arriving, thanks to the overabundance of adrenaline in his system.

Heskel took hold of Jakob and carried him to the back of the vehicle, sitting him atop one of the two-metre-long Branch pieces, before moving to the driver's seat to rouse the animals, who, somehow, had not taken off in a panic. Ciana and Wothram joined Jakob in the back, and he was pleased to see neither had been harmed.

"What *was* that?" Ciana asked, her voice a mixture of dread and excitement. Jakob already knew from the tales of their journey to Svalberg that she had witnessed the Leviathan once before.

The carriage rocked side-to-side, followed by the snap of reins and a frustrated grunt out of Heskel, but then they were moving, the horses whipped into an immediate gallop to get them out of the reach of the Daemon.

"Before I met you, I had intended to have Guillaume aid me in retrieving the Branch. To that end, I gifted him with a long-ranged weapon. It seems he found a loophole in our contract and thus was able to turn my own weapon against me. Quite troubling."

"*Troubling*?? You lost your arm over it!"

"It is simply an arm, Ciana. I can always make… a… another…" he started dozing off, as the pain became overbearing.

"Jakob? Jakob!? Hey!"

Before falling unconscious, he heard Heskel shout something to Ciana, though he could not make out the exact words.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XXXIX

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 Heskel 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-blonde 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. Heskel 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.

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—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XL

Given the remote location of Hekkenfelt and the scarcity of disposable human materials, Jakob had ended up paying a hunter for two of his fresh deer kills, hoping the lithe and nimble animals' bones and muscles would work well to craft him a replacement left arm.

As he worked one-handedly to flay, dissect, and organise the tendons, muscles, flesh, fat, and bones after draining the animals of their stagnant blood, he had Wothram help hold the material still, while working meticulously with a fine scalpel-claw from his demon-glove wherein Purll resided. Additionally, Marll who resided in his robes helped lift away each piece of material as Jakob finished with it, laying it according to the pattern of sorting, using several thin eel-like appendages sporting bizarre suckers that seemed to utilise vacuum-suction to firmly grip everything they touched.

"Greed demons are rather adept at this sort of work, wouldn't you say?"

Wothram, unflinchingly, remained entirely focused on holding the sample still. Even Zelesti had been a more engaging assistant than the Golem, despite always wanting to ruin everything out of spite, but, alas, Heskel and Ciana were busy seeking down a quest, so Jakob had to make do with his mute servant.

"What about you two?" he asked the two demon whose corpuses he wore.

For a while, he thought they were likewise mute, but then a new appendage sprouted from the front of his apron, stretching-and-turning like a serpent emerging from an underwater cave. It lifted up before Jakob's face, before the its smoothed end started rippling as it underwent a transformation. The layers of gelatinous demon-skin rippled and spread out and away from the tip, where a small mouth grew into place.

A flat mouth, like that of the Filth-River Lamprey of Helmsgarten, pointed at him, its manifold molar-like teeth and central aperture mouth moving slowly as a voice emerged. It sounded strangely happy, bordering on lunacy.

"*Hapherll Jakob… we, Purll and Marll, are enjoying ourselves, in your employ.*"

It took him a moment to recognise the title for what it was, given that there were many variations on terms for each Saint's Demons and further based on which Lord they were pledged to. For the Demons of the Shining Hoard, 'Hapherll' was a sort of honorific used for human masters, although it was quite similar to 'Hapherinm' which was a word denigrating lowly imps who were not greedy and miserly enough.

"You speak for your twin?"

"*We are one, despite our separate forms.*"

"I see. If you continue to serve me as you have thus far, I will continue to provide you with meaningful servitude."

"*Hapherll… thank you.*" The Lamprey-mouthed appendage trailed back down into the apron.

Jakob looked to the pile of disassembled materials, then back to the one remaining deer he was halfway through.

"Wothram, I see now what form my new hand will take."

The Golem remaining still as stone, its grip locked on the carcass.

It had been a finnicky process to get all the internal gears and mechanism situated properly, given his momentary disability, but, as he held the gauntlet-like forearm in his right hand, turning it this-and-that way to check it for flaws, he concluded it was finished.

"Wothram, hold this still."

The Golem lumbered over and seized the bone forearm in an unshakeable grip, so that Jakob could align his smoothly-cut stump with it and use his right hand as the focus of the Amalgam Hymn. He shifted his left arm carefully, knowing that a mistake now would be a gruesomely-painful thing to have to amend later. The two fat candles providing an unsteady light, bobbed about anxiously, while he ever-so-slightly turned his stump to find the best rotation and centering.

When he had the perfect spot, he said to Marll, "Secure my arm, such that it does not move."

Immediately one of the bizarre sucker-covered appendages emerged from the squishy fabric of his apron's shoulder-pad and curled around his left arm and the soon-to-be-joined prosthetic, such that they were functionally fused together already.

"Marll, if you would, please remove my glove and mask."

Again the living robes obliged, gently peeling off his glove and placing it on a workstation nearby, before wrenching off his mask, the straps pulling tightly on Jakob's ears, such that he was sure that when the demon tossed the rebreather aside a bit of his ears was certainly thrown alongside it.

"Careful, next time."

There came no reply from the Greed Demon, but he knew that it would heed him well, as, despite its seemingly-thankful nature, it must surely fear reprisal from him, given how much of Jakob's decimation it had witnessed whilst adorning his body and its lack of attempts to defy him thus far.

With his naked index as a precision focus and his vocal cords strained in the proper way, alongside the tightening of his lungs, he began the Hymn while carefully running his finger along the seam between prosthetic and severed flesh.

"*Join these pieces born of separate mothers.*"

"*Connect these errant two to a unified one.*"

"*Create an everlasting bond within and without.*"

"*Connect these errant two to a unified one.*"

"*Join these pieces born of separate mothers*."

He was only halfway when the first verse came to an end and so he continued directly into the next, coming to its end as his finger once again hovered over where he had started.

"Marll, Wothram, you may release me."

Demon and Golem both obliged and he expected to immediately drop his hand with an unaccustomed newfound weight, but instead found it to be lighter than his original limb.

It took a moment for his soul to crawl into this new addition to his body, but, when it happened, it was an uncomfortable feeling of total numbness that first met him, followed by the sensation of tingling in his new fingers, and then the odd sense of warmth spreading into the frigid limb.

He cautiously attempted to exert direct control over the nine fingers adorning the grafted forearm and rather than finding the addition of four extra fingers impossible to control, he quickly mastered the ability to splay them individually and in separate groups, as well as closing them into something resembling a fist. With two thumbs he also felt far more capable to gripping things, and he was surprised to find that the deer bone was quite a durable material substitute for that of a human.

As he played around with the successful graft in the bobbing candlelight, there suddenly came a knock on the abandoned workshop door. The hazy glass window adorning it showed the silhouette of a tall man.

"Wothram, see to the door will you."

The Golem wandered over and immediately ripped the door off its hinges, revealing a very surprised olive-tan individual with deep furrows in his brow, dark pouches under his eyes, and ruffled and partially-balding black hair.

"Wothram, set the door down. And, so that you remember for next time, you were meant to open the door, not destroy it."

The newcomer, to his credit, remained fairly unfazed by the bulky construct daintily trying to reattach the door in his face, but he quickly dodged under the door before it could be slammed into the frame, and came walking towards Jakob.

The light of one of the candles caught on a badge that hung from an expensive chain around his neck and the surprise made Jakob unintentionally release the sensitive trigger in his grafted arm, which in turn released a spike through the Lamprey-like aperture mouth in his palm.

"Oh, my apologies, Ser," the Gold-Ranker said. "I did not mean to frighten you."

With another impulse, the spike slowly sunk back into the hollow of the grafted forearm. "You did not, but I am also not expecting visitors. Least of all a Gold-Badge such as yourself."

The Man looked down at the badge, as though he had forgotten he wore it. Then he chuckled hoarsely, finding it amusing.

"You are Goddarth, aren't you? Former Magister, by the looks of you."

Jakob nodded simply.

"I have use of someone of your talents."

"You will have to find someone else," Jakob replied. "I am not looking to provide support to other Adventurers."

"You have me wrong, Ser," the Man continued with a wave of his hand for emphasis. "I come not in official business. Rather, it is something more personal."

Jakob shifted his stance, carefully lowering his left arm, such that, if he timed it correctly, he could strike a decisively blow to the man and kill him where he stood. He had yet to utilise the corpus of a Gold-Ranked Adventurer after all, though, from the looks of the man, he was no longer in his prime.

When he did not encourage him to continue, he seemed to decide to change tactic and extended his hand to Jakob.

"I'm Harland," he said. "And I desperately need an Alchemist for my sickness."

XLI

Jakob sniffed the flask that Harland had brought with him. There was a faint scent of something familiar lingering along the glass rim.

"Why were you taking this?"

The Gold-Ranker hesitated.

"If you don't tell me why, I cannot help you."

Desperation seemed to seize the man and he grabbed Jakob by the wrist of his prosthetic hand. His shabby exterior belied the strength with which he held him firm.

"Wothram," Jakob said, and, a moment later, Harland was tossed against the far wall by the golem who had been standing behind him the entire time.

"Tell me why," Jakob demanded. "Tell me why you sought me out rather than leave this Gods-forsaken swine-hovel."

Harland got to his feet slowly, his breathing laboured after having been forcefully interrupted by the collision with the wooden beam in the centre of the workshop wall.

"I need to remain here," he answered vaguely. "It is paramount."

"And that's why you've been consuming *this* foul stuff?" Jakob replied, lifting the flask in the air, before slamming it into the workstation top and sending shards everywhere.

Harland let out a horrified scream, like he just watched his child murdered before him. Jakob found it repugnant that a supposed Gold-Ranker would be the slave to something like *this*. He had allowed Veks his euphorics, because the Thief had seemed to be able to handle them with his elevated metabolism, but Jakob abhorred those whose lives revolved around getting their next fix.

A rational part of his mind then kicked-in however, and he considered what good he could accomplish by having a euphorics-fiend on his leash. Though it was arguably a worse idea than trying to make a deal with a Daemon like Guillaume. Even the Undying Daemon's betrayal had not been too unexpected, but those whose lives revolved around euphorics were always just one step from total chaos and they tended to build up a tolerance fast, needing more-and-more exotic highs to not devolve into utter madness.

However, it was said that Nharlla was the Primogenitor of Euphorics manifesting in nature, given the Great One's ability to warp reality and manipulate the minds of any he wished.

Perhaps I am being tested. Is this man one of Nharlla's chosen?

It seemed an absurd thought, but clearly Harland had some unique talents that elevated him above the rabble of Silver-Ranked Adventurers.

The man was weeping into his hands in despair, when Jakob made up his mind.

"Tell me everything I wish to know about why you're here, about why you cannot leave. Then I'll give you your fix. I will brew a concoction so potent that you will feel nothing but bliss when you savour it."

The broken man looked up at him, the Bone Golem nearby and ready to apprehend him if Jakob uttered the word. Using the dirty sleeve of his once-white shirt, Harland wiped his face and nodded.

"I'll tell you… everything."

Nøgel ground his teeth in frustration, as he hurried along the cardinal avenue heading north. Octavio had proven to be the intractable fool he always was, but he had not expected him to outright disavow himself from the Pope of the Eight Saint's Church.

Nøgel's loyalty to the Church was firmly rooted in his loyalty to the Pope, strenuous at it were at the best of times, but this meant that he now faced the very real possibility of fighting against the Principality of Octland, which seemed very counterproductive to the furtherance of the Pope's creed. But, ultimately, Nøgel found that he did not care. It was to be yet another stain on the Church's history, but it would be one amongst many, and the disillusionment with their faith would lead to seeking faithful finding the words of his True Benefactor. So, in a way, Octavio's folly would be to the benefit of the Keening and its Master, the Flayed Lady, for they would reap the souls of those seeking absolution of their mortal wrongdoings and grant them the eternal gift of joining the fold of the Flayed Ones, whose anguished screams in turn fuelled the Keening and its voice of destruction that Nøgel bore in his corpse-glove.

Some hours later, after he had left the city of Serenity, the Rose-Gold Adventurer saw smoke in the distance and scented the foul stench of burnt-and-carbonised fat and flesh.

He dropped from the back of the horse which had heeded his Beckoning Bell, and ran the last few kilometres to the destroyed farmstead.

Nøgel had only just gotten within sight of the ruin, when scalding wind stung his face and the Entity to which his corpse-glove belonged resonated a warning to him.

Then came the laughter: maniacal, unhinged, cruel, joyous… inhuman.

Their name was Raleigh. Once they had been two, but now their souls were one. At times, the weaker part screamed in frustrated despair, but his voice was quickly silenced.

His crystallised epidermis was covered in dried and burnt-to-a-crisp blood, and the air around his manifold claws of hardened blood carapace was alive with the newly-released power. A scalding and flensing wind. A solar flare made to manifest. The Gift given to him as a descendant of the all-powerful Morrligt, who burnt planets with his brutal strength and cosmos-shaking solar winds.

These people were innocent!

These people were born to feed those stronger than themselves! Do you not feel how much we have grown in our meteoric journey through these lands!?

The weaker voice was about to respond, but then a sharp rumbling turned Raleigh's arm to a crumbled ruin of protruding bones and mangled epidermis.

He at once turned to the source, a lone figure holding aloft a foul-smelling hand.

With a brutal roar, Raleigh sent a flare of scalding wind at the challenger, momentarily halting the aural onslaught that came from the sigils on that unsettling hand and its palm.

"***YOU BEAR A FOUL STENCH!***"

"**I am transcendent, blessed by the almighty Keening One. Your meagre powers are no match for mine.**"

Raleigh laughed as his right arm healed and became an over-long three-clawed hand that he used to launch himself forward at the figure.

His crystallised epidermis claw rent the air, but the Keening's servant easily side-stepped and swung its foul hand down, taking with it half of Raleigh's body. But a True Demon of his strength was not so easily slain, and before the foul man could strike his exposed heart core, he used his

overlong clawed hand to launch himself into the air, where, as he flew upwards, he sent a barrage of concentrated blasts of superheated air at the figure, catching him on the side of his face and in the torso, sending him tumbling, unable to immediately retort with his foul sounds and vibrations.

As Raleigh started falling back towards the ground again, spike-tipped tendrils launched from his severed torso and grabbed hold of his lost parts, dragging them to him and instantly repairing his body and making it whole once they connected.

With a loud *crash* of his enormous weight, Raleigh left a crater where he landed, but no sooner had he turned to face his opponent, when he found himself launched backwards by a wall of vibrating air that even his own mastery of the element could not halt.

He flew like a tumbling comet through the dusk-lit sky, his internals mangled and pulverised into such miniscule fragments that even his supernatural recovery seemed at a loss on how to piece them all back together.

"***NEXT WE MEET I WILL KILL YOU!!!***" he screamed with all his might, but he was already so many kilometres from where their battle had taken place that he doubted the foul man would hear him.

Deep within himself, *that* weaker part he had absorbed seemed to take joy in their defeat.

XLII

The house lay in ruins, and the citizens had gathered around it to see what had happened.

"There's someone there, mother," a child-like voice said, the speaker's eyes more attuned to the night than her mother's.

"Come on. Let the guards handle it."

As their footsteps quickly retreated into the distance, echoing against the many stone buildings of the city, a three-clawed hand dragged the figure out of the rubble of where they had landed.

They sniffed the air, trying to ascertain what part of the Principality they were in. There were many wonderful smells of the warm flesh of untold thousands.

Raleigh allowed himself a satisfied grin, though the voice within had once again separated itself.

These are my people! Do not harm them!

Silence, weakling! We feed! Our Ascendancy is near! Once we achieve Knighthood, we will take our revenge on the Keening's Servant and remake the world in our image!

The metallic clatter of approaching guards suddenly drew his attention. These people had a strange scent to them, as though they were his brethren in Vice, pure and undiluted, but then he noticed the faint aftertaste of mortality and wrinkled his nose.

He hated their scent, and yet it promised potent souls for him to devour, and with their sustenance, he would ascend the ranks of Demonkind and become ever-closer to the visage of his Primogenitor.

With a forceful shove, he recombined with the weaker half, and together they brushed off the last bit of battle-damage, before reshaping the blood in their body to become a hardened scale armour of crystallised epidermis, covered in sharp spikes and clawed hands and feet. A potent horn also adorned Raleigh's brow, and before any of the four newcomers could react, he had speared the first on this curled spike and gored a second with his claw.

"***MORRLIGT, WATCH ME ASCEND!!!***"

The slaughter began anew. It would not cease until they had reached the promised heights.

Jakob had made Harland drink a brew to appease his abstinences for the moment, though, as they grew in strength, his brew would not be able to keep up.

After having the Gold-Ranker buy all the tools he required, he had filled the Workshop with alembics, flasks, tubes, and boiling cups lifted above small flames. It was a miniature of Grandfather's alchemy and chimera laboratorium, but it would serve its current purpose in distilling a Euphoric that would utterly shackle Harland's mind, making him a fiend whose morals and ethics held no sway over his actions, and he would do whatever was required to receive the next dose.

"You will tell me everything first, before I allow you this," Jakob told the man.

He was sitting on a stool, watching the slow trickle of evaporated matter fall into the final flask, whereafter it would be mixed with an oil to produce an emulsion that, when chilled to room temperature would be like a paste. The paste would then be either smeared on the gums of the mouth, the roof of the mouth, or inserted deep into the nostrils, such that its absorption through the tissue would lead it directly to the brain, where it would do its work.

The eutrophics paste could also be mixed with food and consumed entirely, though this manner of consumption would result in a muted effect and thus not be as effective in enthralling Harland's mind.

The Gold-Ranker swallowed deeply, saliva forming on his chapped lips. Jakob only noticed now how the man's previous euphorics-binge had destroyed his body thus that much of his hair had thinned or fallen out, along with the nails of his hands which were either paper-thin and brittle or entirely gone. His teeth had fared little better, and were a crumbled ruin.

"*Now*, if you would. Once I give you this, you will be in no position to tell me what sort of task binds you here."

Harland nodded. "I have been doing this for twenty-five years or more. At first I was simply chasing a mystery."

"A mystery?"

"Have you ever heard of '*The Black Lakes of Lilibeth*'?"

"Yes."

Harland seemed surprised at first, but then he nodded. "Of course, you Magisters are more attuned to such mysteries."

"I began my search in Lilibeth, and it was clear from the onset that something unnatural had brought about the lakes, for no fish swam in their black waters, nor did any children nor animals dare approach it, as it was said that something lived in their deep recesses, snatching any who attempted to swim across or even imbibe the waters."

Jakob looked at the broken man, already understanding why he had fallen into the embrace of mind-altering euphorics. One did not seek to comprehend the Great Ones and their powers without a measured mind. One whose mind was rife with emotional turmoil and inner conflict and preconceptions was a cradle into which insanity and madness would be born.

He continued, "I must have looked through all the history of the region for over a year, before I came upon the myth of 'The Wicked Doctor'. A foul Magister whose work was said to be so unholy that it brought about the bottomless lakes and whose creations still flock in their dozens in the darkest forests of Heimdale."

"After leaving behind Lilibeth and my search for answers seeming inconclusive, I met a Gold-Ranked Adventurer, now the famous Rose-Gold-Ranker known as *the Divine Hand*. With his aid, I learnt of esoteric knowledge and ancient sites said to once have been visited by Gods, known as the Absolutes, or, more often—"

"The Great Ones," Jakob answered.

Harland blinked a few times, then nodded eagerly, like a scholar finding a willing and attentive listener to a tale he had told a hundred times prior to nothing but deaf ears.

"Exactly! After learning of these Gods and parts of their ancient language, I suddenly seemed to find clues all over the place, as though left behind by the Wicked Doctor for anyone with the knowledge to find it."

"These clues eventually lead me to Lleman, though many also pointed to Helmsgarten, but my mentor, the Divine Hand, told me not to venture there, though the reasons he did not explain."

"And, so? What have you found here?" Jakob wondered out loud. Despite himself, he was finding that he might benefit from the Gold-Rankers search.

"I have found some old texts that mention 'The Llemanian Widowmaker', and the descriptions of his work, though struck from public records, are eerily similar to those of the Wicked Doctor of

Lilibeth. The particular details are so distinct that, despite five-hundred kilometres separating these two historical villains, they have to be one and the same!"

Jakob nodded, it was not a difficult conclusion to make if one had the proper historical texts to cross-reference, and a Gold-Ranker was certainly able to dig up information that was never allowed to see the light of day, such as guard reports, official statements prior to revisions, private letters, and so forth.

"Have you found the Widowmaker's lair?" Jakob asked.

He knew from Grandfather's brief tales of the past that his laboratorium in Lilibeth was now one of its two lakes, which were the ever-expanding portals to the realm of Nwetrou, the Great Devourer. However, his laboratoriums in Lleman ought to still remain intact, and, one of them was where he had crafted Heskel, before travelling to Helmsgarten. If Jakob could find the specific laboratorium, he wondered what sort of insights he might glean.

In truth, he could simply ask the Wight, but he had the sense that Heskel was uninterested in retreading old paths.

"Not yet, but I am still diligently searching," Harland blatantly lied.

"You have given up," Jakob told him, letting frustration take over. "If you were diligent about anything, you would not have spent *this* long chasing shadows."

"I—"

"Don't bother defending yourself. I care not. Truly."

Harland lowered his head shamefully. Jakob meanwhile ensured the seal on his mask remained perfect, then turned to the flask, where about a finger-digit-depth's-worth of murky blue-brown water had collected. He took the flask by the neck and poured in a draught of Hester oil, then plugged the mouth of the flask with the thumb of his demon-flesh glove, before giving it a rigorous shake.

The resultant emulsion would remain stable thanks to the addition of a unique acid found in asparagus, which Jakob had used the majority of the alchemy setup to isolate, as the euphoric concoction itself was incredibly simple to produce, albeit requiring a rare flower native to the Llemanian forests, which, fortunately, a local flower vendor made a habit of collecting.

It seemed to Jakob that Harland knew woefully little about what he purported to have studied for years, and, thus, there was no more use to be gained from him. He had momentarily contemplated remaking him, but his body was tainted with the filth he had habitually imbibed to save his fragile sanity and he was too old for any of his organs to be of adequate condition.

Jakob was thoroughly disappointed to find a vaunted Gold-Ranker to be such a poor specimen, but he still held out hope that something could be made with a Rose-Gold Adventurer, given their legendary status as one-in-a-million specimens of human fortitude and talent.

"Did you buy the other items I requested?"

Harland handed him the sack that had been sitting by his feet as he talked, though his eyes never left the flask.

Jakob opened the burlap sack and withdrew the cheap mirror and balanced it precariously on the edge of the alchemy workstation, so that Harland could sit on the stool and see himself. Then he withdrew the slender knife the man had bought from the blacksmith in town. This too Jakob placed on the workstation.

Some minutes later, when the concoction had solidified enough, becoming less of a liquid and more viscous like jam, Jakob broke off the top of the flask and handed Harland the broken bottom, which

now was like a dish full of blue-brown paste. Even simply inhaling the stuff could have an effect on one's faculties, so he once again ensured the seal of his mask, then let out a puff of spent vapour.

"Dip a finger in, then run it along your gums."

With a single-minded focus, the Gold-Ranker put his index and middle fingers into the dish and fished out a glob of the stuff, then smeared the paste all over his chipped-and-ruined teeth, as well as his infected gums.

After watching a transcendent bliss overcome Harland and seeing his eyes glaze over, Jakob carefully intoned his following command, such that the man would hear and understand each word.

"Harland, take the skinning knife and carefully skin your own face and give it to me. Afterwards, go to the Guild Hall and tell them you have found the Divine before slitting your own throat in front of them."

Harland nodded dully and then picked up the knife.

Jakob sat on the stool, holding aloft the skinned face of Harland, as a piercing scream cut through the air from further down the street, where the Guild Hall lay. With meticulous care, he rolled the skin up and stuffed it into one of the internal pockets of his apron.

"Wothram. Destroy the alchemy setup and workstation. Make sure no one will connect this to us."

Before he left out the back of the workshop, he grabbed the remainder of the Elf's Lure euphoric and bade Marll craft a special sealed-off pouch where he could stuff it into without accidentally coming into contact with it himself.

Twelve more faces to go, he thought to himself.

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—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XLIII

Tress had lost half of her Royal Guard contingent, but the survivors had fallen into a confident groove and were at the precipice of victory, after learning to indiscriminately immolate any and all civilians they encountered. There was no room for mercy or careful consideration, given that such were easily exploited by the treacherous Daemon and its vile subversion. Because its evil black blood was weakest to fire, those of her units wielded the element were turned into the core of their tight-knit formations as they slowly pressed the remainder of the enthralled population of Rooskeld into a corner of the township.

"Any sightings of the red-haired one?" she asked Arn, who had taken charge of another unit after its leader's death.

"He seems to yet elude us, Major."

"That one is more dangerous than the rest, make sure to find him. Take another unit with you."

As Arn left with ten other Guardsmen, Tress urged her remaining troops forward, sending them through the front and back of the three Noble family mansions where the Daemon seemed to have barricaded itself.

With her small unit, which encompassed two swordsmen, who wielded earth and ice respectively, and two flame sorcerers, she moved into the biggest of the mansions, opting to send a third flame sorcerer around the back with orders to begin setting fire to every other escape route, such that the creatures inside were forced to run through Tress' group.

Casting a powerful gust of wind, she blew the front doors off their hinges, then produced a continuous barrier of dense air before herself and her subordinates, which had already, on several occasions, proven a solid strategy for dealing with the chain-reaction of the black blood spreading from enemy to ally.

Wordlessly, she directed the two elemental swordsmen to the wings of her advance and kept the flame sorcerers between them. As smoke started billowing from the back of the mansion, the exterior flame-caster doing his work, it did not take long for the enemy to manifest itself.

As seemed its wont by now, it started off with a manipulative charge of the youngest and most feeble of its puppets, which, to begin with, had thrown off the decision-making of her Guardsmen, but by now they were hardened to it.

Spears of ice and splinters of dense rock shot through the eighteen adolescents that came straight at them, and shortly thereafter the sorcerers set fire to the corpses, turning the black blood to steam and inert crystallised dust.

Another three charges came, before the house was deemed empty, but, as they were about to leave, having let their guard down for a moment, a *snap* sounded from behind them, and the ice swordsman was lanced through the torso with a spike of black blood. Acting purely on instinct, Major Tress sealed him in a cocoon of air, and one of the sorcerers set fire to it, immolating the poor Guard alive before he could become a black-eyed puppet. The earth swordsman erected a sloping barrier out of the marble floor and the other sorcerer lashed their attacker with tongues of fire, though seemingly not striking true.

"Foul Daemon!" Tress yelled. "Face us with all your might! Let's have it over with now, unless you prefer we continue to dig you out of hiding for three more weeks, you spineless coward!"

"**…I much prefer…this…I am amused…this way…**" it replied, firing off another spike that pierced through the marble barrier, but veered off from hitting the other swordsman, thanks to Tress' covering barrier of air.

By the side of the crimson-haired Undying stood a woman with a golden prosthetic that Tress had heard enough reports about in Helmsgarten to recognise as a Hemolatry Witch. It chilled her to see even so powerful a sorceress be overcome by the Daemon and its vile touch. Before she could warn her men, the Witch launched forward in a deluge of stale blood orbiting her like moons and which fired through the air on incomprehensible arcs, before lacing through both of her sorcerers and killing them instantly, though not turning them to the Daemon's control, to Tress' surprise.

Tress fired off her own attacks in the form of cutting slashes of air, which, alongside her continuous barrier, began to take a toll on her body, rapidly leeching the warmth from her blood. For a few moments, her and the Witch, who was leaping around and trying to catch her off-guard with arcing blood-spikes through the air, were locked in a stalemate, both of them failing to finish off the other.

Snap!

The long-ranged shot from the Red-headed puppet flew through the air, tracing what seemed like a missing trajectory, until it hit Tress' barrier of air and arcing sideways into the flank of her lone Guardsman, who, a second later, burst apart in a shower of tiny spikes of black blood. None of them hit Tress, but she was now forced into a corner, the Witch waiting for her to make a mistake, and the Daemon seeming to calculate how to hit her through her barrier by taking pot-shots and seeing how they veered off.

I wish I had something akin to Nøgel's power, she mused as she slashed through the air, hitting the many blood-spikes the Witch sent her way and punching her off-course with buffets of air, as she continued to try to get in close and deal a finishing blow.

Tress' body was shivering and when she lashed out to blow the Witch off-course during one of her leaps, nothing came of it and her continuous barrier faltered a second later.

She watched as the golden prosthetic was raised in the air and became coated in gold-flecked stagnant-purple blood that took the shape of a cleaver around the limb. It struck her just how emotionless the Witch's face was, but, then again, her mind was no longer within.

To die to a dead puppet… how unfortunate…

Then time continued and *something* flew through the air, sending the Witch tumbling to the side, a colossal ice spike settled inside her skull, piercing from lower jaw and out through the top of her left temple. She stayed down, now dead for good.

The crimson-haired puppet halted its attack to look at its dead servant, then took a single step towards the Witch, before being skewered through sixteen times by spikes of ice and rock, tumbling to the floor of the mansion in pieces, which were moments later reduced to ash by a deluge of superheated fire.

Tress wavered on her feet, before collapsing under her own weight. A moment later, Arn stood above her, reaching out with his hand.

"About time," she said with a smile and accepted his hand.

Ciana and Heskel found Jakob talking to the Flower Lady in Hekkenfelt as they returned from their quest, the Brute dragging the corpse of the strange creature they had found to be the culprit of the many disappearing sheep.

The Flower Lady squealed and dropped the bundle in her hands as she saw the corpse they had brought with them. Jakob, however, seemed suddenly fascinated.

"Where did you find this?"

"In a nearby forest," Ciana answered.

Heskel grunted affirmative.

"Did you find its lair?" he then asked, suddenly switching to the lilting tongue of demons.

"Lair? I didn't think it would have one," she replied sincerely.

"It's one of Grandfather's creations," he explained. "He has a certain fondness for making creatures that imitate their constituent parts in terms of natural instincts. Given that what you have found seems to me a hybrid of a wolf and tarantula, it would most definitely have one."

Heskel grunted something, which she did not know how to interpret.

The pretend-Alchemist did however seem to understand it and replied, "Don't be apprehensive, Heskel. If we can find its lair, we can earn ourselves some goodwill with the Guild, and potentially find a lead on one of Grandfather's old laboratoriums, from which this thing must surely have escaped."

This time, she understood what the Brute grunted in reply. It was a warning. But Jakob simply brushed it off, then leant down to pick up bundle of lilies that the Flower Lady had dropped, handing them to her and continuing their conversation where they had left off. It was something to do with roots of a specific bush, but she had no knowledge of such things and did not truly comprehend the topic. Shakily, the Flower Lady continued her explanation, though she kept looking to the corpse of the monster.

The Guild Hall fell silent when they entered with the corpse of the wolf-head arachnid, or, rather, it was silent when they entered. There was only one Receptionist in, and those assembled looked less like adventurers and more like funerary mourners. Despite the dreary atmosphere however, their burden did arouse some attention, and the Receptionist faked a smile and told them good job on their quest, before announcing that they would be receiving their iron badges soon.

Ciana found that she had rather enjoyed herself, hunting down a local farm menace, and suddenly contemplated if she had perhaps wasted her many years alive on thinking she was an outcast of society, when her acceptance into Hekkenfelt and its Guild had happened so easily. Already, many of the locals greeted her when they walked to where the three of them were staying in a formerly-abandoned one-storey house.

They had just left the Guild Hall the following day, new iron badges in hand, when Jakob handed Ciana a murky vial of *something*.

"What's this?" she asked, as they walked down through the main street, a new quest flier in hand.

"I am your support Alchemist," Jakob replied. She was unsure whether he was being facetious or genuine. "As such, I have concocted a revitalising tonic that will aid you in battle."

Ciana pulled the cork out and sniffed the brew: it was sweet and tangy. She wondered how it would taste, but doubted it was a good idea to try it now.

"I made it by mixing the ground-up roots of the *Alan's Thorn* bush and a local variety of ginger with a honey-sweetened tea of maple leaves."

"Have you tried it yourself?"

"Yes. I haven't slept since I distilled it yesterday evening."

"So it's for fatigue."

Jakob nodded. She managed to spot a slightly crazed look in his eyes below the lip of his hood, as well as the barely-perceptible way his body was trembling with unspent energy.

She lifted the vial into the air, letting the sunlight catch it, which turned the murky-brown into a glowing amber. “Does it have a name, this tonic?” she asked.

“I came up with it yesterday, so, no.”

“It needs a name,” she insisted.

“*Revitalising Tonic*?” he wondered.

“Too dull. How about: *Jakob’s Quick-you-up Brew*?”

Jakob simply shrugged, though Heskel grunted something that could arguably be considered mocking amusement.

“**No good at names.**”

She folded her arms, the bone carapace armour scraping against itself with a hollow sound. “If you’re so good, how about you name it?”

“**Lightning Blood.**”

Jakob halted in his step and Ciana struggled not to laugh. The two shared a glance. “He really got us, didn’t he?”

“You’re in charge of naming things now, Heskel,” Jakob demanded.

If not for the timid mask of the Brute, she was sure he would have flashed them a frown, as his resultant grunt sounded very put-off by the suggestion.

XLIV

They were on the trail, with Ciana proving herself almost equal to Heskel in terms of her ability to track their prey. The three of them were in the Gravenlight Forest, eight kilometres northwest of Hekkenfelt, following the leads on their newest quest to track down the wolf-head arachnid nest. It seemed that the farm Ciana and Heskel had helped was but one of nearly two-dozen that had been regularly preyed upon by the nightmarish chimera for half a decade.

Jakob bent low to lift up a clump of tangled web with his new nine-fingered prosthetic. Though the trees were not closely-packed, the canopies were a tangled mess, and, as such, very little light hit the understory, making it hard to see well despite it being midday. Ciana was well-accustomed to night-time hunting, but she was surprised to find that Heskel and Jakob had no difficulties in the near-total dark either.

"Marll, my scope please," the Fleshcrafter commanded in Demonic.

A tendril lifted from his strange robes and handed him an object. While Heskel continued sniffing the air and scouring the understory for clues, she walked up to Jakob to see what the object was.

He was holding it to his eye, like a one-eyed pair of glasses such as those Magisters often wore, and was studying the adhesive clump of web.

"What are you doing?"

Instead of an answer, he handed her the scope and she looked through it at the web in-between his nine fingers. She was surprised to see very clear details on a miniscule level through the glass lens, but had no idea what she was truly looking for.

Perhaps sensing her confusion, Jakob explained, "It is genuine web, not the keratin imitation Heskel and I are capable of crafting."

"I don't know what that means?"

"It means that we are looking at the web of a chimera. Unless, Lleman naturally has giant arachnids in its forest."

"It doesn't," she replied confidently. She had not been this far west before, but the much bigger forest in the heartland and on the border of Lleman definitely had no such creatures. "So we're on the right track?"

"Indeed. For a moment, I was afraid that we might simply be looking at the work of a rogue Magister with similar talents as me, but, to my knowledge, there are none in our world capable of creating chimera like Grandfather."

"So we're close to one of his old laboratoriums?"

"Let us hope so."

When Ciana looked at Jakob, after they had tracked down and slain the group of six wolf-head arachnids that lived in the Gravenlight Forest, she knew that he was disappointed. After all, there had been no grand laboratorium secreted away within the nest, nor in any part of the forest for that matter.

"What now?" she asked.

Jakob let out a puff of spent air. "We will return to Hekkenfelt with the trophies and proof, then see if we can find other reports of errant chimera. Grandfather's laboratoriums must be around here, I know it."

"Why do you need to find them?"

"Because one of them is where Heskel was created."

The Brute, who had been busy beheading their prey, paused his work and grunted apprehensively.

"Why do you fear what truths we will find!?" Jakob suddenly exploded at his companion.

Heskel got up and let his carving blade fall to the stone ground of the cave they were in. "**Not all knowledge is good.**"

Ciana put a hand on Jakob's shoulder, and he seemed to let some tension escape him, though he was clearly still frustrated.

"I will decide that myself," he answered the Brute.

As they were travelling back to Hekkenfelt, they stopped by one of the farms that had been affected by the predators they had now eradicated. Ciana initially thought it was to assure the farmers that their cattle was now safe, but it seemed Jakob had other plans.

"Have you faced other predations?" he asked the man who ran the farm with his two brothers and their wives and children.

"I 'aven't seen't much. I 'aven't even seen't them monsters what slain my sheep."

"What about your brothers or the women in your farm? Have any of them seen monsters that are out of this world?"

The farmer started scratching his thick grimy beard with his work-calloused hands. "My niece swore she saw an odder once up that creek yonder hill," he replied and pointed southwest.

Jakob shook his head and returned to where Ciana stood.

"No luck?" she asked.

"I'm unsure what I expected," he replied. Then he turned back towards the Farmer and told him, "Bring your brothers over here for a moment."

The man nodded dutifully and went to fetch the two men.

Jakob walked past Ciana, putting his back against hers and said, "Bring out the Mask. We will collect three more faces today."

With what felt like an eagle's talons gripping her heart, Ciana looked at the three farmers standing before her, expectantly. She did not like the way their eyes continued to stray up-and-down her body, but she also did not think they deserved what she was about to subject them to.

Jakob still leant against her back, his eyes averted from her. She had thought him kind, but now there was a brutal side to him. A demanding side that did not allow her to forsake her given task.

From the sealed hide pouch on her waist, she withdrew the Mask and lifted it to her face.

"Wos that for?"

She put it to her face, where it seemed to stick as though tiny hooks anchored it into her flesh. Then she spoke the incantation in Demonic:

"*Belamouranthyne, my eyes are thine and all they see belongs to thee.*"

She felt power flow from the mask and into her face, along with a stinging pain and biting cold. Immediately, the three men became spellbound to her visage and started grinning blissfully, ignorant of what she was about to ask of them.

At last I am fed, the Daemon spoke through her mind. *Turn around and feed me the one who hides in your shadow.*

The Daemon held no sway over Ciana, but its charismatic words were almost enough to make her use the Mask on Jakob as well.

It will be so easy. Make him yours eternally.

She ignored its honey-coated words though, for she yet owed the Fleshcrafter and the Brute a great debt.

"Look upon me," Ciana said, shakily. The three men seemed to relax at just her uttered words, as though they somehow calmed them. As though they loved her with the entirety of their beings.

"Gift me the skin of your faces."

Immediately, the three brothers began digging their dirty and chipped nails into the flesh on their faces and tearing at it. Globs of bloodied fat and meat fell from their hands as they worked arduously to offer themselves to her.

It was brutal to watch, but it helped numb her to the sight by imagining that they were the very same people who had spat on her as a child and sold her to hands of the slavers, who in turn passed her on the Magisters at Svalberg.

Some minutes later, they all three knelt before her, staring lovingly into her eyes and lifting the ruined remains of their ripped-off faces up towards her as though offerings of adoration. Suddenly, Heskel came over and took the offerings from them. Even though she knew the Brute was somehow immune to her enthralling gaze, she did her best not to look upon him.

After Heskel walked away with the scraps of the farmers' faces, Ciana looked upon them, and, just as she spoke her next command, a curious boy came around the corner of the nearest grain windmill, where he had apparently been hiding.

"Kill each other," she demanded, before realising that the boy had heard and seen her as well.

Immediately, the three farmers starting biting and punching and scratching and stomping and kicking and strangling each other, while the boy ran over with a blissful grin, seemingly intent on joining in on the deadly skirmish. Before he could join in however, Heskel ran over and grabbed him firmly in his arms, the boy kicking-and-spasming.

He came up to Ciana, utterly calm, holding the child up before her. She dreaded what he would ask of her, but then he simply said.

"**Tell him to ignore your commands and return to his normal life.**"

Shaken that she had almost condemned a child to death, she quickly looked the boy straight into his joyous and blissful eyes, telling him, "Return to your normal life, you are exempt from this command."

Heskel set the boy down, who then, rather placidly, walked past his father and uncles killing each other, and continued on towards the main farm building.

"Take the mask off," Jakob said. "We're leaving."

Ciana breathed a sigh of relief, before uttering the incantation to release the Daemon's hold.

"*Belamouranthyne, return my eyes to me for thy offering has been duly given.*"

Call upon me again soon, Ciana Half-spawn.

While the three faceless farmers fought and bled on the soil of their farm, nearby sheep watching with vague interest and the lone windmill turning slowly, the trio left.

They saw Hekkenfelt in the distance, when Ciana raised her voice awkwardly. Despite having found her strength, there was still certain things with which she remained uncomfortable.

"Jakob," she started, "I have a question about something."

"Is it about using the Mask?" he guessed.

"No, that I do willingly, even if it disturbs me."

He halted, surprised by this it seemed. "What is it then?"

"You know how Elphin are born… erm…"

He nodded understandingly.

"Well, I was wondering. After the ritual that connected me with my Demon progenitor, have I become… whole?"

Jakob seemed to consider the question for a bit, when Heskel answered, perhaps to illuminate him.

"**Asking if she is fertile.**"

"I understood as much, Heskel... I am not *that* daft to the unspoken word."

The Brute shrugged, which made Ciana chuckle a little.

Jakob turned to regard her, locking his eyes with hers, which always made her slightly uncomfortable. The crazed look from earlier, caused by the recently-titled *Lightning Blood* tonic, was gone, but his stare was no less intense.

"The ritual realigned your soul with that of your lineage and gave to you the powers you were owed from birth, but denied for being half human. However, it did not change anything about your physiology."

"So, I'm still…?"

He nodded simply. A small hope she had held for the last few weeks crumbled at the straightforward gesture of confirmation.

"Can you make me… whole?"

Heskel grunted a denial, though there was a soft edge to it.

"It is uncharted territory for me, though I have repaired a male reproductive organ before, but it is much less complex. There is a chance that Grandfather has the knowledge."

"Can we go see him?"

"That would be unwise," Jakob replied. "We are not on amicable terms."

"I see…"

"There is another way."

She lit up at the tiny hope presented to her. "How?"

"We are summoning Nharlla, when the branch pieces that Wothram guards in Hekkenfelt belong to a thousand-year-old tree. He may gift you the ability to have children, if you ask it of him."

"He can do *that*?"

"There are no limits to what the Great Ones Above are capable of," he replied reverently.

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XLV

Jakob was looking at the three Farmers' faces in the Butcher's shed he was borrowing. The faces came as dozens of scraps of skin and nose cartilage, and he wondered if they would count for the invocation of Nharlla. In truth, it did not matter if they had to get more. Ciana had proven they could easily attain their desired amount, if she used the Elphin Mask.

He was trying to build a new internal component for his prosthetic hand, using a mix of steel and deer bone. In hindsight, an electable stake was perhaps a bit overzealous for him, given that he was not much of a fighter. Marll had told him he should summon their older brother, Sarll, and use his soul to fuel his new weapon's design, but Jakob was yet wary of giving over too many of his faculties to demons. Besides, Marll and Purll had only become such excellent tools because he had been able to work on their natural corpuses, and they had only appeared in their natural forms due to the peculiarities of Mammon's aura and draw. If he were to summon Sarll, only the demon's soul would pierce the veil, and the Chthonic Sigils Heskel had used to bind the demons in his glove and apron would not work.

Jakob was drawn from his brainstorming by Ciana coming through the door to the shed he was in, holding a new quest flier above her triumphantly.

"Heskel says this is another potential lead on one of your mentor's labs!"

Jakob looked back down at the unfinished work before him, before getting off the stool and following the Elphin out the door. After all, this took precedence.

As soon as Nøgel entered Helmsgarten city through Eastgate, he could tell the metropolis had changed significantly in the six years since his last visit.

It did not take long for word of his arrival to reach the Royal Guardsmen, who, despite seeming to be in a state of war-preparations, took the time to issue him his own escort and lend him a carriage to traverse the disruptive districts that lay between Eastgate and the Royal district.

While the many guard corps were in the midst of gearing up for war on the Principality of Octland, the citizens of Helmsgarten were caught-up in the turmoil of all able-bodied men being conscripted, a food shortage due to some problems with ferrying goods from Heimdale, lootings and protests in the streets of the many plebeian districts, and a dozen other minor issues.

It was a pattern of disruption he had witnessed often enough to attribute to the passing of a strong leader, in this case King Ubrik, who had ruled with an outward smile and a hidden sword to great success. It would seem his heir, King Patrych the First, lacked the subtle of his father, given that he, within the first month of his reign, had ruined the alliance with his vassal state of Octland.

But this too was a common pattern, Nøgel mused, as the carriage tumbled across the cobblestones of Armory. After all, many ambitious children sought to right the perceived wrongs of their parents, and given that Ubrik had seemed like a pushover to those who did not know him, it was obvious that his heir would outwardly become a steel blade upon which fell any naysayers and challengers to his rule.

He knew that to stay in the graces of such a King, he must utilise flattery and appeal to the man's vanity. Nøgel let out a sigh. Such squabbles were ultimately beneath him, as his true calling served a higher lifeform, whose machinations spanned dozens of generations. Compared to such complex

schemes, a fledgeling King and his war of pride was utterly meaningless. But he would play a part too, in the end, and it was Nøgel's role to bring him down the right path, such that the Keening's whispered plans would come to fruition.

"**You have gotten older,**" Nøgel told the wizened Advisor, embracing his arm with something very close to kinship. They had known each other for quite some time.

"And you seem to not have aged a day… though your scars have multiplied."

The Rose-Gold Adventurer nodded.

"And your burns? They seem recent."

"**I had a run-in with a rogue Demon and its scalding winds.**"

"It would no doubt be the very same that tore a scar across our fair city."

Nøgel shrugged.

"But… why are you here, Nøgel?"

"**I received an urgent summons from one of your Royal Guard Majors. It mentioned quite a lot of events happening all at once. I came here, wondering if the Ruler of the Sewer Deep stirred yet again.**"

Sirellius let out a heavy sigh. "I don't even know where to start."

"**Make your summation brief.**"

With Sirellius next to him, Nøgel stared at the decaying corpse of a strange beast. It was a fused-together mass of several humans, which had attempted to take on the shape of some creature of myth by bonding bones, flesh, and meat.

"We have no clue what it is, but it is clear that the Haven Tragedy is what created it, along with the many other bizarre abominations."

Nøgel nodded. It was a side-effect of potent Chthonic spells. His Lord-and-Master, the Keening, had referred to them in many of his vivid dreams as the ill-conceived Void-spawn. Just like how ambient magic allowed for incantations of elements and complex rituals, so too was the void between the stars a potent fuel of ever-expanding infinite power that allowed for the Absolutes, like the Keening and Flayed Lady, to exercise their magic. It was rare for normal incantations to carry with them chaotic side-effects, but not so uncommon for the Chthonic spells of the Cosmic Deities, given the chaotic nature of the element that fuelled them.

He had often wondered if there was not some unnamed Absolute whose reign was exclusively over the element of chaotic energy, though, if such an Entity existed, it would easily match the Watcher or the Eternal with its power, but, then again, chaos was by its very nature untameable and unpredictable, so perhaps it simply *was*.

"**Do more of these remain?**" he asked.

"All those we captured have died, from what we are at a loss to say, but there is One which has defied our attempts to slay it and has hurled itself towards the Slums and the large sewer entrance there. Given the treacherousness of the deep tunnels, particularly as of late, we thought it prudent not to follow it, and our hope is that it follows its kindreds' example and dies off before it can wreak further havoc."

"**It is seeking the Underking,**" Nøgel told him.

Sirellius nodded, having apparently reached the same conclusion. "Though for what aim?"

Nøgel shrugged. "**It matters not. I will, however, track it down for you, so that you may rest safe in the knowledge that the deep harbours only one evil.**"

The Old Advisor massaged the bridge of his nose. “There is also the matter of the Undying Daemon that I have yet to tell you about.”

“**And, pray tell, which summoner was suicidal enough to summon such a creature?**”

“The very same we suspect to be behind the Haven Tragedy.”

“**This ‘apprentice’ of the Underking?**”

“Indeed.”

XLVI

It had been a while since he had tread these unholy halls of filth, but he knew the path well to its deepest place. However, he was no fool, so he held his corpse-glove at constant readiness.

As he traversed the many layers into the deep, he scented the familiar stenches that had never seemed to leave his nostrils completely since his last venture here, some two decades past give-or-take.

For reasons he did not comprehend, but also did not question, he had been tasked back then with amiably settling the war between the Fleshcrafter and the Crown, which had for months consumed the backstreets of the city, with the majority of the citizenry being none-the-wiser to the demons and chimera that walked amongst them. It was a testament to King Ubrik's cunning that such a conflict now existed only as rumours, having been purged from the minds that had witnessed it and the journals that had recorded it.

While delving ever deeper, he considered it fortuitous that he had not been forced to meet and bow before the new Majesty of Helmsgarten. According to Sirellius, King Patrych was no fan of the Adventurers' Guild and considered all of its members weak and lazy. He doubted that the brief time they spent practicing swordsmanship together when he was a child held any sway over his opinion of Nøgel, but it did not matter, unless the Keening believed so. He was a tool and relationships were only a means to an end, he had learnt this lesson well. His Benefactor had tested him often when he first gained his Divine powers, with Its most favoured lessons being taught by having Nøgel ruin the lives of those closest to him through setting off chain-events that cascaded and utterly decimated them.

He took a right down a tunnel after obliterating a pack of rat-wolves lying in wait for him. He would soon find what he was seeking.

The Fleshcrafter nudged the growth on a moisture-slick wall of his sanctum, seeing the silhouette of a figure wandering further down towards his home through the eyes of one of his deceased wolf patrols in the middle stratum of his demesne.

With one of his manifold multi-jointed limbs he caressed the newest spawn from his chimera vats, a six-legged bear-porcupine hybrid with a large snout and hideously-destructive claws.

"*Soon, we will have guests.*"

Things had calmed down a lot after the Serenity Knights had left the metropolis and the Royal Guard had ceased their forays into the sewers in their weak attempts to bring him to justice, whatever feeble sense of it they felt deserving of exacting.

For a moment, he had thought things may become exciting again, when a void abomination had sought him out, following his adorable apprentice's destructive use of the Madness Hymn within Haven. But the creature had only found his lair to croak an ominous phrase, before succumbing to the fabric of reality dissolving its incoherent soul:

"***The Sovereign unborn comes. Tremble at the foot of your Scion.***"

After what felt like quite a while, Nøgel reached the bottom of the sewers, where ancient hand-worked stone tunnels were replaced with rough unhewn mountain rock. The smell here was almost enough

to knock him unconscious, but his constitution was stronger than most and as such his body filtered out the airborne toxins before they travel to his brain and disable his faculties.

A veritable greeting party stood in his way, but with a simple swipe of his corpse-glove through the air, they were reduced to mush and fragmented bone. Just like his first time here, the welcoming committee was followed by a ceaseless horde of constructs and hybrids of all sizes, but his power was uniquely suited to fighting outnumbered. There were certainly many sorcerers and spellcasters whose powers could be utilised to similar effect, but they were held back by their need to repeatedly recite the incantations of their magic, while Nøgel had no such need, wielding his granted power over sound and vibration with but a single uttered phrase:

"***O Keening One, render thy aural onslaught!***"

Though confined to the sewer depths, the Underking was not a man who sat idly by, as attested to by his ability to keep flinging hordes of monsters at Nøgel's annihilating hand. Eventually, however, the rushing hordes dissipated and were not replenished.

He had, just like the first time here, earnt the right to approach the Fleshcrafter's laboratorium, having proven himself a force that could not be ignored nor overcome by thoughtlessly attempting to drown him in a hill of death. A creature like the Underking respected true power, such as what Nøgel wielded.

After he left behind the rolling hills of carcasses littering the mountain rock underfoot, he found himself before an industrious workshop of nightmares, and from within, he heard a familiar voice call out to him. He walked through the laboratorium to reach the sanctum, passing by crowded vats pulsing with inner life and sloshing with viscous and nourishing fluids, as well as slabs upon which lay dissected animals, hybrids, and humans.

When he came to a tall aperture leading to a small chamber, he spotted the Underking within, who had changed significantly since their first meeting.

He felt as though he was crossing into some sacred place as he stepped over the threshold.

"*Hello again, Keening's Chosen.*"

"**And salutations to you, Fleshcrafter. I have come to have a chat once again.**"

He could feel it. His weaker self could feel it too. They were *so very close* now. Only a few more souls to be devoured and ascendancy was theirs.

Raleigh found it amusing that the illustrious Serenity and its guard corps were incomparable to the Royals of Helmsgarten, who, at the very least, had given him *some* trouble in the past.

"***YOU ARE WEAK!***" he scolded the two units of eight that were arrayed before him, after a previous eight-man group had fallen to him earlier. "***BRING ALL YOUR SWORDS TO BEAR! IT MATTERS NOT!***"

He launched himself forward, as the voice of the weaker part became increasingly silent, perhaps grown numb to the massacre of his erstwhile brethren. With rending claws of hardened bone and spikes of crystallised blood firing out of his epidermis shell, Raleigh reduced one of the groups to two men in an instant, before spearing the survivors on the additional pair of arms he had sprouted. The other unit were in the midst of chanting some confining spell, when their turn came, and moments after, they too lay at his feet, torn apart. The mesh of their chainmail and the plate of their silvery armour had become like paper to him, and though it stung to absorb their lifeblood, he lapped it all up nonetheless.

Ascension would be his.

"*Send in the Earl and his guard,*" Octavio told his adjutant. "*This Demon has feasted long enough on the scraps of our city and we have a war to win.*"

The adjutant stormed from the room with these new orders, while the Archduke returned to his careful study of the map of the regions that he could expect to see the heaviest of fighting with the Helmsgarten army. He knew their ilk well enough to know that the honourable face-to-face battle his Knights excelled at would not come to fruition. Helmsgarten were fond of sabotage, subterfuge, and long-range bombardment. In short, they were cowards.

An hour later, his adjutant returned, the young boy looking quite out of his depth, despair and dread distorted his otherwise-handsome features.

"The Earl has been slain, milord."

Octavio did not like being interrupted, but he supposed that, sometimes, it was his place as a ruler and leader of the faithful to deliver Divine judgment himself.

The latest unit had done it, they had given him the final drops of power he craved, and, as Raleigh underwent the transformation of soul and corpus, the weaker voice in his mind screamed in agony, at last absorbed fully into his mind.

Like a tarantula moulting from its body, so too did the Wrath Demon shed his epidermis to emerge born anew, a *Knight of Devastation* born through the heat of battle. The conflagration of his newfound power shook the foundations of nearby limestone buildings and scorched their fanciful façades into blackened ruin.

From the shoulder-blades of his vessel grew a pair of appendages like scorpion stingers, while his head and torso fused together, forming a long V-shaped mouth that ran from the chins of the head to the navel of the stomach.

Raleigh lifted his hand and the nearby bodies drained of blood and mass, feeding his form and covering it in a rapidly-forming charred epidermis that was so hot it would scald the hairs off of anyone within a five-metre radius. A sympathetic storm was brewing above him, as though answering his ascension with a congratulatory whirlpool of scalding wind.

The Wrathful Knight let the sounds of his devastation fuel him, as panicked wails and pained screams flooded the world around him.

But then the metallic scrape of armour drew his gaze down towards the end of the wide avenue he stood in the middle of, and scattered around which lay piles of dead and mountains of debris.

"***YOUR FOUL STENCH STINGS MY NOSE!***"

"*Thou stand before thy adjudicator and exterminator!*"

Raleigh grinned, his unnatural mouth gushing forth a deluge of blood as it opened along his body. This one seemed even stronger than the last contender. Once its soul was fed to him, he would seek out the Keening's Servant and eat him too. The world was his to rule and none could stand in his way.

XLVII

Jakob sat behind Ciana, as she rode the horse, while Heskel ran beside them. It was, he considered, perhaps high time for him to learn how to wield the reins of such a beast himself.

They galloped down towards the edge of a great lake that lay westerly of Hekkenfelt, upon the sloping cliffs of which they would find some monster den that had resulted in four deaths thus far and the loss of countless livestock, along with supply chain disruptions of a nearby fishing village.

With an arm around Ciana's waist and his other holding the Quest Flier, he considered the specific wording that had caught Heskel's attention:

A Quest issued by the fishing village 'Siltsoil' on the shore of Lake Pemuthid

Bronze Rank

Quest type: Investigation, Retrieval & Extermination

The lives of locals on the western shoreline of Lake Pemuthid, primarily those of the village Siltsoil, have been disrupted for months by seemingly-random feral animals. When some fishermen took it upon themselves to investigate, after Adventurers' Guild members failed to solve the problem permanently, they came upon a cave that had seemingly been sealed off for a long time, but was unearthed by a mudslide during heavy rainfall in the previous season.

Your task is to find the reason why animals, such as wolves, bears, boars, deer, and wildcats, all act with such hostility.

You are also to locate and retrieve the badges or other identifying items of the group of three Iron-ranked Adventurers who are presumed to have died while investigating the cave. Siltsoil locals are also looking to see returned the body of a fisherman who is presumed to have died in the cave.

Lastly, you are to exterminate and burn to ash any hostile animals you encounter, as these are believed to be infected with some behaviour-altering contagion.

Reward fee: 1600 Crowns

Lars-Albert
Deputy Guild Master of the Hekkenfelt Branch

"How did you manage to get a hold of this quest? Aren't you still Iron rank?"

Ciana steered them around a bend in the forest path and they began to slow down as they started down a cliffside path towards the distant water of the great lake.

"They practically begged me to," Ciana told him. "It seems that after their Gold-Ranker killed himself in public, there has been external pressure from the Head Office in the capital for them to shore up the Hekkenfelt Branch, starting with going through unresolved quests, of which it seems they have quite a few. It seems they are low on capable Adventurers and what few they have are worked to the bone already, so, given our ability to quickly resolve investigation-type quests, they thought this one fitting for us."

Jakob nodded. "It was a good find." The mention of a contagion, not to mention an unearthed cave sealed for a long time, smelled strongly of Grandfather's machinations. Though Jakob had no clue what exactly could be the root of animals going crazy.

"And they're paying us sixteen-hundred crowns," Ciana replied. "You could buy a house for that kind of reward!"

"We have no need of coins," Jakob replied. Heskel who was running alongside them grunted in agreement.

"Well, I do! I'm tired of stealing everything I want," she argued. "And remember, you said I was in charge of keeping us concealed from seeking eyes!"

"I suppose there is a sense to what you're saying."

Octavio was bleeding from a dozen superficial cuts, but his constitution and faith were stronger than the Wrathful Demon's feeble claws and blades.

They locked weapons again, his two swords holding back the Demon's two clawed and powerful fists. The two limbs sprouting from its back kept reconstructing themselves whenever Octavio let off pressure, but he was tiring fast and the Demon seemed possessed of bountiful energy, almost seeming to grow stronger with every wound he inflicted.

With a powerful kick, Octavio was sent flying away, but as he travelled, he began an incantation, realising that this foe was beyond even his ability to destroy.

As the Demon leapt after him, the appendages on its back regrowing, he carefully intoned the words, not even pausing as he tumbled head-over-heels and collided with the lone standing wall of a bakery which had become a smouldering ruin after having been set aflame by the scalding winds.

He finished the final two verses as he got to his feet:

"*Take this devourer of Thy children to kneel before Thy throne of purity and punishment!*"

"*Reveal to this foul beast Thy just ways and cleanse it of its corrupting seed!*"

It was always a risk to reword existing incantations, but his Lord had not failed him thus far, and he held an unshakeable faith in the justice of the Eight Saint.

The Wrathful Demon was only a few paces from reaching him and he lifted his swords, coated in a waning light, preparing to continue the fight, but then, from one moment to the next, a pillar of light fell upon the Demon. Its snarling and distorted body slammed into the barrier formed by the light, which burned so bright that even Octavio had to shade his eyes, while the impure monster within was letting off long streamers of black-and-crimson smoke, while its carapace of hardened blood, flesh, and bone fell off in large chunks.

"***WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME! I WILL DEVOUR YOUR SOUL! YOUR BODY! YOUR MIND!***"

"*You are blessed by the Eight Saint. Rejoice in the justice that will punish you, for it will be the holy waters that will reforge you and cleanse the sin from your bones.*"

Small child-like hands started sprouting from beneath the Demon, who remained trapped within the pillar. They kept growing upwards and grasping hold of its foul body, numbering quickly in the hundreds after just a couple seconds. Before long, there were so many of these long-limbed child hands that the creature beneath was totally obscured.

A strangled threat emerged before the hold of the thousands of arms tightened their grip and started dragging the Demon into the floor from where they had spawned.

Octavio stared at the scene all the while, until the pillar started to shrink and fade, leaving behind no sign of the Terror that had plagued his city for over a full day, killing upwards of three thousand civilians and men of his Elite Corps, not to mention the only man of the rank of Earl.

He had defeated this unexpected scourge, but he had lost too much in the process. This took his war with Helmsgarten to a different point. That they had sent such a foul monstrosity to soften up his beautiful city prior to their invasion was a thing Heimdale and Lleman could not ignore, for it violated all the treatises that previous apocalyptic wars had established as a result of the devastating outcomes.

Octavio raised his bleeding palm towards the sky, sending a flare of light into the air, and, minutes later, a joyous roar echoed across the city.

They had lost a lot this day, but they had just won the coming war. Providence had delivered them the impetus upon which their neighbouring countries would aid them and lend credence to Octavio's claim that Helmsgarten had become a hotbed of sin. Even the Pope, the ever-cautious figurehead of their faith, would be beholden to him now, his public downplaying of events now being the very thing that condemned him.

He walked over the where the Demon had stood when his improvised exorcism had taken hold. He stooped low and with his still-glowing swords, wane though their light had become, he carved the eight-pointed star into the limestone street, first burnt by hateful scalding wind and then cleansed by the pillar of his Lord's pure light.

XLVIII

The light burnt and flayed him, then rebuilt his vessel and soul, over-and-over, as he continued falling endlessly into a world of uniform purity.

That weaker part of him had woken up, as though rekindled by the Eight Saint's awful light.

Even though Raleigh had ascended to Knighthood, he was but a lowly insect before the almighty Saint of Purity, whose Vice was hated by the Seven that came before him.

Two suns sat unmoving in the realm of the Eight, undoubtedly the golden eyes of the Saint himself. The towering square mountains ranged a field of golden grass, upon which moved formless sprites of powerful souls, seemingly content to living in some form of harmony or unity and not warring for hegemony as with every other Realm of Vice.

Every time he was about to reach the ground of the Realm, the voice rang out in his head, before he was tossed back up into the air by enormous creatures of light and flayed in the light that was anathema to his soul and vessel.

REPENT.

But Raleigh would never kneel before such a Saint who allowed for harmony and hive-minded peace, doling out power to those that had not proven themselves worthy through combat nor cunning. He longed to return to the fold of the Wrathful Saint, but he had made an oath to Morrligt.

Even if he must spend hundreds of years tortured by the Saint of Purity within this despicable realm, he would endure it, biding his time until he could amass enough power to break free of the veil that kept him confined here.

He could tell the Saint sensed his plan, as, before he had even begun to fall downwards again, a rapidly-moving serpent of light had grasped him violently in its maw and begun wrenching him apart, only for his limbs to return moments later and his battered soul to become restored to full.

REPENT.

But he would not.

Even after a thousand years of being boiled alive by the cleansing light every moment, he would never submit. Even after being torn to shreds and restored to full, on-and-on-again, he would never capitulate. Even after having his entire soul and vessel twisted and crushed and ruined, he would never bend the knee for the Saint.

For a flame of hatred and wroth would not be blown out even amid a gale-force wind. Blessed by Morrligt as he were, his flame burnt with the intensity of a star, and, try as he might, the Eight Saint could never attain the strength to extinguish his anger.

With a voice like thunder and lightning, he roared into the face of those two suns that observed him. He reaffirmed his oath to his primogenitor, even as an explosion of light reduced him to nothingness and returned him to full a second later.

Raleigh would return to the Mundane Realm and fulfil his destiny.

Nøgel walked out of the sewer entrance in the Slums, holding the swaddling cloth around the *thing* that the Fleshcrafter had given him. This too, the whispers of the Keening murmured, was all part of the greater plan. His place was not to question, and so he followed the path laid out before him.

It had begun to wriggle by the time he had reconvened with Sirellius near Westgate.

"What are you holding there?"

"**Best you do not know,**" he replied.

Sirellius nodded slowly. It was obvious that he knew it was something the Fleshcrafter had gifted Nøgel. "And the abomination? Is it dealt with?"

"**I am a man of my word,**" Nøgel replied. "**I have additionally secured assurances from the Underking that his attack on the metropolis will not repeat, although, I also took it upon myself to eradicate a significant portion of his creatures.**"

"Excellent. Last thing I need to worry about is having our city overrun while we are waging a war on Octland."

Nøgel shrugged. "**I have done my part,**" he replied vaguely.

"Where do you plan to go next? Helmsgarten would be more than willing to hire you to aid in our war. My King may be foolhardy, but I'd rather see him rule than Archduke Octavio and his intolerant policies."

"**You are aware that the Guild strictly prohibits the use of Adventurers for national affairs.**"

"You would be made a General in our Royal Guard," Sirellius insisted.

Nøgel put a hand on his old friend's shoulder.

"**I will be taking my leave now, Sirellius. I pray we meet again.**"

The Old Advisor's posture slackened and he let out an audible sigh. "Why don't you ever stay in one place? You have already reached the peak of what the Guild can offer you. What else is there for you to seek??"

"**I seek Divinity,**" he replied, then hopped on the horse and took off. The *thing* in the swaddle-cloth began writhing, pointing him towards his target far away.

Ciana though it was convenient that all three of them had no need of torchlight to find their way through the narrow passageways of the cave.

They had already slain a good dozen randomly-assorted animals, who all had shards of something like glass or crystal lodged in their eyes, and were driven utterly mad.

After crawling through a particularly narrow gap, Jakob dusted himself off and gave her one of two elixirs he had dug out of his apron. He himself quickly drank the solution, but she wavered, wondering what exactly was in it.

He looked up at her with those intense eyes and said, "Fret not, Ciana. It is no foul thing I have given you. It is a potion that should slow the progress of bloodborne and airborne contagions."

Not wanting to show distrust for him, she quickly swallowed it, savouring the bitter earthy taste of it, before rinsing her mouth with water from a waterskin she had brought.

"**Matters not,**" Heskel commented, scenting a shard he had pulverised between his thumb and index finger. "**Demon curse.**"

Jakob scratched the skin around his mask, before saying, "We are on the right track then."

Heskel grunted in acknowledgement.

Ciana walked over to the brute and sniffed his fingers. The scent was like carbonised fat and a subtle note of some kind of fruity sweetness, bordering on too sweet.

"It's a Gluttony Demon, I think."

Jakob nodded, convinced. "This behaviour is not too unlike some of their kind, although they often eat everything in their territory."

"So it's something else?"

"Perhaps, or, if this truly is one of Grandfather's old laboratoriums, then it may be one of his experiments to alter demon behaviour."

"You can do *that*?"

"Given enough time, knowledge, and patience, anything can be rewritten and reshaped, even paragons of single-mindedness like Demons."

For what felt like hours, they crawled through man-made tunnels that were all almost completely collapsed. It seemed strange, how whatever demon-thing lurked in the depths of the cave system had managed to corrupt so many animals to protect itself and spread to other wildlife. But perhaps the first one to be corrupted was a small rodent scenting something deep within.

After yet another belly-crawl for the three of them to bypass a collapsed section, they were suddenly treated to an open hall of stone, where ancient signs showed tools had been used to excavate the bedrock. Further, in the room stood four figures, leaned over a central stone slab, upon which lay some hideously-malformed creature.

Each of the figures were in the late stages of decomposition, more bone than flesh, and their limbs held together mostly by ligaments and muscular tissue.

"Ciana, tear them down, but don't annihilate them!" Jakob ordered her as soon as he emerged behind her and saw the room.

She moved with swift steps and flung her right hand diagonally through the air, drawing her Vibrating Edge and slicing the head off of the frontmost figure, before spinning and beheading the other three.

As their spasming long-dead bodies fell to the floor of the ruined laboratorium, Jakob came up next to her, holding his creepy spell-tome, the vein-like tendrils of which had latched onto his ungloved fingers.

Heskel went ahead of them, the first to approach the slab that the four dead puppets had been working on. He grunted something that seemed to suggest disgust, which, to her was quite poignant, given that the Brute had thus far shown no apprehension towards the work that he and Jakob undertook.

"Fascinating," Jakob muttered, his mask making the single word sound foreboding.

"What is it?" Ciana asked, not wanting to get too close.

"To me, it looks like an attempt to bond a Demon's soul with the body of a chimera. But it has been left unattended for too long, and the natural decay of the Demon's aura has ruined the vessel."

There came a loud *splat* as Heskel smashed his fist into the half-liquid pinkish-purple clump of flesh. His strike was so powerful it made the floor shake and sent a large fissure down the solid block of stone that the slab was made from.

She thought Jakob would protest the Brute's hasty decision, but he seemed indifferent.

"Check the body for badges," he told her, assuming the lead. Given the situation, she did not argue back and began rifling through the month-old corpses, quickly locating Iron tags on three of

them and an embroidered handkerchief on the fourth. These would do as proof of them having found the deceased.

"What will we tell the Guild about this place?"

Neither Jakob nor Heskel replied, both of them busy looking through overturned cabinets, broken shelves, dusty bookcases, and so on.

In the end, they had properly collapsed the tunnel leading to the laboratorium and first gone to Siltsoil Village to hand over the handkerchief to their mayor, the man who had posted the quest. He had grumbled about there being no certainties that the mad animals would not return, but she had just shrugged off the comment.

Afterwards, they had ridden back to Hekkenfelt, arriving just before the sun had fully set. They had handed over the three Iron Badges of the deceased Adventurers, and were given the reward money, which Ciana eagerly took. Additionally, they had been assured that the following day they could pick up their new Bronze Badges.

They had cleared what should ostensibly have been a challenging quest in half a day, but that seemed of little import to Jakob, who had been disappointed at the abandoned lair of his Mentor not containing anything aside from some flimsy parchment scrolls about chimera experiments.

Ciana lay in her bed in the tavern where they had their rooms, flipping one of the gold coins they had earned. As it spun in the air above her, it caught the pale-blue light of the waxing moon. The coin was worth five-hundred Crowns, the equivalent to a few thousand Novarins. One coin alone would have been something she in the past would have killed to obtain, but now she had gained it so easily.

In a way she enjoyed being an Adventurer, and it was the perfect cover for someone like her, Heskel, or Jakob, as many Adventurers were outcasts who lived off of doing odd-jobs and dangerous tasks the commonfolk found either beneath them or were frightened to attempt.

I should have done this decades ago… she mused in regret.

The following day, she found Jakob in the butcher's shed he was borrowing for his work. He had apparently worked all night on an alteration to his prosthetic, which now allowed him to use the hollow core to fling out a long spear of manipulated blood, allowing him to strike a target at a range of about ten metres.

After he had finished his demonstration for her, she asked, "What next? Should we look through some more quest fliers?"

He shook his head. "We are leaving Hekkenfelt."

"I see. When?"

"Today. Make sure you have all your possessions, Heskel has already found us a horse for our carriage."

As they were leaving Hekkenfelt, one of the secretaries of the Guild Branch came out to wave farewell to Jakob, though he was oblivious to it, which Ciana found amusing. In many ways, he was like a child, but the darkness of the subjects he studied was perhaps to blame for his lack of social development.

They had only just left the outskirts of the town, when she scented *something* regal in the air, so potent that it made her entire body quake with tremors.

Jakob, who was sitting next to her asked, "Are you freezing?"

"No. I just thought I smelled something like a demon." *Something like my mother,* she thought but did not say.

"Truly?" he asked, sniffing the air as well.

Heskel, who had overheard the conversation slowed down their carriage and also began scenting the air, but found nothing out of the ordinary.

"It must've just been my mind playing tricks," she commented. "So, which way are we going?"

"Northeast, to a city bordering the vineyards of Libou. I don't know what it's called."

"Why there?"

"One of the texts we found mentions a catacomb beneath the city, where Grandfather once plied his trade, using the bones and flesh of the deceased for his constructs."

"Oh, I think I know the place!"

"Indeed?"

"It's called Hesslik, if I remember correctly." What she did not mention, was that not far from Libou and Hesslik lay the village where she had been born.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

XLIX

Nøgel had only just entered the town, when the *thing* in his swaddling cloth started squirming violently. However, hunting down the Fleshcrafter's Apprentice was secondary, after all, he was still making the rounds, visiting those of his contacts who had sent him urgent letters. Last on the list was Harland, and his discovery was certainly something Nøgel was curious about.

He started off by visiting his house, which lay at the far end of the main street. One of the secretaries of the Guild were audibly crying from within the Guild Hall, while it seemed everyone else were in low spirits. But who could blame them? This town was a dump, with nothing happening aside from a few lootings now-and-then and the occasional cattle going missing to forest predators.

After knocking on the house door a few times, one of Harland's neighbours came out of the next house over and told him the news:

"Man's dead, ser. Killed himself, he did. Right down in the Guild Hall. Horrible thing it was. They say he tore off and ate his own face before doing it, too."

Nøgel was not a man to grieve the loss of associates, but something seemed *so incredibly wrong* that he felt himself gripped by an ominous sense of dread. He dropped the reins of his horse and sprinted all the way back up the main street to the Guild Hall, where he stormed through the perpetually-open door and strode over to the Receptionist who was crying, slamming his hands down on the countertop.

"I need to know what happened to Harland!"

"What do you think *this* is?" she asked her second.

"Public records mention nothing about this, ma'am."

Tress stared at the fifteen-metre-wide pond of abyss-black water. She had no knowledge of any Daemon capable of manifesting such geographical changes with such rapidity.

"Ma'am, if I may…"

"Yes? Speak your mind, Arn."

"As you know, I hail from the east of Heimdale, where the land borders the Haunted Wilds."

Tress nodded, urging him to continue.

"I have seen such waters before, when I travelled through Lilibeth towards the capital."

She drew some old rumours from the depths of her mind, "…The great lakes…"

"Exactly. Having seen them up close, I can tell you they are the same, with the only difference being size. But, it is said by those long-lived enough to notice the slow passing of change, that even the Great Lakes were not so great half a century prior. They were described to be akin to ponds…"

"We need to inform the Diviner of this," she decided. "Have someone prepare my horse, I'll return to Helmsgarten with news of our victory, as well as the lists we have compiled of missing civilians and caravanners."

"Shall I accompany you?"

Tress put a hand on Arn's shoulder. "You will take over here in my absence."

He was taken aback for a moment, but then replied, "I will do my utmost to match your brilliant leadership, such that the men shall not waver in body or soul."

She nodded to him with a loose smile. She had known he would rise to the task, but it was still reaffirming to witness it. After the sordid matters were dealt with, she would entreat with Sirellius for Arn's promotion. Given the great loss of men, not to mention the coming war, the Royal Guard needed all the capable leaders they could gather.

As she pushed past many of her exhausted cohort, who all seemed to naturally gravitate towards the black pond, there was a sudden commotion up ahead, but before she could even draw her sword, the man nearest to her was sliced open by a nimble and lithe bone-white doll. It took her a few seconds to realise she was this new attacker's intended target, but when she felt those scornful bright-green eyes lock on her, the hairs on her neck stood up stiff.

Tress took a single step back, as the man before her keeled over and the doll tumbled through the air acrobatically, one of its blades catching the skin on her forehead and dragging its way down through her left eye and towards her mouth with scalpel-sharp efficiency.

Then a missile of condensed ice caught the bone doll in the midsection and sent it flying for a few metres, before a group of incensed Guardsmen pulverised its body with spell and blade.

With her knees on the soft earth of the ruined district and her hands clasped to her ruined face, Tress gritted her teeth against the pain. It hurt so much that she wanted to vomit and cry, but, she was a leader, and such was beneath her stature.

"Medic!" shouted Arn as he came to her side, but with one hand of her bloodred hands, she indicated the few Guardsmen that lay in the path before her that the attacker had followed.

"Save those you can," she ordered him, returning her hand to her face.

Darkly, she found it amusing that one of the great many challenges to her rise up the ranks had been her perceived beauty and the 'benefits' they blessed her with, in the eyes of her superiors. What would they say now when they saw her face?

It had taken them two weeks to reach Hesslik, during which time they had mostly just sat in silence on the back of the carriage. The few times they stopped every day to feed and water their mount, Ciana had trained with her power, wanting to keep it honed for whenever it was needed.

During their journey, she had once again found it unsettling how the Fleshcrafter sat unmoving, staring blankly ahead, so deep in thought and contemplation that he may as well have been a statue. But she supposed that anyone who practised his craft had a lot to think about. Certainly, mental fortitude was a prerequisite for enduring the toils on the mind that seemed necessary to invoke Entities beyond comprehension.

They rolled into the wall-off city of Hesslik sometime past noon. Ciana was toying with her iron badge, but, before she could dismount, Jakob took the badge from her and handed her an identical one out of bronze.

"Heskel got these for us before we left," he told her.

Ciana could not help keep the grin from her face. Though it was a token of an institution she had long abhorred, the bronze badge represented her acceptance into the social strata of civilisation, even if Adventurers did not rank high in the grand scheme of things.

"I had one of these back in Helmsgarten," Jakob told her. "But it was taken from me."

She was about to ask "*By whom?*", but then he hopped off the cart and immediately went to the eastern sector of the city. She wanted to follow him, but instead spent the next hour aiding Heskel

and Wothram find a place to stow their cart and its precious cargo of severed lumps of an ancient tree's first branch.

After she and Heskel had gone to the Adventurers' Guild to register their team, they picked up Wothram and the horse-drawn carriage they had hidden in an abandoned shed, before following the way Jakob had went.

They passed down cobbled streets, where a recent rainfall had shifted the stones in the soft clay-like dirt, making it a bumpy ride.

Ciana sat behind the reins, while Heskel walked ahead of their horse-and-carriage, scenting the air for traces of the Fleshcrafter.

After about half an hour, the Brute caught the scent of his Master and took them down a narrow alley, where, more-than-once, the sides of their cart scraped against the brickwork of the houses they passed. At the end of the alleyway lay a four-story house that was quite narrow in width, such that it could sit between the other two-stories, spanning no more than four metres in its façade. In the doorway stood Jakob, waiting on them.

After offloading their cart and taking their horse to a nearby stable for safekeeping, they went through the house, the owner of which had apparently passed away some weeks prior. In terms of which part of the city they were in, it was, Jakob said, like an upper residential district. Ciana did not have much to compare it to, but he seemed to think it was similar to the metropolis of Helmsgarten, where he had spent most of his life.

"Most importantly," he continued. "There is a way to go through the basement and reach the catacombs that half the city lies atop of."

"Before that," she started. "What is our plan? Should we continue to blend in?"

"I can handle the exploration of the underside of Hesslik," he replied. "You and Heskel may do as you see fit."

"Then I will see if there are any interesting quests available in the Guild," she told him.

"You want to continue to rise through their ranks?"

"Preferably. I find it to be rather fun."

A puff of spent vapour left his mask, then he nodded.

"We must bide our time, as seasons change, and the prerequisites for our ritual draw near. Keep an eye out for any who seek Heskel or me."

"I will."

"Also," he continued, scratching the skin around his mask. "I would like to learn how to ride a horse."

Ciana was caught so off-guard that she could not help but laugh.

"I'll teach you."

Jakob had spent the past few weeks combing through the catacombs for secrets, but had thus far come up empty-handed. Heskel had aided his search a few days, but was more than often out on quests with Ciana, which, for reasons that he himself could not explain, made him jealous.

Have I become so perverted by the demons with whom I cavort, that I now too exhibit their vices like the symptoms of some illness plaguing my soul?

The Wight and Elphin had spent a lot of time together since they had met, but perhaps it was less about Jakob and more to do with the fact that Heskel had been brought up on Grandfather's incessant rants about the splendour of Elphin and how rare they were.

Though, Jakob was a victim of Grandfather's brainwashing too. Even now, there were many perspectives on things that he wondered were truly his own or leftover remnants of his Mentor's teachings.

Blame not the beast, was his most favoured saying, and yet, perhaps it was a shield by which he himself had hidden from accusation of cowardice in fearing the end that all mortal men face. Certainly, one should not blame a pig for wallowing in filth, but one ought to blame a man as brilliant as Grandfather for his manifold shortcomings.

He had a pause as he leant back from his unearthing of yet another skeleton behind what had seemed a plausible entrance to some deeper tunnels.

Why do I seek to find his old laboratoriums? What boon will past knowledge he left behind have for me? After all, those remnant shreds of knowledge they had found near Hekkenfelt had been like child's play to what Jakob already knew.

Jakob wiped his hands of the grave-dirt on his spongey apron.

This is a waste of time…

Another realisation hit him, one which was obvious, given the revelations he had about his former Master.

The knowledge that I will benefit from is all within his demesne. In the bowels of Helmsgarten. In his greedy miserly clutches. In his jealous claws.

With the benefit of hindsight and what Jakob had learnt of the world and of demons since parting from his Mentor, he knew that Grandfather was a weak man. Certainly, he had been great once. A man without equal. But now, following his encounter with his own frail mortality, he had broken. He had signed some pact with a Great One and voluntarily interred himself in his laboratorium.

What worth is there in following someone of such a pitiful nature?

Jakob left the catacombs.

As fresh air brushed against his skin, he took off the scent-mask and indulged in a deep breath. The air here was better than that of the Metropolis. Hesslik was no bad place to hide out for now. But he had made up his mind. Once six more months had passed and their branches belonged to a millennium tree, they would invoke Nharlla and obtain the power of the Divine straight from its source. Armed with their newfound power, they would return triumphantly to Helmsgarten and wipe the stain of Grandfather from the metropolis, and cannibalise all his hoarded knowledge for themselves.

Jakob drew in another deep breath, his newfound goal filling him with a tremendous sense of power. No more would he look to the past. The future was where his aim was locked.

"Excuse me?" asked a man, suddenly breaking him from his thoughts.

For the act of interrupting his grand scheming, he almost tore the man in half with his newly-modified prosthetic, but he managed to relent.

"What is it?"

"Are you the new Undertaker?"

Jakob looked the man up-and-down. He seemed the sort that was somewhat well-off, though ultimately inconsequential in the grand scheme of Hesslik and its no doubt dreary politicking.

He nodded in response.

"Excellent. Yes, excellent… We have so many bodies that need burial in our distinguished catacombs, y'see." He fiddled with his lapel as he spoke. Jakob wondered if it was because he was scared or just habitually-nervous.

"And you are?"

"Mayor Selvmon."

Jakob gave him another look up-and-down. For a man who should have been at the top of the city's hierarchy, he certainly did not look like it. Though he wore a suit, it was clearly a hand-me-down, with many patched holes and a shoddy retrofit for his indulgent figure. Even the servants of Hesslik's nobles wore finer clothes…

"I see," was all he replied.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to take you to the morgue straight away. There's a lot of work to be done after all."

"Of course."

"Excellent. Y'see, Magister Harmlig is already there and he has been complaining about the overflow of bodies."

"How many are we talking?"

"Err, well, close on two-hundred."

Jakob stopped in his tracks. "I will go fetch a servant of mine, wait here."

"Yes, of course. Excellent."

After ensuring that the branch pieces were stored away safely in the basement of the house they occupied, Jakob brought Wothram with him to the catacombs entrance where he had met the Mayor. It was a peculiar thing, but the Mayor seemed not the least perturbed by the visage of Wothram.

The three of them went up and alley and then half-way across a street, where they took yet another turn down an alley and found a large ramp that lead down into the basement of a square slab of a building. As they came through a large hoistable gate, Jakob realised that the ramp was purpose-made for carts ferrying bodies in-and-out of the basement.

Down in the basement, the Mayor clumsily introduced Jakob to the Magister by the name of Harmlig.

The Magister was perhaps ten years Jakob's senior, but it was hard to tell, given the fact that some malign illness had ravaged half his face and seemingly paralysed his right arm. His hair was a potent black mane and his one good eye had a blue iris with specs of brown. The rest of his face looked like the aftermath of a chemical burn and the right eye was melted into the skin of the cheek. His nose and mouth seemed fine however.

The first thing the man said, was, "Do you have another one of *those*?" while pointing to Jakob's mask.

"I do not."

"A shame. I've been using wax plugs in my nose, but they don't seem to truly keep out the stench. It's rather foul."

"Not to worry! Y'see. This man here is Magister—"

"Goddard," Jakob said.

"A new Undertaker?" Harmlig asked.

"Yes, indeed."

"About time," he scolded the Mayor. "Took you long enough to replace the last guy!"

Mayor Selvmon, rather than defend his pride, lowered his head in apology.

Harmlig gave Jakob an appraising look. "You're not *just* an Undertaker are you?"

Jakob looked to the Mayor, who seemed to realise he was no longer wanted and made his escape with hasty steps back up the basement ramp.

After the Mayor had left, Jakob replied, "My forte is Summoning and Fleshcrafting."

He was unsure why he felt a desire to confide in the Magister, but perhaps it was because he sensed a kindred spirit in the man, or maybe it was a recklessness borne from the confidence he felt in his newfound goal of usurping his Master.

"Summoning, huh?"

Jakob nodded.

"And your servant there, am I right in assessing that it was made from bones?"

"Human bones," Jakob replied, as if the distinction was important.

Harmlig laughed. "It has been a while since I met a Magister with some actual guts."

"It is all for the pursuit of knowledge," Jakob replied.

The Magister fixed him with a solid stare of his good eye. "We may have more in common than I thought."

Jakob let out a vent of spent vapour, then said, "If you tell me what your setup is for, then I will craft you a mask." He indicated the piles of bodies that surrounded the few workstations in the basement. "After all, materials are plentiful here."

Harmlig grinned in response. "Truth be told, I am mostly numb to the stench by now, but I will not decline the offer. I am a Magister of Pathogens. My study here is of the flea-borne parasitic typhoid. Hesslik has been hit rather hard by it, and Lord Karsten of the Merchant's Guild in the capital hired me to find a cure."

"Is there a cure?" Jakob asked sincerely.

"Of course, though it depends on the individual. For now, it is on a treatment basis, but I plan to construct a proactive solution."

Jakob looked at the strange setup of lenses and a telescope mounted horizontally. It brought to mind the zoom lens glass that Pernille had gifted him with.

"And to that end, you use these scopes?"

Harmlig did not reply, but instead took two wafers of almost-perfectly-clear glass that were sandwiched together, then put them below the horizontal telescope and indicated for Jakob to look through the lenses that were situated in eye-height. He had to stoop slightly to into them, but then he saw a blurry image of things squirming around. They looked like beans with long tentacle-like feelers.

"Is that…?"

"You are looking at the parasites that cause the typhoid."

"Fascinating."

Jakob found it quietly comforting to once again have someone he could work side-by-side with and not having to fret that revealing his true nature would scare them off.

"You know," Harmlig said, as he was cracking open the cranium of a recently-diseased adolescent boy to get to the brain within. "It is nice to have a work companion that does not judge me for my work."

Jakob did not tell him that his thoughts were the same, but instead just grunted in acknowledgement, while he was laying out the bones of the freshest male corpses on his slab. While Wothram was a tireless worker capable of loading and ferrying a cart of corpses to the catacombs once every half hour, it was nowhere near enough to compete with the steady flow of new corpses. So Jakob was constructing another servant.

The previous few days he had been making the tallow candles of human fat that he needed, making more than enough, just so he had enough for yet another servant if the need arose.

It was fortunate that the basement of the morgue was so extensive, as it allowed for both Harmlig and Jakob to work their craft, while also staying clear of the hole in the backwall where new corpses arrived by the dozen every couple of hours.

After laying out the bones, he began to chant the Amalgam Hymn, and while working his way down the bones he was fusing together to reinforce them beyond the limits of human capabilities, he felt Harmlig observe him quietly.

He had just finished the longest of the sections, the torso-and-waist, when Harmlig came over with a cold cup of mead. Jakob took it gratefully and used the deeply-flavourful spirit to treat his tired vocal cords and throat muscles.

"It's impressive how you can maintain a steady rhythm for that long. Tell me, can you breathe through your ears, Goddard?"

Jakob looked at the Magister, who was wearing a mask that he had made from the bones of two female hands. Harmlig had insisted that Jakob kept the appearance of the hands, rather than smoothen out the bones as originally intended. The result was that the design of the mask looked as though a bone spider was gorging on the lower half of his face. The vents were crude, but functional, and, strangely, when presented with the choice of what sort of scent-ball he wished for, Harmlig had said he would make his own, ending up with something that had a mixed scent of cinnamon and a pungent leaf that Jakob suspected was a lesser narcotic. But he would allow the Magister this vice, for it did not rule his faculties, only seeming to mellow him out somewhat.

"Help me lift it up," Jakob told him.

The Magister let out a puff of vapour as he chuckled at the command, but obeyed nonetheless, despite the fact that they were equals in this place.

They both grunted with effort as they lowered it to the dirty floor, which Jakob had attempted to scrub clean for the ritual circle, though to no avail.

"Thank you," Jakob said.

Harmlig clapped him on the back and returned to his study of the tiny parasites.

"*Where void rules, light the ember of Unlife.*"
"*Where void rules, sprout the seed of thought.*"

"*Where void rules, fill it with conscious noise.*"

"*O Eternal Serpent, Birthe Sentience!*"

Harmlig stood away a few metres from where Jakob knelt, his twisted face lit ominously by the white flames. He was clearly no stranger to such a ritual, but he doubtfully knew what the result would be, given the obscure nature of the rite.

The room went dark, after the corpse-tallow lights bent their flames inwardly and flooded the inanimate construct with life, before the dull light of their candleflames seemed to remember their ability to illuminate.

As the construct rose from the floor, its arms longer than those of Wothram, and its entire frame a head-and-a-half taller, Jakob called the golem to his side.

With both of the constructs before him, he painted a Necroscript sigil in the forehead of each of the two. He thought it looked similar to demonic Obedient Squire symbol, though it was a six-pointed star and half a complex letter within on each of them, so that they together formed a whole.

Then he recited the simple addition to the Birthe Sentience rite, which would allow his new creation, Mayhew, to absorb the knowledge of Wothram, such that the newborn Sentience would not start from scratch.

"*Sentience born anew, absorb from thy betters,*"

"*The knowledge once seeded and grown, now is harvested,*"

"*Imbibe of the fountain of experience.*"

The two sigils burst into pale light and then vanished. Visually nothing happened, but as Jakob set them both to the task of clearing out the oldest corpses piled high in the basement, it was clear that Mayhew was no fresh intellect, but rather a copy of Wothram, as, despite his taller frame, he moved in the same manner that Wothram had developed. It would take time for Mayhew to refine his motor functions, but it was better to give him a completed image and let him sculpt it to his liking, rather than to ask of him to learn it all by himself.

"I have no idea what just happened," Harmlig commented. "But that was certainly impressive."

"I gifted the servant with a facsimile of life, one which contains a constantly-evolving core."

"You gave it a soul?"

"Not a soul, for it will never truly be alive. But from the outside, it may appear just like a soul grafted to a human-sized doll."

Harmlig nodded, quite taken aback by the ordeal, but nonetheless fascinated.

Jakob was about to go to work, when a commotion from the nearby main street drew his attention. He ignored it until the Magister commented, "Another noble-born has passed, from the sounds of it."

"Really?"

"They always do these long processions of mourning, as they take the bodies to their family tombs just beyond the southwestern wall where the nobles have their graveyard complex."

Jakob let out a puff of vapour and began cleaning up the leftover tallow and wiping the charcoal drawings from the stone floor. It went without saying that, seeing as he was hired as an Undertaker, leaving behind evidence of ritualistic work was a bad idea.

"Wanna see who it is?"

"Why?"

"It may be Selvmon. That chubby bastard has somehow survived catching the disease twice, so he is due, if you ask me."

"He did not seem affluent enough to warrant such a procession," Jakob replied in something that might amount to sarcasm.

Harmlig chuckled. “I suppose you’re right. Still, let’s go take a look.”

Jakob was about to argue that it was a pointless waste of time, but then he changed his mind and followed the Magister out of the basement that they had, for the most part, been living in for over a week as they worked and discussed theory.

It struck Jakob as peculiar that he had not seen Ciana and Heskel in all this time, but he supposed they were hard at work themselves, the Elphin seeking fame and fortune, and the Wight obligingly acquiescing to her desires.

LII

Harmlig was slightly ahead of him in the crowd that had gathered to observe the procession of black-clad figures. The Pathogen Magister had taken off his mask, but Jakob kept his equipped, even though it seemed to draw a lot of eyes to him.

"I wonder how bad we must smell," Harmlig suddenly commented. Jakob noted that the people around them had cleared away somewhat.

"I used to live in the sewers of Helmsgarten," Jakob replied, "this much is nothing."

"You are certainly a peculiar one, even amongst Magisters," the man replied, though, despite the words, it seemed a compliment.

As the closed casket of cherrywood passed by, Jakob locked onto one of the figures trailing directly behind it. Life seemed to have been drained from him by loss and it was clear that he had not groomed himself in a while, as his beard was unkempt and his hair unruly. When he looked up for a moment, his face sparked recognition in Jakob, though he could not fully place it. The man saw Jakob as well and seemed to freeze in place. Then he suddenly strode straight towards him.

Jakob almost unleashed his prosthetic and its hidden magic, but before he could make a decision, the grief-stricken man embraced him firmly, putting his head on Jakob's shoulder and letting out a gut-wrenching sob.

"If only… if only I had known *you* were here!"

Just then Jakob remembered the man. He was the noble who had set him up with the clinic in Rooskeld.

"Who is in the coffin?" Jakob asked, dreading the answer.

"Pernille… my dear niece," Count Bastian replied, and then he was overcome by grief and let out a wailing cry, muffled by the inhuman fabric of Jakob's robes.

As though turned to stone, Jakob could only follow the cherrywood casket with his eyes as it proceeded past him, a train of servants and family following close behind, all in similar states to that of the man embracing Jakob.

It felt as though his brain was on fire.

I had saved her. Protected her from Guillaume by sending her away...

This makes no sense… why would she be dead?

Why wasn't I informed?

Thoughts whirled around his brain as he tried to comprehend the situation. His breath seemed locked in his lungs, with no ability to escape.

Was this what grief felt like? Jakob could not recall having experienced it before.

But he was a pragmatic man.

"I can bring her back," he told the sobbing uncle.

Next to them, Magister Harmlig silently observed, a curious grin on his face.

Heskel seemed perturbed by Ciana's obstinate insistence on using a normal sword, but still he followed her lead as they went out on their quests for the Guild.

The previous one had been about a strange burrowing insectoid creature that was certainly another of Jakob's Mentor's creations. She had started to recognise the stench of his particular nature of Fleshcrafting, or Chimera Breeding as she had heard Jakob call it.

The stenches of demons were pure, single-minded, and direct, but the chimeras they had encountered thus far: wolf-faced arachnid and burrowing woodlouse monster the size of a carriage; they bore the scent of fear, blood, wroth, and pride, along with an underlying note that brought the image of the disfigured Elphin in Svalberg to the forefront of her mind.

In short, she was repulsed by them, in a way that went beyond the mere vision of their transnatural forms. It was instinctual; shaking her to the fundament of her core being. Fortunately, she had not caught the same stench from Jakob's work, though in his work the smell of death was pervasive, along with the faintest whiff of regal Pride and metallic Greed.

Elphin like her were all possessed of a supernatural sense of the Septet Vices and their effects on humans, given their unique position between the two species, but never had she smelled them as intensely as with the work of the one called 'Grandfather'. His chimera offspring were seemingly condensed forms of Vice made manifest within the physical realm. At first, she had been interested in meeting Jakob's Mentor, but after seeing his creations and discovering that both Heskel and Jakob abhorred the man, she had changed her mind.

Ciana was not naïve, she knew that following the Fleshcrafter and his Brute companion was a path of thorns that led to the worst depravities of man, but it was a sobering thought to find that such morally-black people even had figures in their lives that they viewed as evil and corrupt.

A grunt from Heskel tore her from her travel-induced reverie. They had arrived at the camp of the Bandit King and his Highwaymen gang.

"We go through the front," she told the Brute. Surprisingly, his body language seemed to suggest it was a bad idea, but she was in charge.

She pulled her silver sword from the sheath Heskel had fashioned her out of the hide of the first wolf-head arachnid they had slain. Then she strode into the open.

It took the Highwaymen a precious few moments to realise their hideout in the ruins of some old farmstead had been invaded, and by then they had already lost a quarter of their number to Ciana's blade and Heskel's destructive fists.

Ciana danced through the air and spun with the grace of a felid, while carving open the underequipped bandits, who wielded dull bells and wore clothes ill-fit for battle. In total, there were about forty of them, but after only the first few minutes, they were down to half-a-dozen and a few moments later, it was just the one.

The Bandit King lay dead, and Heskel was already setting about removing his head from his shoulders, while Ciana played around with the man's bodyguard, whose sooth-black skin spotted in dots of pale white informed her that he was from the northern continent, where masters of martial arts were born on a weekly basis, or so the rumours spoke. Still, even with so illustrious a heritage, the man was barely putting up a fight.

Heskel held the dripping head of the Bandit they had been given the bounty for and grunted impatiently for her to finish the guy off.

She sidestepped a lunge, then slapped away his follow-up, and was about to ram her blade through his torso, when suddenly the Northerner pushed her off-balance with a gust of condensed air, making her stumble for just a second, as he speared her through her shoulder, somehow bypassing the bone armour she wore and managing to grate the bone of her shoulder joint.

With a kick to his stomach she created distance between them, then lifted her hand and popped his head like a pumpkin smashed with a hammer, before tumbling to the ground, a profuse amount of blood leaking through the segments of her armour.

Heskel roared and flew over to her and with a single motion tore open her carapace shell, putting his powerful hand on her shoulder wound and beginning to mutter a string of sing-song words, but she passed out before she could figure out what for.

Wothram had lifted Pernille out of her casket and gently lain her down on the stone coffin that she was meant to be interred within for eternity. The Golem stood near the backwall now, watching patiently as seemed his wont whenever not assigned a task. Count Bastian sat on one of the stone benches in the catacombs they found themselves in, his head in his hands, and Harmlig was busy removing the malignancy from Pernille's body to the best of his ability.

Jakob meanwhile was knelt on the hard ground of the Tingleif family tomb, where the stone coffins of Bastian and Pernille's ancestors lay entombed, many of their sarcophagi sculpted to match the likeness of their faces and covered in longform poems that seemed to incapsulate the essence of their lives.

Where Jakob knelt, he was desecrating the floor with a piece of charcoal, drawing out the lines of the Twinned Heart Rite. The implications of the ritual were grim, but, to him, it seemed the simplest way of bringing the full spirit of Pernille back from death, without having to cavort with conniving Daemons. Bastian easily agreed to the plan, though, in truth, Jakob would not have given him a choice. Though, for the Twinned Heart to work, cooperation was a boon, but not a requirement, least of all when he still had enough Demon's Blood to force the man to serve.

After a few hours, where Jakob oversaw the work Harmlig was performing, the time for the ritual arrived. The longer they wait, the worse off Pernille's body would be and the more complications could follow, so when Jakob deemed Harmlig's work sufficient to stave off death, he bade Bastian lift the corpse of his niece to the drawn-out Necromantic Sigil on the floor of his family's tomb.

Following the prescribed nature of the ritual, as put forth in his Of Undeath and Bone Necromantic tome, Jakob adjusted the Count and his niece, such that they lay within the hexagram, the Eternal Serpent surrounding them, and formed a vague resemblance with a heart while staring at each other.

Count Bastian had fallen mute, which Jakob took as a sign that the grief had permanently altered his mental state to a point of disabling his functions of logic and reasoning. But it ensured his cooperation, which was all that Jakob required.

Harmlig walked over to where Wothram stood statue-still and observed as Jakob placed the six human tallow candles at each point of the star, where they overlapped the outer ring. Then he knelt at the feet of the two figures, one dead and one catatonic, and began to recite the spell rite. "*Two hearts become as one,*"

"*Two minds become as one,*"

"*Two souls become as one,*"

"*Conjoin these two in a single embrace and connect their souls with a single thread,*"

"*Merciful Serpent of Eternity, whose coiled figure surrounds us all,*"

"*Make of these separate hearts a single whole,*"

"*And even in death be they twinned of heart eternally.*"

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

LIII

Jakob sat in the morgue, his two Birthed Sentience servants doing his work while he contemplated the decision he had made the previous day. Seeing Pernille stir to life had both brought a sense of accomplishment and joy to him, but it had also imbued him with the dreadful realisation that not all dead are meant to be given a second chance.

Upon realising her circumstances, Pernille had fainted, and Bastian had carried her to a private carriage, a few of his closest staff following him on horseback, as they rode off into the night, going who-knew-where to live out the remainder of their lives together, never to ever be apart again.

Seeing Jakob sitting on his stool staring at the floor in contemplating, Harmlig had asked him, "Why did you do it? Who was she to you?"

Or perhaps Jakob had only imagined he was asked the question, for when he looked over, the Magister was engrossed in his work and seemed to not spare him a single glance.

"It was a momentary lapse in judgement," Jakob confided in him. Harmlig, for his part, did not move from where he stared at the many samples of the typhoid parasite he had collected through the lenses of his contraption. "I wished to repay a gift given to me in the past, and I believed it was the best way to do it."

"But you regret it now?"

"Perhaps I regret the means by which I did it. It was hasty and thoughtless."

"What exactly does the ritual do? I am no occultist, and the words you spoke were meaningless to me."

Jakob let out a sigh of spent air, which quickly lifted towards the ceiling and mixed with the fog of Harmlig's vented vapours, though the scents they cast into the air were obscured totally by the scent of putrefaction and death that the basement was forever stained to bear, even if the epidemic came to an end and bodies no longer piled high along the back of the expansive room.

"When two hearts are twinned together by the Eternal Serpent, they are fused together in mind, heart, and soul. Their thoughts are forever shared. Their hearts beat to the same rhythm. Their bodies are like twin vessels for one unusual soul to occupy."

"Forgive me if this is a dumb question, but would that not mean that they share the same life energy?"

"They do. If one falls ill, they both fall ill. If one dies, they both die."

"But it seems a small price to pay, to see your beloved brought back from the dead."

"Perhaps, though they have now become slaves to each other. They can never stray far from the other, lest the bond forcefully snaps and they both are sent to the abyss of the beyond. They may also harbour no ill will towards the other, for it too will violate the sanctity of the rite. Further, given that one was dead and the other nearing his final decade of life, even well-off as he is, they must share a quite limited time together, before death takes them both."

"Even then. They will at least share their final moments and never be apart."

Jakob let out another sigh. He had not felt this way before. Regret was antithetical to his being, but then, he had also never before made a rash decision of this nature. It went against the core of his very being to act based on emotions. It had been beaten out of him by Grandfather all those many years ago, so why had it now resurfaced?

"Hopefully, it will be a life they both do not regret living."

Harmlig looked up from his contraption to take in the expression on Jakob's face. He looked as though he was about to make a comment, but then he did not, and instead just watched the Fleshcrafter for some time.

The Fleshcrafter smelled of a charnel house when he came to see her. Heskel had somehow managed to carry her all the way back to Hesslik without ruining the hasty needlework he had patched her up with. For whatever reason, he had not used his esoteric magic to make her whole, and, now, as she lay on a bed on the third floor of the house they were squatting in, she realised that Jakob likewise did not intend to mend her using his magics.

"This will hurt," he told her, his voice almost comforting, "but please do not scream. Bear this pain and remember what I told you: *Power is meant to be used*. Heskel says you have forsaken your gift for some fleeting vanity or fancy. This wound is your punishment for your carelessness. The Great Ones do not favour those who do not utilise the gifts they have given."

Jakob lifted his unsettling glove over her exposed chest and bade Heskel put pressure on the wound, as he undid the stitched on her skin with a thin blade protruding from the index finger of his glove.

"*Purll, I need a longer blade*," he said in the lilting tongue of Ciana's mother, and then the blade on his glove doubled in length. When he began cutting deeper into her tissue, she gritted her teeth against the pain, but still could not help the tears that welled forth in the corners of her eyes.

Power is meant to be used, she scolded herself.

This was her punishment for her hubris.

The Fleshcrafter continued speaking to his demon-possessed glove while he worked and she felt the blade within her flesh alter and shift according to the commands he gave it.

Ciana stared a hole in the ceiling, feeling herself become distant from the reality of the situation, not even noticing when the Brute eased off the pressure and fetched string for the Fleshcrafter to seal up the ruined tissue within her body. Nor did she notice when Jakob masterfully spliced the severed halves of her axillary artery back together, before removing the clamps the Brute had placed on them within the ruins of the Highwayman Hideout to prevent her from bleeding to death. Even after the procedure was over and her shoulder was stitched back together neatly, she just lay there, her mind faraway, thinking of her last lover and the time they danced around in the moonlight in a clearing of the Heartblack Forest.

Surprisingly, Jakob took quite well to the lessons Ciana gave him, and, after only a few tries, he was staying steadily seated in the saddle of their horse. After only a few days, he was galloping down the roads that ran around city of Hesslik, the Wight and Elphin running alongside him.

When he sat in the saddle and held the reins, he felt a sense of invincibility that he had never felt before, not even when completing a time-consuming and complex construct such as Stelji or Loke. The speed was exhilarating to him and every moment that he did not spend in the basement with Magister Harmlig was dedicated to taking the horse for a ride, though many such rides were cut short by the draft horse running out of stamina and coming to an abrupt halt, almost throwing him off each time it happened.

After returning to the animal to the stable where they kept it, he went to the morgue basement and excitedly told Harmlig of his next construct he would make.

"You have changed as of late," Harmlig remarked.

Jakob scratched the top of his pate under his hood, where hair was starting to grow in, itching a lot as a result. "Perhaps this is who I was meant to become," he replied.

"Or maybe your regrets about resurrecting your lady-friend have manifested into some manic aberration to your demeanour. I have seen it before, you know. There are many Magisters who suddenly find themselves in love, or discover a new passion, following a tremendous setback in their professional work or some near-death experience."

Jakob took a deep draught of his scent-mask. "Are you going to help me?"

"I don't know a lot about equine anatomy," the Magister replied.

"Nor do I," Jakob admitted.

Harmlig got up from his seat, where a shine had been worn into the wooden surface due to him always using the stool. "Let's see if we can find some old draft horse or something to use for studying."

Jakob nodded. He liked this about the Magister: he was resourceful.

The *thing* in the swaddling cloth would not stop squirming, as Nøgel rode north towards Sirellius' hometown of Hesslik. It seemed an ominous thing that the Fleshcrafter's Apprentice had visited not only the obscure village of Hekkenfelt where Harland had done his research, but now also the city where the Old Advisor had spent his youth. If he did not know any better, he would think that the Apprentice had some disturbing grand plan to undermine all the major players on the continent, one-by-one.

Of course, there was the possibility that these were all random occurrences, but it seemed quite unlikely. After all, Nøgel knew for a fact that a vile spell had been cast on his mentee Harland to cause him to publicly kill himself. And having witnessed the autopsy of the Gold-Ranker, he knew that they had not managed to recover any scraps of his torn-off face that he was supposed to have swallowed.

What use could the face of a Gold-Ranking Adventurer be worth to the likes of him?

The wriggling thing urged him onwards yet again, its impatient motions seeming to sense the distance to his target growing shorter by the moment.

"**O Keening, render thy aural onslaught.**"

LIV

Ciana was accompanying Jakob to the Guild, where they were to pick up their new Silver Badges, when suddenly she scented that incredibly-dense smell of regal Proudful Vice.

She froze, putting a hand on Jakob's chest to halt him. Further down the street a man came wandering towards them, intently focused on something that wriggled in a swaddling cloth in his grip. His blue shirt and black woollen vest, along with his dark-grey trousers, were ruined and caked in dirt and old blood.

The intensity with which he carried himself immediately set Ciana on the edge, not to mention that with every step closer he came, the scent flooded her nose all the more.

"What is it?" Jakob asked.

Ciana's shoulder had scarcely healed, but she was ready, she would annihilate this foe without hesitation.

Nøgel was staring intently at the swaddling cloth and the *thing* that squirmed under its cover. It seemed to be pointing him straight ahead, but it was hard to decipher the intentions of something of its nature accurately.

From one moment to the next, it burst out of his grip and lunged down the street towards the two figures that he only now just noticed.

As the *thing* shed its swaddling cloth and became revealed in full, he lifted his corpse-glove up towards the pair.

Ciana watched in horror as the light of the sun caught on something around the man's neck, it glittered ruby gold and sent a spike of ice through her. *A Rose-Gold Badge,* she realisation internally, having heard rumours about the legendary rank many times within the Guild Halls of both Hesslik and Hekkenfelt.

Meanwhile, whatever creature he had been carrying had crawled towards them, its shrivelled skin and lumpen head giving it a horrifying resemblance to one of the boys she had been imprisoned alongside with at Svalberg, just before he died of malnutrition, following a failed experiment. As it crawled towards them, or rather, towards Jakob, its skin seemed to peel and char in the light of the sun, as though it had been birthed in the bowels of the earth and was never meant to see the world above.

"A homunculus?" Jakob muttered at her side, seemingly not having noticed the man who was aiming a black and withered hand at them, palm-first. Then some realisation struck him, as the creature died, its right arm pointing directly at him. "Ciana! Grandfather sent him! You must—"

Before he could finish his order, the air around them began to vibrate and Ciana clawed both her hands down in front of her, rebounding the impending strike, such that it detonated at the halfway-point between the pair and their assailant.

The air shook and dust blew in every direction, but before it could clear, a figure launched through the smokescreen cover, swiping her hand down as though she was wielding an invisible weapon. Instinctively, Nøgel jumped out of the way, fearing a melee wind sorcerer, but when the armoured figure finished her swing, a colossal *boom* of vibration assaulted his body from the vacuum of where she had severed the very essence of the air with her strike.

His eyes widened as he, for the first time in his long-lived life, encountered another person blessed with his Lord Keening's power. With a grasp of his corpse-glove, he attempted to crush her inside a cage of pressurised air and sound, but she used her free hand to somehow deflect the strike, such that the backwash of the spell hit him and sent him flying backwards into the side of an unmanned cart, breaking his left wrist with a poor landing.

With an offended roar, he flung his power out indiscriminately and upturned the earth and dirt underfoot, as well as quaking several houses to their very foundations, one-or-two visibly sagging afterwards. But the Pretender who stood before him had guarded herself and the Apprentice at her rear, such that an area untouched by his destructive vibrations spread out behind her.

As Nøgel got to his feet, he was about to unleash the entirety of what power he had available, his supremacy as Keening's Chosen demanded no less, but the Pretender pushed in closer, letting off a barrage of vibrations he had to guard against, while dancing out of reach of her invisible cutting edge.

While backpedalling away from her, he swung his fractured left hand outward, while subvocalising the incantation for Immolating Blast.

A sudden flare of heat made her fling herself out of the way, as the Rose-Gold Adventurer suddenly launched a fire spell at her torso and face. Ciana knew that the man's mastery of the vibration-based powers was better than her own fledgeling grasp, so logic dictated that she ought to keep him constantly on the backfoot, but the tide of their fight shifted as he started mixing minimally-charged concussive strikes with explosive flashes of scalding flame.

She stepped around to the side of him, swinging her Vibrating Edge down at his midsection, while using her left palm to let off pummelling buffets of vibrations, as well as targeted strikes meant to liquify him from within. But his spatial awareness and expertise in battle was too good for her to land any definitive blows, and as she moved through her repertoire of moves, she feared he would quickly figure her out and manage to find a flaw in her attacks to exploit.

Heskel had come running to Jakob's side, hearing the loud explosions of sudden vacuums being formed, while he was helping out in the morgue basement.

"Ciana seems to be able to hold him at bay," Jakob remarked.

Heskel grunted a warning. "**Not for long.**"

"You know him?" he asked, noticing how the Wight was sniffing the air.

"**The One who defeated Grandfather.**"

Jakob scratched the stubble growing around his mask in irritation. "Truly?"

Heskel replied with an affirmative grunt.

"We ought to aid her then, wouldn't you say."

Without further prompting, Heskel kicked off from the ground, striding towards the battle in a loping gait, like a wolf closing in on its prey, though truly he was a bear with the agility of a felid.

Jakob doubted he would be of much use up close, so he pulled out the spell-tome and took off his glove, before letting the vein-like tendrils dig into the skin of his hand.

"*Tchinn. A feast has come for you, its blood is the purest sort. Don't you want a taste?*"

The spell-tome hissed in response.

Nøgel recognised the Wight that stormed his way. It was bad news for him.

While normally his corpse-glove and gift from Lord Keening could render him victorious in any battlefield, he was limited thanks to meeting someone who possessed a similar power. The Pretender was no poor fighter, but her movements were still predictable.

The Wight meanwhile… Nøgel still bore the scars of their last bout, though he had assumed the Wight annihilated and gone since then, but it seemed the Fleshcrafter made durable servants given that it was the very same figure, with that uncomfortable appearance, who came loping towards him now.

"**I will reduce you to less than ash! Our last fight was but a meagre display of my true might!**" he challenged Heskel in Chthonic.

Though the Pretender was predictable, she kept switching styles, making it impossible for Nøgel to counter her, but the strategy would not last her much longer. Though her power over Lord Keening's magic was strong, her mastery was underdeveloped, leading her to rely entirely on instinct, though what an instinct it was. She easily had the strength to be a Rose-Gold Ranker herself, but Nøgel would allow no Pretenders to tarnish his relationship with the Keening One.

Ciana scented Heskel's arrival and the pair quickly worked to support each other, switching places and seeking to exploit any potential weakness, once again putting the Man on the backfoot by forcing him to adopt an entirely-defensive stance.

Then, from one moment to the next, a long rending tear worked its way down the front of his body. The pause in him was the perfect opportunity for Heskel to hammer his tremendous power into his torso, sending the Rose-Golder tumbling head-over-backwards, before he clipped the side of a stone lantern with a loud *crack* and fell to the ground.

Ciana was on him before he could rise, deflecting and dispersing his defensive attack, and then she swung her Vibrating Edge through his body, severing his right arm from his torso, releasing a tide of blood.

But neither she, Heskel, nor Jakob could deliver a finishing strike, as some incredible vibrating clash of wind assailed the city, reducing parts of the outer wall to ash and tumbling and literally erasing many houses all around them. It seemed as though the trio only survived the cataclysmic magic because of Ciana's presence, as her body warded off the vibrations, perhaps because of own grasp of the vibrating power.

When the wind cleared, the Man was nowhere to be seen.

He had lost. It was unimaginable, but he had lost.

Nøgel looked around him and at the forest he had fallen into. He recognised the way the trees bent and how their leaves grew. He was not far from Helmsgarten's metropolis, he realised.

A jolt of excruciating and humiliating pain reminded him of his defeat and he quickly moved his scalding left hand down his body, cauterising the snaking wound carved through his skin and flesh, before moving to the stump that was all that remained of his right arm, sealing it shut by superheating the flesh, fat, and bone into a charred and crispy nub of skin. It would necrose fast, it was not a matter of if, but rather when.

It seemed a gift had been bestowed on him by Lord Keening, transporting him out the dire situation he was in and placing him here, though the whisperings had fallen still since his loss. He feared his Benefactor had lost its faith in him, but those thoughts were brief and quickly dispelled. Nøgel would not be discarded so easily.

He arose from the forest floor, where the trees and shrubbery had been reduced to splinters and loose fragments from his landing, before picking up his severed arm, where the corpse-glove yet remained. With this burden, he marched towards the Slums of Helmsgarten.

The Fleshcrafter would aid him. That much was certain.

While the workers of the city, those not yet succumbed to the plague of the epidemic tuberculosis, repaired the outer walls of the city and attempted to rebuild the many devastated houses, Jakob continued his efforts to make a horse construct, while using Heskel's expertise in anatomy and the dismantled corpse of a real horse as the blueprint.

Ciana and the Wight had not left his side since sudden attack two days prior, but it seemed that no additional ambush was to come, but, then again, the man they had faced had been an army by himself.

"His name is Nøgel," Ciana told Jakob, while he was finishing up one of the back legs of the construct, its tibia made to be twice as strong as that of a normal draft horse.

Jakob inclined his head slightly as a sign that he was listening, but in truth he cared little what the names of Grandfather's servants were.

The front part of the horse construct was mostly completed, though he was sure there would be some complications once all the parts were assembled and made to function as a whole. After all, he was very unfamiliar with equine anatomy and had several times been shown an error he had made by Heskel's observant eye. For the most part though, the Wight had just let him work, only aiding when asked. It meant that the work would take longer, but the end result would be, for the most part, entirely Jakob's achievement.

"He was a Rose-Gold Adventurer as well! Why would he attack us like that?"

Heskel answered this time, perhaps sensing Jakob's need to focus on the construct.

"**Father wields many leashes, even now.**"

"*I did not expect your return so soon.*"

"**Spare me,**" Nøgel told the Spider. "**I need to be fixed.**"

The Underking looked down at his crippled figure, though he himself was in a far worse state, seeming more dead than alive. "*To tamper with the Gift of a Great One would be sacrilege.*"

"**You hold nothing sacred! I told you what I required and you will deliver it to me!**"

One of the Underking's countless arms moved ponderously around before reaching the chin of the Fleshcrafter and tapping his thin lower lip in thought. "*It seems my apprentice has grown very strong indeed.*"

"**You did not tell me he was also accompanied by a Chosen of the Keening and your reborn Wight!**"

"*I would have thought that one with so illustrious and famous a reputation as yourself would find no equal in this world. But another Chosen, you say? Perhaps you have been abandoned by the Keening in favour of this new man?*"

"**It was not a man, nor even human. It was one of those disgusting demon half-breeds.**"

The Underking froze, his tapping halting at Nøgel's words. "*An Elphin?*"

"**Who cares what they call them. Repair me so I can retake my rightful place as the Keening's Hand!**"

"*No. I have a better idea.*" One of the countless arms snaked around and grabbed hold of the severed arm that lay by Nøgel's feet, then the Underking moved further into his sanctum and the

Rose-Gold Adventurer had no choice but to follow his whims. He doubted the Fleshcrafter would betray him now, after all he had done for him, but the possibility was there, given the Entity that the Old Spider served, which was why he still remained cautious as he followed behind the patter of his dozens-upon-dozens of limbs across the sewer floor.

"Thoughts?"

Harmlig sat on his usual stool, having just told Goddard, Heskel, and the strange blue-winged woman his idea to spread his cure for the epidemic to the remaining populace of Hesslik.

The woman looked to the other two for guidance.

Heskel grunted something then spoke in that bizarre language he had heard Goddard use on several occasions. The Necromancer nodded thoughtfully, then said, so that Harmlig could understand it:

"Spreading it via the water will dilute your formula. Spreading it through food will only last as long as the food. If you spread it through the air, however, it should affect the most people possible and not be limited by an auxiliary delivery method."

"Won't people be alarmed if they see it in the air?" the woman asked genuinely. He found he rather liked the cadence of her voice, though she seemed very guarded, as she had only responded to his attempts at conversations with curt and brief sentences over the last few days she had stayed in the charnel house with the Necromancer and his servants.

"**Spread with mist,**" Heskel suggested.

"That's a good idea," Harmlig commented, "But I'm no sorcerer, and none of you have a mastery of water and air, I'm guessing?"

"There is another way, though the ritual requires a lot of ingredients."

Heskel looked to Goddard and asked something in their secret tongue, to which the Necromancer nodded in confirmation.

Over the next few days, they gathered the ingredients required for the ritual: sweet honey; fragrant flowers; a decayed head; acrid bile; tar; wood ash; candles made from odourless tallow; a bucketful of stagnant pond water; as well as two male youths that the blue-winged woman somehow spellbound to her.

With all the ingredients gathered, they met on the outskirts of Hesslik, within an abandoned house near the outermost wall of the city. Harmlig had brought along the vat of bacteria he had uniquely grown and nurtured to combat the parasitic epidemic over the last few months of study. He had carefully conditioned and evolved the bacteria in such a way that they specifically targeted the parasites responsible for the sickness that plagued the city, but it would only work to stop the disease if he could somehow administer it to both those infected with it and the rodents and other critters that bore the fleas responsible for spreading it in the first place.

With their strange ingredients arranged in a circle, each equidistant from the next, and the two spellbound young men each in a circle of their own, Goddard took the vat from Harmlig and place it in a different sigil that was inscribed with Demonic script that seemed to include a sort of instruction of some sort, though his understand of the language lay not so much in reading, but more in speaking, given many Magisters predilection to using the language for certain incantations and covert communication with their fellows.

After the area was covered in blood-red sigils, lines, and circles, Goddard got down on his knees before the large painting and began to chant:

"*Gluttonous One, scent these eight offerings brought to thee,*"

"*Doth thy maw salivate to savour these earthly morsels?*"

"*Saint of Indulgence, taste these eight offerings brought to thee,*"

"*Doth thy tongue flick the air and wet thy lips?*"

"*Take these lives and their blood as toll,*"

"*Feast on these offerings plated for thee,*"

"*Give us thy buzzing horde for our simple task,*"

"*This is a Table of Plenty in exchange for a fee.*"

With a warm yellow-brown glow tinged with red and green, the linework set aflame and suddenly the two spellbound figures started writhing as their bodies began expanding from within. There followed a muffled buzzing of a millions tiny wings, before both of the youths vomited forth a deluge of tiny flies, which circled the eight offerings, until they formed a dome that obscured the objects completely. After they lifted away, there remained not a single scrap within the circle and they quickly set to devouring the two youths next, reducing their bodies to nothingness in mere seconds, the buzzing of their wings so loud that Harmlig feared he would never heard anything but *that* sound ever again.

After their meal was done, the flies began circling the vat of bacteria he had brought, and he could only watch anxiously as they formed a dome around it and then suddenly took to the air, leaving behind an empty vat as they flew across the city, ostensibly to deliver the waterborne bacteria to all they encountered.

"I have no idea what I just watched," he confessed.

"It is called *The Table of Plenty Ritual* and it invokes the Gluttony of the Fourth Saint and allows for the brief control of a horde of his Gorgeflies after giving him a feast of eight unique tastes and scents."

"I am not sure how a horde of flies will accomplish my plan to spread my cure," he admitted.

"Gorgeflies are no different to imps," Goddard told him. "They will complete their given task, have no doubt about that. It is said that, once, a King built a city overnight by using this ritual."

"I suppose I will have faith and see what the morrow brings."

Though he was surprised to receive the news, when he awoke the following morning, he still did not know if it was simply a coincidence or what, but overnight the new cases of the typhoid parasite had plummeted to none, from a steady few hundreds.

Day after day, he inquired the Mayor and his aides about new cases, but the answer remained the same.

Even two weeks later, there had not been another new case, and he had to admit by then that not only had his cure worked to halt the spread and new infections, the bizarre delivery method the Necromantic Summoner had developed had worked flawlessly.

LVI

It was finally assembled in full and, as Jakob looked at the prone figure of his new mount, he felt proud in his accomplishment, though Heskel had more than once asked why he needed such a construct. Jakob supposed that to a being like Heskel, who was possessed of bottomless stamina and agility, it seemed weird, but to a human like him it made perfect sense.

"What are you going to name this one?" Ciana asked curiously. Her ethereal wing was twirling around behind her, as though mirroring her interest.

"I was going to have Heskel name it, but he refused."

"So you're still thinking?"

"Yes, but I'll come up with something soon."

"*Sentience born anew, absorb from thy betters,*"

"*The knowledge once seeded and grown, now is harvested,*"

"*Imbibe of the fountain of experience.*"

The construct walked around aimlessly after the Birthe Sentience rite was finished and the essence of Wothram's knowledge and experiences had been copied over into it. It would perhaps take a while for it to learn to behave like a proper mount, but nonetheless Jakob took it outside for a test ride.

Ciana watched as Jakob's new hand-crafted mount tore across the horizon, the young man clinging to it, a wicked grin on his face and the intensity in his eyes replaced with a steel-hard focus on where he was heading.

Given his abilities with most things, it was perhaps no surprise how quickly he had taken to riding, even though he started from scratch. She admired that about him. Through willpower and innate talent he was seemingly capable of achieving anything he set his mind to.

She watched him from where she leant against the outer wall of Hesslik for the better part of two hours, as he pushed his creation to its limits. A real horse, even a thoroughbred Charger, would have begun flagging after the first hour, but his facsimile was stronger and utterly tireless, still managing to go beyond its perceived top-speed when he continued pushing it.

It was an utter thrill to feel the air tear across his body, as the mount thundered across the landscape, moving faster than the birds of prey in the sky, faster even than the arrows of longbowmen who practiced north of Hesslik in an open field.

If not for the fact that preparations were required for the promised day of his Great Undertaking, he would have continued pushing the construct mount to its limits and indulged in the terrific feeling of being unstoppable.

"**It is time,**" Heskel told him, a fierce look in his eyes.

"Has it already been that long?" he wondered out loud, though he was aware of the passage of time.

"Do you think they will still hold the festival in Rooskeld?" Ciana asked naively.

"I doubt there are any people left to celebrate it," he replied.

Jakob looked at the assembled requirements for the ritual which filled up their cart: the three massive stumps of the First Branch; the four skinned faces they had gathered; the Eye that had witnessed Divinity; the Relic of Virtue in the form of the once-was Saint's ring; as well as four sacks of shredded silver, which Jakob had no clue how Heskel had managed to get his hands on.

"We still lack nine more faces," he said.

"We will find those where we're going to hold the Ritual," Ciana replied confidently.

"You have found a good place?"

She nodded. "Jon's Hamlet."

"That's close by. Why did you pick this place?"

"It's the place where I was born. They have taken much from me there, and I wish to repay them."

Jakob narrowed his eyes. "Now is no time for sentimentality."

"**Place is good.**"

He let out a puff of condensate, and said, "Fine, but this *must* go according to plan. It is too important to be muddled by personal conflict and emotions."

"It will not become a problem," Ciana assured him.

"Then let's go."

With Jakob sitting atop the construct horse pulling the cart, wherein Heskel, Ciana, Wothram, Mayhew, and all their requirements lay, they moved out of the city of Hesslik.

Ciana was absentmindedly playing with her silver badge, perhaps upset that her illustrious journey as an Adventurer might be put on hold indefinitely. Heskel sat in silent contemplation, just like the two constructs, while Jakob carefully manoeuvred the mount through the narrow streets.

As they came out onto the thoroughfare, Jakob caught sight of the morgue he and Harmlig had spent the last many weeks in together. In a way, he would miss the easy comradery the two of them had shared, but if the Watcher willed it, they would cross paths again in the future.

They passed through the partially-reconstructed city gate and then hit the road that led east.

Sirellius looked at the Major's bandaged face while she was delivering her report of the annihilation of the foul Undying Daemon. He despised the foul creature and its Summoner for what they had done to her, but he was at least glad that she had returned alive.

"Sire," she continued, handing him a list of hastily-scribbled names. "These are some of the people who believe may still be under the Daemon's influence."

"You have done well, Major. It is a sad state of affairs that a single creature could devastate such a number of our best and brightest, but we Royal Guard are nothing if not determined and strong-willed."

"Yes, Sire!"

"I will see which of these I can track down, though, with any hope, these are Lleman's problem to deal with."

"It is believed that the caravaners on the list are within their territory, yes."

"With any hope, this will distract them from joining in on the war the Pope has just declared on us."

Major Tress narrowed her remaining eye. "What have I missed?"

"It seems we are blamed for unleashing a Demon upon Octland, as though that is our way of warfare…"

"And it is being used to bring other nations into the conflict?"

"Indeed… Say, did you manage to locate the Summoner. Tell me you at least saw his corpse."

"Unfortunately, no, Sire. He is believed to have escaped Rooskeld prior to our arrival. There is evidence of his magics within."

"Evidence?" Sirellius asked, looking back up at where she stood erect, back straight and eyes looking straight ahead.

"Yes, Sire. A pond of black water was discovered to have ruined parts of the township. It bears perfect resemblance to reports out of Heimdale."

"The Black Lakes of Lilibeth you mean?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Where did you learn of such a thing? I believe it is above your station to know about it."

Tress momentarily lost some of her flawless composure, but then admitted truthfully, "Nøgel, the Rose-Gold Adventurer, also known as the Divine Hand, is a friend of my grandfather. He has told me about it in the past, Sire."

"It seems we share an acquaintance then," Sirellius answered.

Tress finally locked eyes with him. "Truly?"

"He is a useful man to know. Without him, who knows where we would be?"

"I must confess something," she told him. "I sent a missive to him about the ails of our fair city."

Sirellius nodded. "I am aware."

Tress' face flushed slightly and she quickly looked down at her feet. "I will accept any punishment you deem fitting. It was not my place to presume we needed outside help!"

"You do not have to be so formal with me, Major. I am the only one privy to your transgression, and were I fully in charge of this nation, I would have done the same. And if not for you, the Summoner would go unpunished for his crimes, but now, with the Divine Hand seeking him, his days are numbered."

Tress smiled. "I can rest easy knowing I did the right thing."

"Indeed."

"But now is no time to rest," she continued. "I wish to aid our war-effort in whatever role is necessary!"

Sirellius looked at her bandaged face. "Rest for now. We have yet to fully mobilise and the logistics are still being considered, as well as the changes in strategy required by Heimdale and the Pope joining in on the fray. The time when I call upon you will come."

Tress saluted him and left. When she was gone, Sirellius took the list and went up the stairs to his Scrying Chamber. He would make sure the foul Daemon remained entombed in the bowels of the castle, unable to spread its vile influence any further across their realm.

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LVII

He looked at his new arm, at the many scrawling ever-changing sigils that flowed across it with the liquid skin. With a thought he changed the number of clawed fingers at its end and with another he doubled its length and joints, even causing another forearm and hand to grow from it. It was the ultimate tool to suit his every desire, as, beyond its simple ability to transform, it had total domination over the blood of any creature and could even spontaneously manifest a servant of the Great One within any humanoid vessel.

To make the limb, the Fleshcrafter had taken his old arm and offered it up to the Betrayer. She who was contempt and envy incarnate, whose every action was laden with double-crossing schemes and ruinous decimation of friend and foe alike. Nøgel had worshipped her through his devoting to the Keening One, but he had never been granted any of her power, for she was miserly with handing them out, even when it benefitted her. But through the Fleshcrafter's ritual, her gift-giving claw had been extended to him and now one of her treacherous arms adorned his body.

He could already feel how it spoke to him on an innate level, but his decades spent with the corpse-glove leading him every which way had prepared him for this. His will could not be so easily broken. Nøgel would obey, for that was his place in the cosmos. A lowly pawn that served a higher calling. Even becoming a hero and Rose-Golder had all been at the behest of the Flayed Lady's machinations told to him through her vassal, the Keening One.

But he had some pride in the work he had done, for, after all, human souls and their devotion was a greatly-sought prize for the Great Ones, and he had brought many such souls into her fold. Certainly this was his long-sought reward for his lifetime of service.

The ritual complete, he immediately obeyed the first command of his Benefactor. With his constantly-shifting arm, he tore his way through the Fleshcrafter's laboratorium, destroying his tools, servants, and chimera vats, while the Old Spider could only watch from his inner sanctum where he had wilfully interred himself.

And as Nøgel left the sewer demesne, the Fleshcrafter was the sole survivor within a ruin, his days as a creator of monsters brought to an end. If he had cared, he might have wondered what the Old Spider would do, whether he would remain alive and wait out the end of the world around him or cross the threshold of his inner sanctum and become dust.

A grin covered Nøgel's face. He adored the Flayed Lady's schemes, even knowing he himself would no doubt succumb to one of them someday. And yet, he served willingly. This world that he hated, he wanted to see it torn asunder and reduced to ruins.

Tress sat in her room, looking through the letters and plans she had been given to prepare for the coming war. She had no doubt that the Summoner that Sirellius had tasked her with finding was the cause of their newest headache: this report of a Wrath Demon tearing its way through the metropolis, before ending up in Octland and causing great destruction within its capital. No doubt it was the very same one that a year prior had led to the Market West disaster.

She took in a deep breath and put the papers on the desk and went over to the tall mirror near her simple bed. Carefully, she peeled the bandage back to witness the hastily-stitched ruin the left side of

her face had become. The skin was purple and black along the seam and the stitches pulled at her skin uncomfortably, giving her a permanent grin that lifted the corner of her mouth upwards slightly.

She let a single self-pitying tear travel down her right cheek, then a sound from her door quickly made her turn, hand outstretched and ready to launch shearing wind at any attack.

Then Tress reminded herself that she was within the castle of Helmsgarten and no one would be coming for her life. She figured it was probably just Arn that wanted to confer with her about something, now that he had been promoted.

When she went over to the doorway, she found the door already opened wide and a dark silhouette standing just beyond, its right arm disturbingly elongated. She then caught sight of the face of the figure and recognised who it was.

"Nøgel?"

Archduke Octavio walked amongst his people, seeing which of his citizens were fitting to be elevated to footmen in his army. There was no time to have new recruits undergo the Glass Forest Ritual, but he could still bestow a sliver of his Lord's power to those deemed suitable, such that they could fight with increase strength and stamina on the battlefields that would soon emerge where Octland bordered Helmsgarten.

As he continued his tour, he wondered when the promised reinforcements from Heimdale and the Pope would arrive. Given that the Pope was the figurehead of the Church of the Eight Saint, he was constantly surrounded by many of the strongest fighters within their Holy Corps, and Octavio expected to see these men come to bolster his army, as well as the vaunted and often-celebrated cavalry troops of Heimdale's army that he had been promised.

But weeks had passed and yet no sightings of them had manifested within his lands. Given the strength of Helmsgarten's opening offensive and the many lives the abominable Demon had taken, he feared that the reinforcements would arrive too late to make a difference. But he yet held the faith. After all, had he not, by the might of his Lord, exorcised the foul Wrath Demon to his Lord's realm of purity, where it would suffer for an eternity?

"*O Untainted One, blame us not for being weak, for we are but sheep in your fold, shepherded under your strength. Lend us but a figment more of that strength, so that we may continue to sing praises in your name, undaunted by all who seek our defeat.*"

Maybe once it would have troubled him, but now Nøgel took joy in committing atrocities against those he was supposed to hold dear, whenever those malicious whispers commanded him to.

At his feet lay his latest victim, the granddaughter of his oldest acquaintance, whom Nøgel had himself slain two decades prior. Her blood flowed between his feet, but, using his new arm, he collected it all, before lifting the lifeless body up by its neck and pumping that life-fuel back into its veins, sealing shut its grievous wounds and even healing the horrendous disfigurement to its face.

Then he set it down on its feet, a facsimile of the person the body had once belonged to. If not for the faint reflection of terrible creatures within its eyes, it was impossible to tell the difference.

"I serve," it told Nøgel, sounding just like he remembered Tress' voice.

"**You know what to do,**" he told the servant.

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It was to play only a minor role in the upcoming schemes, and its creation and the death of yet another familiar tied had more to do with Nøgel once more proving his loyalty.

But he lived to serve and he offered everything willingly to his Benefactor.

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LVIII

Jon's Hamlet was a dull village, its few dozen inhabitants all seeming to go through life with no aspirations or enjoyment of the life they had. It was just like Ciana recalled.

What she despised most was that, after all this time, nothing had changed. As if to really underline this, the hanging tree had a fresh new corpse hanging from one of its thick branches. Even in such a place, with such blatant misery, the people still had time to be hateful creatures that hurt and killed any who they deemed easy prey or as something foreign to disturb their meagre peace.

"What a dreadful place," Jakob commented, his eyes travelling over the village centre, many of its people openly staring at him and his retinue, either from doorways or out of windows.

She was glad he shared her sentiment.

"Ready to begin?" he asked her.

She nodded, steely determination taking hold of her. Then she brought the mask up to her face and said:

"*Belamouranthyne, my eyes are thine and all they see belongs to thee.*"

Just like every time before, power flowed from the mask and into her face, stinging her as though a thousand hair-thin needles pierced her flesh and spread a bone-aching cold throughout her body, making her muscle tense painfully. But then it faded and she was left with just the overwhelming sense of power that occupied her eyes.

I have been awaiting you, Ciana Half-spawn. What souls have you come to gift me with today?

"A proper feast is what I have gathered," she told the Enthralling Daemon, then strode towards the nearest house and kicked the door down, immediately locking eyes with the first man she saw.

"Gift me your face," she told him. With a passing gesture, she annihilated the other unfitting occupants with her destructive vibrations.

While the Elphin moved through every house in the village, harvesting the skinned faces they needed, Jakob and Heskel, alongside the two bone constructs Wothram and Mayhew, got to work clearing space for the enormous ritual they needed to invoke Nharlla.

A tense ache in Jakob's lungs was the only indicator of the tremendous excitement and apprehension he felt. It was an anxious mix of many different conflicting feelings. On one hand, he felt that he was nearing the most important moment in his life, but on the other hand, he worried that the moment he invoked Nharlla, the veil of reality would burst apart and doom every denizen of their world, cutting his own life short in the process. It was, however, his belief that he would be spared somehow. Though the Great Ones were unknowable in their millennia-spanning schemes, he doubted the Watcher would have brought him to this point, only for it to end.

After the ground had been properly prepared, he sat on the edge of their cart, his yet-to-be-named horse construct trotting around somewhat aimlessly. Unlike Wothram and Mayhew, the mount did not seem to enjoy remaining still while having no task to perform. It surprised Jakob, because it had started out as functionally-identical in spirit to Wothram, but its different form and utility had already shaped its Birthed Sentience towards something very different.

Heskel came over, lifting the skinned face of Harland up before Jakob.

"What?"

"**How acquire?**"

"I used Elf's Lure."

Heskel tossed the skinned face back into the cart. "**No good.**"

"I know. But it matters not, we will have more than enough faces for Nharlla's offering."

With a grunt the Wight left. He seemed very antsy for some reason that Jakob did not fully comprehend.

He had known that making someone skin their own face, while under the Elf's Lure, would not count as 'given willingly'. Though the Euphoric had the uncanny ability to utterly remove someone inhibitions and apprehensions, it was still coercion, or at the very least a trade. It seemed a devious thing to have the addition of 'given willingly' required for something that by the very nature of the act would require violence or coercion in any normal setting. But then, it was an esoteric requirement for a reason.

While he continued to watch the dreary village and listened to the sounds of vacuum explosions and struggling, alongside the barely-audible noise of flesh and skin being torn, Heskel started drawing the outline in the ground with a stick he had found.

The ritual diagram, though obscured thanks to being described using Chthonic Sigils, would be a massive thing. It consisted of tiers that had to be made from compacted earth, whereupon the various tolls would be placed in a seemingly-nonsensical pattern, and every 'line' would have to be 'drawn' using the shredded silver shavings.

It made Jakob uncomfortable that he had to leave the majority of the work to Heskel, and it was even more humbling and unsettling that he could not even check the Tungsten Scroll and help keep the linework true or the placements properly aligned. He wished dearly that he could read the archaic alphabet, but, thus far, he had only been able to memorise six of the countless sigils, and even then, he was unsure how they would be read in a sentence.

To his eyes, it was like trying to decipher text written in flames. The lines constantly shifted and getting too close would scald his skin and singe his hair.

He let out a puff of air.

The scent of Misty Reminiscence was mostly gone now, the scent-ball eroded to the point of being a thin film within the nose of his mask, caused by his constant breathing. He would make another, but at this point it seemed rather meaningless, not to mention, he required a proper setup for it and Jon's Hamlet was as deprived of technology as it was deprived of humanity.

Ciana wiped her hands on some linen fabric that had been used in one of the houses as a tablecloth. Her work was finally complete and she had been thorough.

Not a soul remained of the former inhabitants of Jon's Hamlet. Most had been reduced to obliterated husks or barely-recognisable stains of blood and viscera. Those whom her mask had not worked on she had been merciful with, killing them in an instant before they even knew to fear her. Although, by the end, the remaining villagers had caught on to what was happening and tried to fight back or flee. She had found them all and slain them with her devastating noise that pulped them from the inside out in a single moment.

However, the men, those faceless pitiable souls, she had gathered to her, after they had willingly given her their faces. It was an uncanny sight to behold all the bleeding and grievously-injured men and adolescents who stared at her like she was the only thing in the world that mattered to them. The power of Belamouranthyne, the Daemon who Enthralled all Men who saw Her, was such a frightening

and exhilarating ability. Even if only half the world's population were men, the Elphin Mask was a tool of total dominion, if only put to proper use. But Ciana was sure there was some demerit to it, after all, the Daemon remarked that she was feasting upon the souls of those she enslaved somehow. What exactly *that* implied was yet unknown to her, but it was doubtfully something good.

She had the faceless men trail behind her, holding their faces in their hands as though they were offerings to a shrine, before she came to a halt on the fringe of the large diagram the Brute was busy setting up.

Ciana looked over the outline and already it was enormous and complex to the point that she had trouble looking at it without feeling a stinging pain in the back of her head.

"Jakob. What do you want me to do with these?" she asked, making sure to look down and away, so that her enchanting eyes did not touch his and bring him under her dominion.

The Fleshcrafter was seated on the front of the cart, deep in contemplation.

"Do we need their blood?" she continued.

With a single glance over the assembled faceless crowd of men, he replied, "I admire your forethought, but beyond their skinned faces, we require nothing more of them."

Ciana turned on her adoring followers, who all revelled in her gaze, as though their eyes meeting being the only things they required in the world.

"Leave your faces here, then run to Svalberg and dive into the black lake within its Academy grounds."

In an orderly line, the faceless men left their offerings at her feet, all of them smiling and pleased to do her bidding. Then they started running in a straight line southwest, as though knowing the shortest route to the place, despite many of them clearly never having travelled beyond the village in their lifetimes.

As she watched them run off, she said, "*Belamouranthyne, return my eyes to me for thy offering has been duly given.*"

You have gifted me with a delicious feast, Ciana Half-spawn. I hope you will call upon me again soon.

Jakob came up behind her, while she was taking the mask off.

"How many do you think will make it to the academy? It is more than four-hundred kilometres from here."

"Want to take a bet?"

From behind both of them, they heard Heskel grunt: "**Six.**"

They both turned to look at the Brute, but he had already gotten back to work. They shared a brief glance, Ciana finding laughter bubbling up from her stomach despite the grimness of the situation.

"There were seventeen of them," Jakob started, "Three were clearly on the brink of bleeding to death. Eight of them will no doubt succumb due to their old age. The remaining six might make it, given that they seemed hardy enough, but, accounting for trouble they might encounter on the way, I'll say three."

She did not need to consider it that long and then answer: "I think eight will make it."

Jakob chuckled. "We will have to make a stop by Svalberg and see who is right, once we're done here."

"Are we going to Helmsgarten?"

He nodded. "Armed with our gifts from Nharlla, I will finally face Grandfather," he told her confidently.

LIX

Seen from above, the ritual might have some sort of distinguishable shape, but standing before it, seeing it from a human perspective, it seemed nonsensical and disorganised.

Many dozens of lines of carefully-placed silver fragments flowed around the ground, some straight, some curved and bending up towards the raised platforms of compacted dirt. At least the number of platforms made sense, as it matched the required number of tolls, though there was none for the final toll that Heskel still would not tell Jakob about, even while insisting they already held it within their grasp.

As the Wight continued to work on the Great Undertaking by himself, Ciana and Jakob riffled through the abandoned houses. Seeing how the ritual would still not be done for a while, he had decided to try and setup a makeshift laboratorium, despite his initial apprehensions. Grandfather had taught him to use anything he could get his hands on, in order to achieve his goals, though right now it was mostly just to have *something* to do, as sitting on the side and watching Heskel work was making him feel useless.

"You know," Ciana started. "I lived here with my father for a time."

Jakob looked up from the cabinet he was searching. He did not say anything, but he also did not know what exactly to reply.

"The place looks the same now as it did back then."

He was unsure why, but it seemed she felt like she had to get something off her chest.

"Of course, being born with these horns and my wing…" she continued, pointing to her head and her back in succession. "I was immediately an outcast. At first, I believe my father actually wanted to care for me, but it must have been hard."

Jakob nodded. "Parenthood is no simple thing."

"Especially not when your child is seen as a demonic omen," she replied.

He lifted a cup up to the meagre light that fell through the open window, its surface was damaged and it looked so stained and worn that it might have been older than the former inhabitants, perhaps a family heirloom, even though it was by all means of simple construction.

"I do not remember much of my true parents," Jakob admitted despite himself. It was not something he thought about a lot, mostly because it seemed futile, but also because he rarely had time to delve into his past, busy as he always was with one thing or another.

"Would you try to find them again, if you could?" she asked, not knowing his unique circumstances.

He considered it for a moment and then answered truthfully, "What is the point? I was taken by Grandfather and moulded by his will and tutelage. Do you believe my true parents would wish to see me?"

"If they loved you, they would."

"You seem sure about that."

She nodded to herself. "They definitely would want to see you."

Jakob gave it a brief thought then replied, "Perhaps, if I find the means to see them again, it could be an interesting insight into what could have been."

"If you find the means?" she asked.

"Ciana. I am not of this world. Grandfather used his Chthonic spells to wrench me from the grips of another realm adjacent to this one, all to suit his own machinations."

"I had no idea such a thing was possible."

"It may have only worked that one time. I have never since seen him cast such spells."

"I'm sure there is a way. If your faith in the Great Ones is strong enough, they will reveal the path to you. You could ask Nharlla to gift the means to you, couldn't you?"

"I won't squander my gift on such a frivolous thing."

"I don't believe it to be frivolous."

"There are things I seek more than answers about my true parents," he told her.

Ciana looked down at her feet. "If possible, I would wish to see my mother. Even if she's a demon who discarded me out after I was born."

"Is that what you'll ask of Nharlla?"

"No."

They were in a different building, one that was now something akin to a carpentry workshop, but which Ciana assured him had once been two separate houses. It seemed she still had something she wanted to discuss, because she continued their prior conversation, as Jakob looked over the tools collected within the workshop. Thus far, they had found nothing of any significant value or use that he could utilise for a laboratorium.

"You know what I'll ask of Nharlla."

Jakob nodded. "It means a lot to you."

"Of course it does!" she replied, getting worked-up over his blasé response.

He set the handsaw down and looked at her, where she stood opposite the workbench covered in tools and unfinished little sculptures and wooden gears.

"Is it so weird that I want what my kind deserves!?"

"No."

"We may be treated as misbegotten freaks and our infertility might be seen as punishment for our mixed heritage, but we just want to be able to create life, like anyone else!"

"I understand."

"Do you *really* understand!?"

"Ciana, settle down. I am not judging you."

She took a step back, seeming to realise she had been yelling this whole time.

"It is the desire of all living entities, sentient or not, to pass on their legacy and achieve immortality for their species. To be denied the ability to bear offspring is a cruel fate. But I was unaware it meant so much to you."

"It means everything to me."

Jakob nodded. He was still trying to figure out the depths of Ciana's character. Though, he was also still trying to figure out Heskel's character, after all, so much of the Wight's past was kept from him, by Heskel himself, but also Grandfather. He wanted to know everything about them.

"My life has been shaped by the pursuit of knowledge. Knowledge is the gift I'll seek from Nharlla. Knowledge about all the things I do not know."

"Omniscience?" she asked, surprised.

"If such a thing is possible to attain, yes."

"You wish to become the Ninth Saint? The Saint of Knowledge?" she joked.

"I do not require followers, praise, nor power. I seek knowledge for its own sake. With knowledge in your hand, all other things are insignificant."

Ciana looked like she did not agree with him, though she held her tongue.

"Seeking knowledge is also not a vice," he added.

"Are you sure?" she joked.

Jakob and Ciana returned to Heskel sometime later, when the sun had vanished from the sky, with its waning light still illuminating the clouds above. He gave the ritual site a scrutinising gaze, then met Heskel's eyes.

"**It is ready.**"

Jakob nodded. "Teach me how to invoke it."

Heskel shook his head. "**I will do it.**"

"What is the point of me being here," he asked, once again feeling useless, when Heskel held all the cards in his hands.

"**To witness.**"

Jakob's eyes trailed across the work that the Wight had slaved away on completing. What struck him most was how perfectly each fragment of silver lay, the thin slices placed in a way that the seams between them were practically invisible.

He left his two companions and went to a nearby house, where he moved some pots and crates chairs outside, so he could climb up onto the roof. Once up there, I could properly appreciate the ritual that Heskel had made, following the Tungsten Scroll's instructions.

It was a work of art. It was a flawless execution of an utterly-foreign design, which drew the eye in a certain way and made a tingling electrical sensation fizz around inside his head. It felt somewhat wasteful to commit so marvellous to so dreary a place as Jon's Hamlet. But then again, Jakob supposed there was no place in this world that would be worthy of such a ritual as what they were performing.

Such thoughts however were dreadfully human in perspective. To a Great One, vanity was no doubt an alien concept, even for so miserable a creature as the Flayed Lady, who seemed to exhibit all the worst of human vices and desires.

Ciana hopped onto the roof, and shortly after the Wight joined them as well.

They stood there, the trio of unlikely companions, beholding the enormous ritual, its countless interwoven sigils, raised tiers of perfectly-compacted earth, and all experienced their own unique cocktail of emotions as their eyes fell upon it.

The light of the sleeping sun eventually vanished from the sky above, but even in the darkness its magnificence was no less amazing.

LX

Thirteen Faces Given Willingly, their expressions permanently locked in the blissful moment they were harvested, adorned a pillar of dirt such that not a single part of the dirt beneath was exposed, apart from where the holes in the eyes and the mouths of the faces revealed it.

The Relic of Virtuousness, that tiny unimpressive silver-coated wedding band, lay atop a pile of stacked flat stones that stood over a metre tall and was comprised of seventeen individual rocks. Jakob had no clue if the stones themselves had any significance or if their involvement in the ritual was meaningless.

An Eye that has Witnessed Divinity lay in the centre of a bowl created by two clay hands joined together. Even now it still sparkled, almost a year after it had been plucked from the corpse of a woman who had, in her final moment, seen the Watcher manifest in the sky. The iris was comprised of a miniature galaxy and the surrounding parts of the eye were like the black of space with its uncountable twinkling stars. Though Heskel ridiculed him for it, he still held firm that it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. The other eye he had harvested still remained in his private possession, though he had no idea what to do with it, other than look at it from time to time, when the urge to be closer to the Watcher compelled him to pull it from its pocket on his demon-spun robes.

The three pieces of *the First Branch of a Thousand-Year-Old Tree* stood stacked atop one another, in a way that showed the manifold rings in the core of the wood, no matter what side you viewed the stack from. Again, Jakob had to wonder if it was by the Ritual's design or by Heskel's fancy.

Jakob's plan for the *Sincere Childhood Dream* toll was that Guillaume would be its catalyst, given that he had openly stated how he adored the Great Ones and wished to witness one descend to the Mortal Plane. Like with all the tolls, he had no assurances that they would fit the descriptions, so all he could do was trust that the Watcher had guided him well.

He looked to Ciana, who had taken off her bone armour at some point and now just wore simple clothes she had bought some days back. She looked back at him with a strange expression on her face, then she looked away to where Heskel was standing.

"Can we begin?" Jakob asked the Wight. In the distant horizon, the sun was preparing for its journey across the sky.

Heskel grunted affirmative.

"What do I do?"

"**Witness is all you are required to do.**"

Jakob frowned beneath his mask, a puff of condensate shooting into the air. After his and Ciana's hours of scouring the village, they had not found anything that he could use to make a temporary laboratorium, so he had spent all the time simply observing as Heskel worked. It bothered him greatly to have so small a role in this final crucial step.

Ciana came over next to Jakob and put a hand on his shoulder. "Kneel with me," she told him. He was unsure why she suddenly was the one who knew what to do, but did not think much of it. After all, she and Heskel spoke frequently when Jakob was not around, so perhaps he had told her what to do already. If Jakob had had the capacity for it, he might have felt jealous, but he did not. Instead, he just felt insignificant in so significant a ritual. Perhaps it was the greatest ritual that would ever take place in this world. Who knew how the future would be shaped by this very moment?

As Jakob and Ciana knelt in the dirt, Heskel walked into the centre of the ritual circle, where an empty tier of raised earth stood, just like all the other places that they had put the tolls.

"What are you doing?" Jakob asked him.

"**I am the final toll.**"

Jakob became suddenly aware that Ciana's hand was still on his shoulder, as well as the force she was exerting to keep him kneeling.

"Don't be irrational!"

"Ciana! Let go of me! This is wrong!"

"Heskel, don't you do this! Don't do this!!"

Heskel did not reply. Instead, he reached behind the back of his head and undid the clasps of the mask. When he took it off and cast it aside, Jakob was petrified by what he saw.

Ever since meeting Heskel in that dark and damp ritual chamber at the age of seven, Jakob had wondered what sort of face hid behind the timid hand-crafted mask. The Wight had never, in all the years they had been together, taken it off in front of Jakob, but he had also never dared to ask him remove it for fear of what might hide behind it. But now he saw the Wight's face.

It was uncomfortably normal, adorning such an unnatural body as what Heskel had. It was untouched by the scar-like stitch-patterns that permeated every part of his large frame and it had such a human expression of sadness adorning it that it made Jakob's lungs seize-up and hurt as though stung by frozen needles. Worst of all, Jakob had the uncanny feeling that this was Heskel's original face, from before he was turned into an undying, inexhaustible, and omnipotent Wight by Grandfather.

A single tear trailed down the Wight's face and Jakob screamed something so loud that it made his own ears ring. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Heskel pivoted his face up towards the sky, the single tear falling from his square chin and hitting the earth below him.

The world skipped a moment and every living breathing creature that inhabited it felt the moment that they had missed. They felt the way that the world around them seemed to have changed in an instant, assured in the fact that what was lost could never be returned to them.

Those attuned to the world beyond felt the missed moment the worst, some of them losing control of the powers they had been gifted and in the process losing themselves as well. The mages whose magic was borrowed from demons were also not left unharmed, as their own magic became volatile in their hands and catastrophically malfunctioned.

Even those entities summoned from beyond the world felt their souls shorn in half, leaving them stranded in the realm they were visiting or instantaneously vaporising their souls to feed the ones who watched the missing moment and its aftermath from the dark of the star-specked cosmos.

In his internment below the metropolis, the Old Spider felt certain that he had been upstaged by his erstwhile Apprentice and now awaited his final moments with a satisfied grin.

Somewhere between the metropolis and the insignificant village where the stolen moment was taken from, a pawn of the Betrayer felt his Benefactor's wrath at what had transpired and his body was flayed and regenerated over-and-over as punishment for failing to prevent the ritual that had changed the world and all those within it.

Jakob saw how the ritual site instantly changed through blurred eyes full of frustrated tears. He saw how the maskless Heskel took a step down from what had become a crown of gelatinous quivering flesh and protruding bone.

Then he blinked and the vision changed. Trees adorned the ritual site, their leaves a brilliant gold and the Wight had become a fair maiden the sight of whom struck Jakob with painful familiarity, though he had no clue who she was.

He blinked again and there stood slime-caked and fungi-infested stone pillars. The figure had become a spider with the body of an old horrible man whose long hair obscured most of his face and whose lower body was gone.

Another blink and the scene had become the throne-room of a castle, with the kingly figure of a Lich dragging a massive sword behind him.

He blinked in rapid succession, each new brief glance revealing something new, before eventually he broke through and the scene had returned to normal, with the figure returning to the shape of Heskel, but its body like an oily mass of shadow-given-form and unblinking eyes staring at him from all over its visage.

Then he blinked again and the ritual site became like the bottom of a lake, with water plants dangling up towards the heavens and the figure before him become like a humanoid shark.

Another blink and the site returned to normal, but this time the figure was a four-metre-tall porcelain doll with triple-jointed arms and a single eye at the centre of its tiny head.

The doll put its hand on Jakob's head and he instinctively blinked again, transforming the surroundings into some rocky lifeless surface with the cosmos just beyond the horizon of the landscape and the figure before him like a coiled form comprised of a thousand strands of spun silver.

Still that hand was on his face and Jakob felt its scalding touch.

"Grant me Knowledge!" he screamed, unsure if it would even comprehend him. "We summoned you to this world! Grant us our wishes!" he argued, though he doubted the incomprehensible Entity even understood him.

"NHARLLA! GRANT ME ALL THE KNOWLEDGE I SEEK!!"

You have done well, Seeker.
I see the Watcher's Mark on you.
You are one of His Chosen.
May you find what you seek, even if a million years must pass before your journey comes to its end.

Jakob felt his body become filled. The cup of his soul ran over as he was bombarded with all that he had desired and more. But instead of bursting at the seams, his cup grew to take in all that it was fed, becoming bottomless.

The vision of the world around him had changed again to that of a dark forest with hovering purple-glowing wisps in the air and the figure, which had moved on from him to touch Ciana, was now like a blue lizard with four arms and two legs.

Petrified by the endless barrage of knowledge, Jakob could barely move from where he knelt. It became too much to bear all at once and he felt his consciousness slipping, as though slumber was claiming him.

He blinked again and the dark forest became a floating island in a sky of amber-gold clouds and the figure was now a massive black slug, one of which tendrils was touching the forehead of Ciana as she told it her desire.

"Make me unbeatable in battle! Make it so no one can ever be my equal in combat! Make me undefeatable!"

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—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

In that moment, Jakob knew that he had been wrong about one of the esoteric tolls. It had not been drawn from Guillaume after all.

LXI

The boy looked at his parent, whose face was a mask of rage and disappointment. He had failed yet another of his father's many trials. It was nothing new, but somehow his father always acted this way, as though expecting the world from the boy, whose body bore no innate talent.

"You are weak! Worthless! Unbecoming of what I have to teach you!"

"But father, I try and I try and I cannot do any better!" he argued back.

"You will try again! You WILL get this right!"

Even after turning ten, the boy was still useless in the eyes of his father, despite having learnt everything that did not require him to cast spells or summon entities. His father was not impressed however and as punishment made him dissect his own pets or those few friends he had made in the villages they always moved around between.

Even when the boy tried to end his own suffering, his father brought him back with his talented hands and evil magic. He was destined to live out his divine punishment that some past life's transgressions must have earnt him, but the boy never stopped dreaming of a time when he could escape his torturous nightmare of an existence.

One day, when the boy was no older than fourteen, his father told him of a way to make him strong and to make him capable of wielding the magic that he had been unable to cast for all of his life. But the boy knew that it was yet another lesson in pain that would await him, though he could not disobey his parent and his wishes.

He felt the moment acutely, when his soul was drawn from his body and stuffed into a puppet of flesh that had been formed from the bodies of seven different demons. As he began to feel the sensations of his new body, his father took his old body and carved it up before him, before adding his face to that of his new form.

But though his new body was strong and allowed him to shrug off all the pain he experienced, he hated it. Even though it allowed him to cast and memorise all the spells given for him to learn, he hated it.

The way the other kids looked at him in horror mirrored perfectly how he himself felt after seeing his reflection in the surface of a lake. He was so mortified by the sight of his horrifying new body, with all its curling stitched-up patterns and mismatching colours, that he cast one of the spells that his father had not taught him, but which he had discovered by himself.

He bade the entity he invoked devour him whole, but when it manifested into the world it seemed incapable of feasting upon him. The backlash of its wrath from being slighted made the skin and flesh on his body fall from his reinforced inhuman bones, but no sooner had it fallen off than new fresh matter began to grow upon his skeletal frame.

He called upon the entity again, but the same thing happened and after the ordeal he was one again still alive, even as the ground below his feet became a massive pond of bottomless black water.

When he attempted to call upon it a third time, no answering manifestation came, as though it had grown wise to his trickery.

Soon after his father found him and dragged him away.

Despite learning all his father had to teach him and mastering everything he was taught, as well as many things beyond the scope of his teachings, his father one day deemed him unfit to be more than a servant and began preparing to summon a child from beyond their world to become his successor.

Many of these children they called into their unforgiven world perished within their ritual chamber and his heart broke with each and every one of them.

But then the summoning bore fruit in the form of a bright-eyed boy no older than seven. He watched as the boy grew into adolescence, tackling everything thrown at him with cold-hearted determination and a will of unbreakable steel.

Heskel knew that he would one day give his life for this boy, because the Entities he prayed and spoke to told him as much. But it was okay, because he had always sought his end. However, when it finally came, he somehow felt reluctant to go and remarked upon the fact that he now had the desire to live.

But alas, one cannot fight against one's fate.

Jakob shot upright. His head buzzing with foreign memories and dreams, and his whole body tingling with a restless desire to learn more and absorb from the world all the things it had to teach him.

The world around him was as it had always been, but, where the ritual site had been, the mud had turned to gleaming obsidian rock full of twinkling lights, as though a physical fragment of the cosmos. He crawled over to it on his hands and feet, remarking that his demon-spun clothes had fused with his body and become part of him, with the souls of the demons that had inhabited it absorbed into his own soul.

With an orange hand of strangely-spongey flesh that reformed according to his desires, he cut a piece from the obsidian ground and put it in a pocket, which formed on the side of his torso that was now of the same matter as his hand.

He looked over to where Ciana lay. Unlike him, her body had not changed from their encounter with Nharlla. Jakob reached up to his mask, but it too had fused with his body and become a permanent part of him. But he did not feel any dread about it, for his body had no need to eat or drink anymore. It was enough for him to subsist on the knowledge he gleaned from the world around him.

Truly, he had become a Seeker of Knowledge. But beyond this desire to learn was the desire to fulfil a purpose he had been imbued with from his form-shifting Benefactor.

"Ciana, wake up."

She began rousing from where she lay, while he went over to the cart that had brought them here. Mayhew and Wothram stood unflinchingly beside it, awaiting instructions. The construct mount came wandering over and with a single touch of his right hand upon its brow, Jakob knew how its future would turn out, so he said, "Your name is Invincible, for you will live forever."

The bone horse did not seem to consider the weight of his words, but over time its Birthed Sentience would become self-aware and be able to look back upon this moment and realise that through its name-giving it had been granted a certain unchangeable fate.

Though Jakob had been given a bottomless desire to learn as an answer to his wish, he had also been given quite a lot of knowledge that had been within the power of Nharlla to give, such as a perfect understanding of Chthonic, replete with so many invocations and spells that it would have made Grandfather giddy with excitement.

From the cart he lifted up the heavy Tungsten Scroll, seeing through his physical touch how it had been made by an Emissary of the Great Ones for this day to come to pass. He looked at its contents and read all the things he could never have understood before the Ritual.

The last esoteric toll, the one that had taken Heskel from him, was stated as: "*The Loss of a Loved One.*"

"Whom was it drawn from?" he wondered out loud. "Heskel or me?"

"You can read it?" Ciana asked him, suddenly appearing behind him.

"Yes. And so can you, though you have been able to read it ever since Heskel and I performed the ritual that gave you half of your Demon Progenitor's power."

"How did you know?"

Jakob looked her right in the eyes, putting the scroll back into the cart. He would not need to read it again, as he had already memorised its contents. Ciana flinched under the intensity of his gaze.

"Jakob… your eyes… they've changed."

"Changed?"

"They look just like *that* eye you sacrificed."

"Eyes that have Witnessed Divinity?" he considered. In a way it made sense, but Ciana's eyes remained unchanged.

"Why did you ask Nharlla to make you undefeatable?"

"Because it was my greatest wish," she replied frankly, not knowing that her true wish had been offered up as an esoteric toll. "I never more have to fear defeat. With the power I now possess, I can defeat anyone who tries to hurt those I care about."

"Why didn't either of you tell me what the last toll was?" Jakob asked accusingly. Heskel's old memories still floated around in his head and his lungs hurt from all the pain that was interred within him, threatening to burst forth.

"It wouldn't have changed anything," she told him. "That's what Heskel told me, when I asked the same thing."

"We should have sacrificed you instead," Jakob said coldly.

An expression of incredible pain pinched Ciana's face, then she answered, "None of you loved me, so it would not have worked."

Jakob knew she spoke the truth, but he wondered if the sacrifice had not been greater than the reward, though he also knew that he could not have gained all the knowledge he now had, even if he had lived to the age of three-hundred.

"I'll learn how to bring him back," he told her resolutely.

She frowned, but said nothing.

"But first, there is something else I need to do."

"What?"

"It seems that I have been tasked with giving life to something known as the Sovereign."

She looked surprised and revealed, "I was told that I must help you create the Sovereign."

Jakob nodded. "Once this task is fulfilled, we must seek out Grandfather. He has something that I seek."

LXII

They arrived at the tavern by late evening, leaving their travel-worn cart and the construct horse Invincible in the vast stable tended to by an elderly man. As though his eyes did not see Invincible for what he truly was, he patted the beast on the side and remarked, "What a strong stallion."

Jakob could hardly explain why, but he had been drawn to *this* particular place, despite it just being a simple roadside tavern near the border that separated Lleman and Helmsgarten. As he looked at the three-storey, he could not help but wonder what significance such a seemingly-insignificant place might have for him.

Wothram and Mayhew flanked him, while Ciana walked in front, as they came through the double-doors and found the counter that doubled both as the reception for those seeking to overnight and those that dined and drank in the cosy ground-floor eatery.

The proprietor was a heavyset woman with narrow and suspicious brown eyes and short auburn hair.

"We're full up on rooms," she immediately told them.

Ciana seemed about to speak, when Jakob pushed in front and said, "I have heard from Kasper that you were in need of a physician."

The woman blinked. "You know Kasper? Well why didn't you say so immediately!? I have room in the basement if you don't mind the rats and dust."

He nodded and *that* was that.

The proprietor called her busboy to stand by the counter and make himself useful, as she guided Jakob and his entourage down a staircase that was somewhat hidden thanks to only being accessible through the kitchen.

"I ain't never seen't a doctor with this many followers."

"These are uncertain times, Matilde," Jakob told her.

Matilde froze mid-step. "How'd you know my name? Oh, I suppose Kasper must've told ya, huh?"

The basement of the tavern was spacious and reminded him a lot of the morgue in Hesslik and his laboratorium in the Apothecary. He knew, thanks to his blessing from Nharlla, that Hargraves still ran the Apothecary without the city guard having any clue that he was under the sway of Jakob's demonic spell.

After the proprietor went back up to the main room, Ciana gave him a strange look.

"Who's Kasper?" she asked, "I thought you had no idea what this place was."

Jakob just shrugged. "I have never met the man, but I know that he and Matilde are siblings."

"And you knew that she would respond to you mentioning him?"

"Indeed. Though I also know that Kasper died to a bandit raid two years ago, but I suppose she has yet to learn this truth herself."

"So… how are we to go about summoning this Sovereign?" she wondered.

"It is not an entity to be summoned, rather, it is a creature that must be made from three constituent parts."

"And what parts are these?"

"The blood of the Seeker, the corpus of Pride, and the corpus of Envy."

"The Seeker… isn't that you?"

Jakob nodded. “I have yet to learn why my blood is required for this ritual.”

Ciana frowned. “It feels like we are following the plans laid by someone else, without any say in the matter.”

“Sometimes fate is subtle and unseen. Other times, its guiding hand is felt. Regardless, we are beholden to it and have no say in the matter, however it decides to manifests itself into our lives.”

They spent the rest of what little of the evening was left clearing the basement of the mess of stacked chairs and unused tables, such that ample room was available for the rituals they would have to perform.

“How do you plan on gathering enough blood for the summoning tolls?”

“We do not require blood,” Jakob told her confidently, as he was busy scratching the stone walls with a hardened half-metre-long claw on his right index finger.

“Why not?”

“Those we call upon will come willingly without a need for appeasement.”

“Willingly? I’ve never heard of any demons acting like that.”

“Nor have I,” Jakob replied, “but this is what I have learnt and I do not doubt the veracity of the information I have been gifted.”

Ciana tossed the chair in her hands onto the pile in the corner of the basement and then looked at what Jakob was busying himself with. “What are you doing?”

“I am ensuring this space is inviolable,” he explained, while finishing up the carving of what looked like a disorganised bundle of snake-like squiggles that somehow formed an eye if you looked at it long enough.

As he moved on to another wall, and began scraping the next Chthonic Sigil into the stone, he continued, “Chthonic Sigils are the building blocks of this world. They are power given physical form. To one who is untrained in their usage or whose purpose for drawing them is meaningless, they are dangerous and destructive.” He had a brief memory of Heskel attempting and failing to transcribe Sigils for Jakob to learn, as the Sigils destroyed whatever medium he transcribed them to. Except for something like Tungsten, there was truly no medium that could bear the strain of such powerful Sigils being inscribed upon them, even though he had assumed that flesh and hide could bear their inscription. He now knew that Sigils imploded if they were drawn without proper purpose. Truly, it was a fickle alphabet that jealously hid itself from the world, even steering the gaze of someone undeserving away from them, by mimicking the damaging properties of staring into the sun or by stinging the observer’s mind painfully.

Ciana seemed to have no difficulties looking at the Sigils he now drew, nor did he feel the painful and disturbing effects he had felt in the past when attempting to study the Sigils that Heskel had drawn on both their stitched-flesh robes and their Apothecary laboratorium’s walls.

As he finished inscribing the second Sigil on the wall, he pointed to it and told Ciana, “*This here* is the Inverted Ear, it obscures all sounds within this space from being observed from outside.” Then he pointed the first sigil, the bundle of squiggles, “*That one* is Nharlla’s Tangled Eye, it obfuscates all attempts at observing this space. It should keep us hidden from both Sirellius’ Scrying Powers and Grandfather’s blood-tracking homunculi.”

He was in the middle of inscribing a third Sigil, the Bottomless Well, when a scream tore through the air.

“Wothram, Mayhew, stay here and continue to clear space for us. Ciana, you and I have been summoned, it seems.”

The Elphin looked at him confused, but followed him out of the basement nonetheless.

On the third floor of the tavern, they found several guests and the proprietor gathered outside a room. When Matilde saw Jakob and Ciana approach, she told the guests to make way for them.

Jakob had only just crossed the threshold of the room, when his nostrils were assailed by an acrid stench of days' old blood and another smell he could not identify.

"It smells of a Prideful One," Ciana told him confidently.

When he thought about it, the unidentifiable stench was somehow regal and authoritative in the way it worked its way through his olfactory pathway, like a cold and sharp spike jammed right into the region of his brain that registered and processed smells.

He looked around the room. The walls were covered in old dried drawings and texts that made little sense, even to his discerning eye. All the furniture had been upturned, with the bed lying on its side and the dressers and cabinets were all turned up-side-down for some reason. On the backwall which was directly opposite the doorway, was written a single name that he *could* read however, as it was clearly Demonic script.

In the centre of the floor, in a circle drawn in his own blood, lay a man who had gouged out his own eyes before chewing through both his radial arteries in his wrists and lying down in a spread-eagle pose as his lifeblood slowly drained from him to form a very deliberate pattern on the wooden floor.

Jakob turned towards the morbidly-curious observers and the stern proprietor. "This is the evidence of a demonic possession. I will need to conduct an exorcism, lest this entire building be condemned to its foul grasp."

"I thought you were a doctor," Matilde remarked.

"In these times, a doctor must know how to heal wounds both physical and metaphysical. It should go without saying, but I will require solitude for this."

He nodded to Ciana, who left the room and took up guard outside the door.

Once the door was closed securely behind him, he looked at the backwall again and read out loud:

"Jǫkull."

As he spoke the name, his gift of knowledge told him the Demon's full title:

"Lord of the Solitary Spire, Jǫkull."

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—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

LXIII

After erasing the traces of the demonic text and using his transformative right hand to cut out the corpse's tongue, he opened the door and told Ciana to clean up the room. She cast him a suspicious glance, likely knowing that he would busy himself with a more important task, but something told him that keeping up appearances, even if for just a little while, would be to their benefit.

Jakob took the steps down two at a time, as he hurried to the basement below. Word of the brutal suicide had already spread to the guests that lounged in the eatery despite the lateness of the night and they were busy debating the cause of it, one of them already embellishing the story to include a sighting of a fleeing figure, though Jakob knew that it was no murder that had taken place.

Nharlla's summoning had been foretold and long-awaited schemes were now aligned properly in preparation for the arrival of the Sovereign. Rather than wait for Jakob to find the right Demon of Pride to summon, the right Demon had found him, and it was a Lord no less.

When he got to the bottom floor, he strode through the kitchen, startling the snoozing chef who had fallen asleep in the middle of peeling carrots for the morrow's stew. He came storming down the stairs to find his two construct servants still tidying up.

"Wothram, Mayhew, go stand by the top of the stairwell and ensure I am not disturbed."

The Golem and the tall construct left in lockstep synchronicity, as Jakob immediately got to work scratching the summoning ritual into the stone floor with his clawed right hand. He had memorised the pattern shown to him below the dead man and his knowledge-engorged brain fed him the rest of the ritual he needed.

It was no simple summoning septagram, rather it was a series of seven slightly off-centre rings that became smaller as they went, the second within the first ring, the third within the second, and so on. To the line of each ring was added the Chthonic Sigil that identified the specific realm: Pride as the first, Envy as the last.

Outside of the outer ring he drew the specific pattern he had seen. It almost looked like the silhouette of a bird of prey, but not quite. Within it he added the Chthonic name of the Demon Lord, as well as the Sigil called the Watcher's Gate, which was like an upside-down U within which was the Sigil for the Watcher. It was amusing how the Demonic way of drawing it was identical to the Chthonic way, but some things were absolute after all.

Then, to finish, he added a Sigil he did not know the name or meaning of, but which seemed as important as the Watcher's Gate and the Demon Lord's name.

Jakob took a few steps back. It was a habit to give his linework an appraising look, but he knew it was not needed. Alongside the knowledge that filled his brain and screamed to be used, was the assurance that he could not fail with his rituals, as though his hand could make no errors when it drew the potent lines or scratched the devastating sigils.

He wished dearly that Heskel was here to witness what he was about to do. After all, summoning a Demon Lord in a conventional manner was tantamount to suicide, not to mention damning perhaps the entire continent to ruin. But this was no Demonological ritual, no, it was a Chthonic rite of True Summoning. Whereas a Demonic Summoning would bring the Demon's soul through the veil, a Rite of True Summoning would bring their entire corpus.

If Jakob had not possessed the knowledge, he would not have believed it possible, but, of course, the Great Ones and their power was absolute and there was nothing they could not accomplish; the only thing required was the knowledge of the right Sigils and hymns.

He cleared his throat as he prepared to intone the spell, but before he could begin, the sound of Ciana's hooves on the stairs gave him pause.

"You're not doing this without me," she scolded Jakob, as she came over to stand behind him.

"I have no idea you were so interested in this."

"Don't be silly. I saw the name on the wall too. Is it a strong demon?"

"The strongest, some would say."

"I can still defeat it if necessary."

"It won't be," Jakob replied, "But good to know."

Then he began to wordless hymn, which awakened the magic within the spell he had drawn, making pale-blue light emerge from the scratches in the floor, as though some entity born of a cold star was attempting to break through the stone floor of the basement.

The light grew in intensity as Jakob continued onto the second verse, wherein the name of the Demon Lord was interspersed seemingly at random, though he himself knew there was a logic to it.

As he reached the third verse, the light began to warp and take on a physical shape, forming an immaculate pearlescent-blue gate in the air. A *woosh* of air broke through as the gate began to show another world beyond its threshold.

Cataclysmic winds whipped the stone peak that they looked at, with lightning and monsoon-level rain shooting back-and-forth as though the most violent storm possible was raging just beyond the threshold of the light-born gate.

A lone figure stepped through and no sooner had his clawed blue feet touched the stone floor of the basement than the vision of a foreign world disappeared within the gate, and the light that it was made up of began to break apart and vanish into tiny motes of light.

Then Jakob ended his hymn and all the light disappeared at once, leaving behind a tall naked figure who clearly did not belong in the Mortal Realm.

The Demon stood at over two metres in height, though he may as well have been a giant with how imposing a figure he struck. His body was lithe and laced with tightly-packed muscles that on anyone else would have looked brutish, but on him seemed perfectly sculpted. His face had high cheekbones and a lipless slit for a mouth, with two piercingly-cold almond-shaped eyes. At the top of his brow were two slate-grey horns that curled back along the curvature of his cranium, not to mention a mane of silver-white hair that were raised at an angle like the spines of a porcupine. He wore no clothes, but the lack seemed neither vulgar or primitive on him, but instead gave off the air of clothes being beneath him.

Ciana stood awestruck as she stared at the figure, while Jakob did his best to counteract the overpowering aura the Demon was assailing them with. He had to physically and mentally fight against the urge to debase himself before the figure.

Jǫkull, Demon Lord of the Solitary Spire, stared Jakob in the eyes, then said:

"***At last you have called upon me, Seeker.***"

LXIV

"Are you the Sovereign?" Ciana asked, dumbfounded.

As though just now noticing her, Jǫkull turned his sculpted face towards her and let his eyes run down her figure, perhaps appraising her.

"***I am its first half,***" he told her, then turned back to Jakob. "***I was unaware that the spawn of Archduchess Sköll would be present.***"

"Ciana is my steadfast companion," he replied. "But I had no idea that her progenitor was an Archduchess."

"***Sköll is one of my loyal adherents, but I was unaware that she sired a half-spawn.***"

"I believe it was for a reason," Ciana replied. Jakob was surprised by her confidence, but perhaps it was easier to live with the suffering of the past by using the successes of the present to justify them.

Jakob nodded. "The Watcher has guided us to this moment."

"***Not just the Watcher has had its hands in this,***" Jǫkull remarked.

The Demon Lord walked around the basement for a bit, seemingly fascinated with the mundanity of his surroundings. Then he found the ritual carvings on the floor and dropped to a knee to study the Sigils.

"***It is my first time being summoned,***" he revealed. "***I was made to believe it would be different.***"

"Normally just your soul would be summoned," Jakob replied.

"***Fascinating. You use the Watcher's Gate, my Sigil, and your own to imitate the spell.***"

Jakob looked at the third Sigil, the one he had not comprehended, but known to be crucial for the Rite to work. "That is *my* Sigil?"

"***The Seeker, it says.***"

He looked at the Sigil, pride and surprise flooding him in equal measure. To be of enough significance to have earnt his own Chthonic Sigil was quite something. It was nowhere near as complex as the other Sigils he had used, but as he looked at it intently, he could not help but feel a strange sense of affinity for it, as though instinctively knowing that the symbol personified him completely.

While Jakob was busy marvelling at his Sigil, Jǫkull wandered over to the unfinished drawing that Jakob had left when the commotion upstairs had beckoned him and Ciana. With a simple gesture, the Demon Lord summoned a cutting wind that finished the linework, such that the Bottomless Well

Sigil joined Nharlla's Tangled Eye and the Inverted Ear in protecting the basement from all prying eyes and would-be observers.

Jakob stood up from where he had been knelt to stare deeply at the Seeker Sigil. "You said you were the first half of the Sovereign," he reminded the Demon Lord. "Who is your other half?"

Jǫkull returned to their company. It was strange for so immensely-powerful an entity to seem so timid and unassuming, despite their visage only inspiring awe and reverence, as well as promising untold horrors to any that defied him.

The Demon Lord performed a gesture while pointing his palm at the stone floor next to where his own summoning ritual was, and once again the wind came to do his bidding and created a near-identical copy of the rite carvings, though the silhouette that surrounded the seven circles was more like a hexagon, and the Sigil between the Watcher's Gate and the Seeker was different.

Jakob read the name of the Sigil out loud, "Kalameytas."

"***The second half,***" Jǫkull replied. "***The Sovereign is a Daemon of Pride and Envy. A joining of the First and the Last. Only one such Daemon has existed before and it was known to be a vengeful creature. Lady Kalameytas of the Ruinous Path will be joined together with me to form a whole. Never before has the Realms known of such a joining. The Sovereign is the name by which we will be known and even the Absolutes shall have to bow before our combined might.***"

He tried to quell the shiver that ran through him. He had no clue that the two halves were meant to be Demon Lords, and, while the aura of Jǫkull was by itself cowing and overpowering, no matter how hard Jakob attempted to fight back, it was still no match for the aura of a Lord of Envy. The summoning alone would surely condemn Lleman and Helmsgarten to a brutal death under her corrupting aura.

Before Jakob could do anything however, Jǫkull had begun to sing the hymn to initiate the Rite, and a foul putrid yellow-green light began lighting up the lines carved into the stone floor.

Working as fast as he could, Jakob drew a warding circle and began scribbling many different Sigils along its edge, the sound of Jǫkull's angelic voice like the death toll of the coming apocalypse. Ciana noticed what he was doing and walked over to observe, but, no sooner had she gotten within range of where Jakob stood inside the circle, than he pulled her in, hugging her tightly to his body so they both could fit.

She was about to say something in protest, when the hymn ended and a corroded version of the gate that had brought Jǫkull manifested, bringing with it a foul stench of sulphur, putrefaction, and effluvia. Out of the threshold stepped a lumbering mound of flesh with a small head on a long neck and a body like a pear, with all the meat and skin hanging down around the knees of her emaciated legs. Two sets of arms emerged from a cracked and misshapen torso, and two tails grew from the end of her spine and swished around the air.

No sooner had the Lady of the Ruinous Path stepped into the basement than the stone cracked and blackened as though subjected to scalding fire. In the corner, the pile of chairs and tables decayed into a pile of decayed mulch and the wooden rafters in the ceiling began to drip as the wood became a gloopy mess. Before her destructive aura could spread any further, Jǫkull flung wide his arms and seemed to lock it away.

The Demon Lord of Pride turned towards Jakob and observed as he hugged Ciana tightly, then replied. "***It is safe now. Let us waste no more time in the joining.***"

LXV

Jakob had called Wothram and Mayhew back down into the basement so that they could clear away the ruined top-layer of the stone floor, such that Jakob had a clean surface to work on. He made sure to inspect the ground floor of the tavern to see if Kalameytas' hideous aura had affected anything there, but it seemed to have been confined to the basement and bottom-three steps of the staircase that led down to it.

Once the Joining Ritual was completed, he would need to make a new door to replace the one that had become a pile of rancid slush already descended upon by a swarm of tiny flies. Fortunately, the Sigils on the walls did not require a functional door to keep prying eyes out nor suppress any sounds from within.

For some reason, he felt that something was wrong with this whole affair involving the Sovereign. It felt warped and wrong, or as if some important piece of information was missing. Certainly, he was sure that without his quick thinking he would have died to the Envy Lord's aura, but it was quite possibly one of the Watcher's esoteric trials to ensure he was the correct one to carry out this important task.

He took a deep breath and a vapour cloud emerged from his face where the crimson scent-mask gifted to him by Grandfather was now permanently grafted onto the skin. Something he found peculiar was that, since his encounter with Nharlla more than a week prior, he had not had the urge to eat, sleep, nor drink. It was as if the only nourishment he needed was the knowledge he gleaned from his surroundings.

With his mind cleared and assured that the tavern would not collapse down around him thanks to Kalameytas, he went back into the basement. The Envy Demon stood within one of three interjoined ellipses, while Jǫkull was busy carving the remaining bits of the Joining Ritual, such as the copious lines of Sigils that snaked around outside the linework. Disregarding the Sigils, it was a very simple drawing that Jakob recognised from his gifted knowledge as a Rite of Harmonious Unity. In the same moment he recognised the Rite, he also realised why everything felt *wrong*. But he kept the revelation to himself, as he instinctively knew that revealing it to the two willing Demon Lords would ruin all the careful work that had led to this moment.

As he finished the final Sigil, Jǫkull stepped inside one of the ellipses as well, which left one vacant for the missing piece.

"***You have the final piece,***" Jǫkull told him confidently. "***Complete the ritual and sing the hymn, so that our ascension be complete.***"

Ciana looked at him and seemed to have figured out what Jakob already knew: the Demons were mistaken about their roles in this.

Jakob strode over to the vacant spot and bowed to carve the Seeker Sigil into the area within the third ellipse, then he manipulated his right hand to release a glob of his own blood onto the Sigil he had drawn. He took a quick step back and got to enjoy the moment when both Demon Lords realised that something was wrong, then he said the simple phrase to ignite the Ritual:

"*Let a harmonious and united whole be born of these three parts!*"

Ciana and Jakob, as well as the heavy Wothram and the tall Mayhew, were tossed against the walls of the basement as the ritual began and combined the three parts to create a whole. A wind like the storms they had witnessed through the portal to Jǫkull's realm buffeted the room, flaying the top

layer of the skin on Jakob's face and arms. As it died out, a chilling cold washed over the room, and Jakob heard Ciana yelp in pain as the flesh laid bare by the brutal wind began to freeze over. Then that too faded and a single sound cut through the dead-still air:

A baby's wailing.

It was a monumental challenge to crawl towards the product of the unholy union of Jakob's blood and the two Demon Lords, but he persevered, even as his skinned hand and legs stung painfully. His muscles were drained of their power and his body seemed on the cusp of faltering. Ciana was knocked out cold, but Jakob knew she would be fine, after all, her gift from Nharlla had made her undefeatable in more ways than one would naturally assume.

The place where the Pride Lord had drawn the ritual had caved in under the immense powers that were condensed into a single form, so that, when Jakob finally came close enough to see its result, it lay in a small crater in the floor.

Jakob was stunned by the figure he saw within that crater left behind, for it was a human child. If not for the slate-grey back-swept horns that grew from the baby boy's brow and the glowing heterochromia of one frost-blue eye and one mustard-green eye, he would have looked like a normal baby.

Somehow, he found the strength to stand and reached down into the small crater to lift out the child, before lifting him into the air and proclaiming to the dead-still basement:

"The Sovereign has been born!"

He felt the change in the world and so too did his Benefactor, who once again punished him for failing to divert the course of fate. But Nøgel knew that forceful measures did not work to redirect the river of what-was-meant-to-be, though small changes in the River of Fate now could lead to profoundly-different outcomes in a couple of decades, and thus he assured his Lady, whose persistent whispers flogged him and flooded his mind with images of all the worst things he could imagine.

The ghost sensation of his skin peeling from flesh and bone still rang through his body, but he continued his journey towards the tavern where he would find the Apprentice and the creature he had just given birth to.

With his new arm, the magic of which belonged to the Lady herself, he had a sense for so many things he had never before noticed, and it was with this sense that he knew there was still time to carry out the task he had been given.

"**The Child will die,**" he said, mostly to himself, though he was sure the Lady heard him as well.

Nøgel continued his journey. It was not far now and then he would kill the Pretender and the Fleshcrafter's Apprentice, along with the foul spawn they had brought into existence.

Jakob held the child awkwardly. Even with his boundless stores of knowledge, he had no idea how to stop the baby from crying his eyes out. The supple and soft skin was stained red from the effort of boy's hysterics, but no matter how Jakob held him or swayed his arms back-and-forth, the crying would not cease.

Ciana had regained her consciousness by then and came over and took the child from his hands, before sitting back down on the ruined floor. It was clear that her body was as feeble as Jakob's, but she carried it well.

She made a few shushing noises with her mouth, which Jakob found peculiar.

"He won't stop."

"He's just hungry," she assured him, then pulled up the hem of her shirt and began breastfeeding the baby. For some reason, the sight made Jakob tumble down onto his ass. As he sat there in front of her, he noticed how her wing, the part of an Elphin's soul that did not fit within their bodies, swished around in the air. He watched as it moved in a strange dance of sorts behind her and knew she was content. In a way, she had found that which she had always sought, even if her desire for it had been sacrificed to Nharlla.

While Ciana fed the child, Jakob just watched, spell-bound by the beauty of the moment that the Watcher and its Vassals had granted them.

"What will we name him?" she asked gently.

"His name will be *Iskandarr*," Jakob told her. "He is the Sovereign, so his name must befit his stature."

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

LXVI

Iskandarr visibly grew from day-to-day. Jakob at first thought that it was a by-product of the Elphin's mother's milk, but then realised that it was an intrinsic part of the boy's unique anatomy. He was born of two of the strongest physical entities imaginable, with Jakob's blood serving as the frame upon which their combined powers intermixed.

At day two the boy weighed around four kilograms, and by the fourth day it was double that. A wild mane of silver-white hair began to sprout from his crown on the third day, and by the fifth it reached his shoulders. His crying was incessant the first couple of days, but then it was replaced by an eerie silence, as Iskandarr observed the new world around him.

Jakob did not like to admit it, but he was apprehensive around the boy, because he feared what he was capable of, which, given the significance of his title, was no doubt awe-striking power. But, as he observed his unnaturally-fast growth each day, he struggled to figure out what made him unique apart from his metabolism and physique.

The patrons of the tavern, as well as its proprietor, took to the boy quite fast, which hinted of some ability to warp people's perception of him, especially considering their lack of concern at his astonishing day-to-day changes.

Almost exactly a week after Iskandarr's birth, Ciana and Jakob were outside with him. Judging by his appearance, he seemed to be around the age of three, which to Jakob indicated that he would reach full maturity before the end of the following month.

The boy was walking behind the Elphin, occasionally jumping to attempt to grab her ephemeral wing. He wore an oversized shirt and nothing else, his long mane of hair flowing behind him as he followed her.

Without warning, he ran ahead, shedding the awkwardness that a child of his apparent age should have. He found a stick amidst the autumn trees that had shed almost every leaf and as he lifted it in the air triumphantly, he announced to Ciana:

"*Look, mother! I'm a warrior just like you!*"

Ciana froze and Jakob came up next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. He knew how she was feeling. He somehow understood the flurry of emotions that passed through her, as well as the underlying fear that made shivers run down her body.

She shrugged off his hand and ran towards Iskandarr, picking him up in her arms and twirling him around, while her power over sound and vibration made all the dead leaves rise and spiral around them like a cyclone.

Jakob watched from where he leant against a tree, while Ciana and Iskandarr laughed. He felt content as he observed their joy, but a part of him knew that this moment was transient and fleeting. He knew that, come the end of the following month, they would return to Helmsgarten and confront Grandfather in his lair.

Perhaps it was a by-product of his newfound knowledge, but he felt in his breast that a storm of emotions waged war on each other. There were pride and success fighting with worry and fear, and there was joy and contentment fighting with sorrow and grief.

But most of all, Jakob could not quell the one thought that raced through his mind, repeating itself despite his attempts to quell it: *What would Heskel have said if he was here?*

He had never thought he was capable of sadness, but he understood that he mourned the loss of his life-long companion and father-figure.

Jakob was torn from his thoughts by the touch of a small hand touching his right hand, where the demon-skin glove made from the Greed Demon Purll's body had become part of his body.

He looked down and his gaze met the two glowing eyes of the Sovereign.

"*You will bring him back, Father.*"

A clump suddenly formed in Jakob's throat and though he wanted to ask the boy what he meant, he felt unable to use his voice. Instead he simply patted the boy on his head.

Ciana came over, concern on her face. "Are you okay?" she asked Jakob.

He nodded curtly.

"It's just… I've never seen that expression on your face before."

Jakob was in the basement, studying the obsidian sliver left behind by Nharlla's summoning within Jon's Hamlet. One of the abilities he had gained from the Great One's gift was the ability to understand things that he touched, as well as understand how they may be used to further his own knowledge. As he held the sliver, he understood how he could use it, and as such he spoke a simple hymn with his right hand over the seam between his arm and the prosthetic he had made after the loss of his left forearm.

The prosthetic let go of his flesh and settled on the worktable with a hollow *clunk*. He pulled out the tongue he had taken from man who had written the name of the Pride Lord in his own blood before his death. Then he took the obsidian sliver and arranged it with the tongue and prosthetic in a triangular pattern, before speaking a hymn that must surely have been the true version of the Amalgam Hymn:

"*Nharlla, the Everchanging One, I bid thee heed my words,*"

"*Unite these pieces born of separate wholes,*"

"*Conjoin these errant strays into a single form,*"

"*Make these changeable fragments unchangeable in union,*"

"*Until its purpose has been served,*"

"*Form this lasting bond.*"

Unlike with the Amalgam Hymn, the three pieces combined to form a new union, over which form Jakob himself had no control, but which was the form that would best serve the purpose he had in mind. It was strange to him that the Disfigured One, Nharlla, who could never be observed wearing the same visage twice, was somehow capable of combining things into their true form, but then it also seemed true that a Great One wielded both the power that defined them and its opposite. For example, the Watcher wielded the power of sight, in its many variations of physicality and metaphysicality, but he also wielded the power of blindness, such as what Jakob invoked in Sigil-form to prevent anyone from observing him.

He lifted up the newly-formed forearm and carefully moved the obsidian prosthetic closer to the nub of his stump. As his skin, bones, and exposed flesh met reflective star-specked stone, a numbing cold shot through his entire body, while the stone itself seemed to dig into his stump, forming a permanent bond and connecting his nerve endings such that he felt what the four-fingered prosthetic touched. But beyond simple sense-of-touch and sense-of-temperature were abstract senses, like the physical flow of auras and their boundaries, as well as the way souls fit within their vessels. The senses were not connected to his eyes, but he still somehow could perceive them visually.

With the newfound curiosity born of his obsidian forearm, he walked over to where Mayhew stood. The construct stood stock-still as it had not been given instructions, and, when Jakob ran his reflective left hand over the body he had given it, he could feel how the tendrils of Mayhew's Birthed Sentience permeated its body. With an experimentative tug on the metaphysical tendril that connected its upper-body with its legs, he made the construct collapse, only for the tendril to reorient itself back into the construct's body, allowing it to use its legs again.

"Fascinating," Jakob muttered to himself, a breath of vapour escaping from his mouth.

Ciana was sitting with Iskandarr on his lap in the eatery of the tavern. She felt the boy ought to observe the people and their ways, because she knew he would one day rule them. The voice of Nharlla had told her as much when he had given her his gift.

"*They do not perceive me as I am,*" Iskandarr told her.

She was surprised to find that he was now fluent in Chthonic, as, the last few times he had spoken it had been in the lilting tongue of Demons.

"You were born of a union of True Demons and Jakob's blood, so you have powers that alter the minds of those around you."

"*Have I altered you and Father as well?*"

Ciana had to think for a moment before she answered, but then she confidently said, "We are stronger of mind than most. We view you as you truly are."

Iskandarr seemed placated by the response as he fell silent and went back to observing the guests who dined, drank, and talked around them. She still felt slightly unnerved by the boy's intensity, but, given his progenitors, it was a given. And more than anything, she felt the unshakeable desire to protect him. With the gift granted to her by Nharlla, she knew that it was in her power to keep him and Jakob safe.

Of all the gifts she had been given, by the Brute, by the Fleshcrafter, by the Great Ones, and now by the young Sovereign, she felt that the most important gift was a simple one that she had always sought in her life: a purpose.

Iskandarr hopped down from her lap and walked over towards the door that led outside. Ciana quickly followed behind him. As they went outside, the boy took her hand and pointed into the horizon.

"*The Betrayer's Chosen is near.*"

LXVII

Iskandarr continued pointing south-southeast as he held Ciana's hand. As his words sunk in, she noticed a disfigured silhouette cresting a hill directly where the boy pointed. She let his hand drop and started striding towards the approaching figure.

At last he had found the place. Even with how the Great Ones meddled to keep him from locating the Pretender, the Apprentice, and their unworthy spawn, he had found them. It was all thanks to the Lady's guidance.

By now, the arm he had been gifted had consumed half of his face and torso, turning the skin and flesh into the same swirling mass of blood and power. It was an intoxicating rush of omnipotence that filled him every time it expanded further across his skin, and he knew that when his entire body was consumed by it he would be unstoppable. He would become a Flayed Avatar of the scheming Lady.

As he crested the hill just beyond the treeline of the forest he had run through for the last few hours, Nøgel saw the diminutive tavern in the distance as well as the approaching figures.

"**You have blessed me,**" he remarked to the River of Fate. It had after all brought him exactly what he sought.

Nøgel raised his bloodied right arm into the air, its massive form a weapon of destruction, then he swung down its claws, hitting the dense soil of the hill and flinging his entire body forward like a projectile.

As he descended upon the approaching figure, he relished in the thought of flensing apart her skin and punishing her for believing herself the Keening's Chosen. His body spun around, the clawed and disfigured arm reaching for her, but then a powerful explosion of air punched him off-course, sending him on a collision course with a nearby coppice of slender leafless trees. His body broke against their trunks, but was already beginning to heal by the time the Pretender strode towards him, sending powerful vibrating bolts into his body, shredding his skin and flesh, while also pulverising his internals.

With a swing he sent two dozen bullets of blood back at her, while his own life fluid leaked from a multitude of cuts, holes, and open wounds.

Ciana raised her hand to obliterate the projectiles sent back at her, then she leapt forward with a downward chop of her Vibrating Edge. The disfigured Creature blocked the strike of her unseen blade with the massive clawed hand, somehow avoiding being split in two. With her free hand Ciana clenched the air inside his untainted left flank and a massive cavity formed as her gifted power pulverised everything it touched with its devastating tremors.

Despite the fatal wound in his side, the Creature swung back at her with its enormous and skinless right arm, the very air singing an unholy tune as she moved out of its reach. With space between them, the Creature fired off more of its blood magic, tiny shards of crystallised blood shooting from the hideously-overgrown upper arm.

Ciana backstepped while selectively destroying each of the projectiles that curved through the air to try and catch her from a blind spot, but her awareness of her surroundings was total and it was as though she saw everything without needing to look directly at it.

Is this what it feels like to be undefeatable?

The Creature used its massive claw to fling its body forward again, but she saw it coming and sent a slash of her unseen blade right at his mid-section, cutting apart the portions of his body that was still human and untainted.

As his waist separated from his torso, a dozen tendrils shot out of his crimson arm as his body fell to the ground. The tendrils reached for Ciana like blood-thirsty lamprey mouths, but with a sweeping gesture of her free hand, she pulverised them into a mist that immediately vapourised. Then she let the Vibrating Edge fall away into the air and focused both of her hands on the prone and mutilated Creature, letting the full brunt of her magic bear upon its miserable form.

As the very atoms of its being began to vibrate destructively, the human portions of the body yet attached were reduced to nothingness, but nothing happened to the swirling mass of blood that made-up its right arm and half its torso and face.

Even as she increased the intensity, the dirt around the crimson Creature becoming finely-grained dust, nothing seemed to happen, as though her magic could not harm it. She continued to apply her destructive magic however, as to let up would be to allow the Creature to regain a foothold.

Then she heard the soft footfalls of the boy as he came up to her side.

"Iskandarr, get out of here!" she demanded through gritted teeth, the strain of keeping up the aural onslaught already beginning to drain her reserves.

The boy did not listen however and walked over to the lump of misshapen crimson matter.

"*The Keening cannot harm its Master*," he remarked.

Then he spoke a phrase and the lump of crimson matter vanished. "*Unmake the bonds that bind thee to this realm.*"

Like a pressure that had been held back by an equivalent force, the disappearance of the Creature meant that there was no target for Ciana's magic, so it shot straight into the ground and made an enormous crater as it vapourised the grass and earth before she could shut it down.

She turned to look at the boy in wide-eyed disbelief, just in time to see him collapse to the ground, unconscious.

Nøgel struggled to believe it. He had been defeated despite everything, despite the overwhelming strength he had possessed. He had scarcely enough time to contemplate the matter, when he realised that, somehow, he was still alive, though his vision was black and his senses were numbed.

Then a cold and searing pain shot through his body, making him wish for true death. Wordless screams and shrieks filled his head and blocked out all thoughts he might have had.

Crimson light cleared away the darkness of his vision and he found himself within the bowels of some colossal creature, the curving and pulsating walls around him covered in reaching limbs full of claws and mouths.

If he had possessed the ability to, he would have begged to be put out of his misery, but he was unable to do that much. He was incapable of even moving, knowing instinctively that he had no true body, but was only a misshapen lump of formless soul-matter.

The screams in his thoughts began to take on shape, until they formed words.

"FAILURE**.**"

“WEAKLING.”
“WORTHLESS.”
“USELESS.”
“HIDEOUS.”
“PATHETIC.”

The screams and shrieks continued to berate him in a thousand different words and he felt the space between each word like a knife being pulled from his body, before the next word plunged it back into a new spot and brought with it a fresh pain.

He wanted to plead with the voices.

He wished to prove himself undeserving of them.

But he had failed the Flayed Lady.

And she did not take well to failures.

LXVIII

Jakob was brought back to reality by Ciana thundering down the stairs to the basement, Iskandarr in her arms. Her face was a mask of fear and from the sounds he had heard earlier, he knew she had fought off someone strong, but her body was spotless. She had not even worn the armour Heskel and Jakob had made her, and yet she was unscathed.

Without needing him to tell her, Ciana put the boy on an available table.

Looking at him, he knew that no wound was the cause, as the boy was as spotless as his protector, but his face was sallow and dotted with sweat. Jakob moved his newly-crafted obsidian hand over Iskandarr's torso, feeling the way his unique soul flowed within his small frame.

"What did this?" he asked.

"I don't know! He somehow exorcised the Creature that was attacking us, but then fell unconscious!"

"A Creature? Of what sort?"

"It doesn't matter, Jakob! Focus on the boy!"

He was taken aback by the tone in her voice, but knew that it was simply misplaced anger caused by her fear and feeling of impotence.

"He will be fine. He just requires rest. With how rapidly he is developing, he may be up and active in a couple of hours."

"Are you sure!?"

Jakob narrowed his eyes.

"Do you doubt me?"

"I… No. Sorry."

"He may be possessed of extraordinary abilities, Ciana, but he is not yet matured. He somehow exhausted his soul by *exorcising* your attacker, but there is no apparent damage. It's almost as if…"

"As if what?"

"No, nothing. Take him to one of the vacant rooms and watch over him. If he hasn't regained consciousness before noon, then you come find me."

Ciana visibly relaxed and went to take the boy in her arms. Before she could lift him up however, Jakob took his right hand and touched her forehead, right next to her horns, with his index and middle fingers.

"I see," he remarked, mostly to himself.

"What did you just do?"

"I wanted to understand what you saw and my gift allows me such an insight through touch."

"Really?"

"Indeed."

"So, do you know what it was that attacked us?"

"It seems to me the same person who we fought in Hesslik."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"But he used the same magic as me back then, not to mention he had more control over his faculties. What I fought out there was no man, it was a beast borrowing the shape of a human."

"He seems to have traded in the arm you severed with this new version. The manner of manipulating blood reminds me of Wrathful Demons," he said.

"It didn't look like a demon."

"A shame nothing is left," he replied. "I would have liked a sample."

"The parts I cut off, the human parts, they are still out there."

"I see. I will glean what I can from his erstwhile corpus then."

Jakob left the basement before Ciana even had the chance to lift up Iskandarr.

A few days later, when Jakob was poring over the peculiar structure of the 'Creature's' human parts, Iskandarr came hopping down the stairs. It was an odd thing how the boy's mannerisms matched his apparent age of around five, but his speech and insights were of an ageless fashion.

"*Father,*" he greeted as he passed through the threshold to the basement, closing the newly-built door behind him.

It had surprised Jakob to find that Wothram possessed the talent for rudimentary carpentry, but, sure enough, when he had given the Golem the task, he had dutifully acquiesced and produced a functional door that was eerily similar to the one that had broken down under Kalameytas' aura of decay.

"I expect you to be punctual, Iskandarr," Jakob scolded the child.

"*Yes, Father. Have I missed much?*"

"I have left this piece for you to deconstruct," Jakob said, ignoring the question and indicating the available worktable upon which lay a hand with the forearm attached.

Iskandarr had to step up onto a stool to reach the table, but, even then, his chin barely cleared the edge and his arms had to reach up and over in an awkward way to manipulate the limb. But he did not complain, for it was not his way. Though Jakob was sure the boy no doubt knew that in just a few more days he would grow to a proper height that he could stand upon the stool and properly use the worktable.

"*Do I not get a blade like yesterday?*"

"No. Yesterday was a lesson in dissection. Today I am teaching you how to understand the sample in front of you."

"*Yes, Father.*"

"You may lift it off the table so you can see it better," he told him. "I want you to use your senses to tell me as much as you can about the sample and the person it came from."

Iskandarr hefted the forearm off the surface of the table and took it as he stepped down off the stool, moving it around in front of him with narrowed eyes.

It was an absurd sight to behold and Jakob had to keep reminded himself that it was no ordinary child before him. Ciana had complained that Iskandarr was above such work as Jakob's fleshcraft, but Jakob believed it would serve him well.

As with any craftsmanship, the skill one developed from it applied to more than just the niche of the particular craft. A butcher learnt to wield a knife with such efficiency that it rivalled the most well-practiced swordsmen and from his butchering came an intrinsic understanding of his prey's anatomy, which rivalled a physician's well-studied knowledge of bodies and their layout.

So too it was with Fleshcrafting: it required an objective eye that could discern healthy and potent samples from tainted and useless ones at a glance; a steady hand and calm mind to ensure cuts were made without damaging the tissue; and the ability to absorb knowledge and think outside common logic such that esoteric lore could take hold.

"Time's up," Jakob told him. "Tell me what you have learnt." He walked over and took the limb out of Iskandarr's hand and placed it back on the table.

Jakob was not like Grandfather, for he did not fear that his student would surpass him, rather, he relished the thought that such a thing was even a possibility. But even with such a mindset, he found it chilling how easily everything came to the boy. He was truly excellent in anything he set his mind to learning, and Jakob doubted the Demon Lords corpuses that had fuelled his birth were the reason. Rather, it was as though the perfect mind had found a home in the strongest vessel the Great Ones knew how to scheme into physicality.

"*It belonged to a human male,*" Iskandarr started.

"Are you certain?"

"*Yes. His bones may be denser and his muscles like steel, but he was human.*"

"Go on."

"*A potent form of magic permeates his body, even after his death. There are no signs of decay, as if the body it was from was incapable of aging. The blood vessels have a peculiar nature, which makes it likely that he wielded fire magic with this hand.*"

Jakob nodded. The man it had belonged to, Nøgel, had not only been favoured by the Keening One, but had also wielded simple fire magic, which had a tendency to distort the veins due to the heat travelling through the body before being fired off, and this would be more evident in the limb favoured to use such magic. Ice magic had a similar side-effect, while earth and wind magic impacted the lungs and organs more and left the veins unchanged. Jakob had only ever studied Stelji's body, prior to remaking her, but knew from Grandfather that those rare few that wielded lightning tended to have visible signs on the surface of their skin, which often experienced micro-crystallisation, with occasionally gaining something very close to scale. Additionally, lightning magic also impacted the centres of the wielder's brain that dealt with emotions and memory.

"*He was possessed by the Flayed Lady's power when he died.*"

Jakob nearly choked, then he took a step towards the boy, putting his right hand on his forehead, trying to discern how he had made such a connection from studying the limb, as he himself had not found such signs.

Watching Jakob's frantic expression, Iskandarr grinned, exposing rows of tightly-packed incisor teeth.

He removed his hand from the boy's head, "You did not learn that from studying the sample," he concluded.

"*No, Father. I felt it when I exorcised him.*"

"And how exactly did you feel it?"

"*It was like a thousand claws digging into me and a loud screeching voice promising me an agonising death.*"

Jakob felt a chill travel down his body. A threat from a Great One was nothing to brush off. Given their immense power, even the simple utterance of a threat from such an Entity could warp reality and manifest it into being. "The Flayed Lady will forever seek your life," Jakob admitted to the boy.

"*Why? I have done her nothing.*"

"Not yet."

Iskandarr looked up at him with his glowing heterochromatic eyes. Despite it all, there was still a childlike naivete to him, which, somehow, was even more terrifying, Jakob thought. In a way, it reminded him of himself. No doubt he could have avoided much trouble if he had properly understood the consequences his actions would manifest. But then again, perhaps he was here now exactly

because of those consequences, and perhaps it was now his role to instil a proper kind of preparedness into the young Sovereign, so that he would always be in charge of the consequences.

"You are meant for greatness," Jakob told him. "Of all the beings in the endless cosmos, the Flayed Lady abhors rivals the most, after all, it was her very nature that gave birth to the Demons of Envy. One third of your body was made possible as a result of her hateful and jealous nature, and that alone might be enough for her to wish for your destruction, but I believe that the Great Ones have many plans for you and she wishes to usurp them, so your death would be the means to accomplish this."

"*Father?*"

Jakob put his left hand on Iskandarr's tussled silver-white hair. He felt the tremors of the boy's soul through his obsidian fingers and understood the emotions travelling through his young body.

"*Do you fear death?*"

"I do not fear death, for it is an eventuality for any being. Even the Great Ones perish with time. No. What I fear is to leave this life unfinished. I must see my work completed before I am ready to be taken."

"*I fear it,*" Iskandarr admitted.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

LXIX

He wandered down halls that he had explored enthusiastically as a child, but now found to be devoid of the life and the intrigue it had held for him back then. The tapestries and banners were faded and untended to, left alone to fade in lustre, like a microcosm of the city itself.

It was quite obvious that he was to blame for this state of affairs. He knew how he was perceived and how people talked about him when they thought he did not hear them. It was common knowledge that none of his scheming father's great techniques of altering public perception had rubbed off on him, but the people around him were mistaken. Even the oh-so-wise Old Advisor did not think much of him. But Patrych was a changed man. It had taken hideous death and unholy resurrection to unearth the talents instilled in him by his father, and those lessons had seen him slay his dear father and claim the city and its lands for himself.

No one else seemed to sense the voices that Patrych heard nor the sights that he saw. He had seen how those bright and evil horns grew from the Knights of the Eight Saint and he had known they were vile and needed to be exorcised from his realm. Of course, he had no way of knowing that it would devolve into so massive a conflict as what it had turned into. Already hundreds of his soldiers had died in skirmishes with the vile vice-indulging holy warriors.

Patrych knew what few had yet to learn: Purity was a Vice. It was an inevitability that the Eight Saint would fall and become part of the pantheon of Sinners. Only one look at the magic the Saint's adherents performed and the ways their bodies were shaped by the powerful Vice they let themselves be overtaken by, and it was clear that they were evil.

Those of his most promising Royal Guardsmen squads that had ventured deep into the Principality had begun to find mass graves and signs of genocide on a scale that made Patrych quite speechless.

Sure, the Kingdom of Heimdale had joined on the Principality's side when suspicions of Helmsgarten utilising demons was brought to life. Patrych would defeat the Archduke and show the proof of what he had done to all those who believed Helmsgarten was the villain in this. His father, old beloved King Ubrik, had aided the Principality, of that there could be no doubt, and it was just one of many reasons why he needed to die.

If the Old Advisor had not been the only person capable of Scrying within his retinue, then he too would have been sacrificed upon the altar of change that Patrych would create for his nation and its people. Hopefully he would soon find a replacement, for he was tiring of the codger's reticence and heavy-handed ways of dealing with everything. Just recently him and the Royals under his command had condemned several villages and towns to utter decimation, all to wipe out a single nefarious Daemon… It was clear that things had to change.

The whispers told him so.

Four Royal Guardsmen stood guard by the entrance at the foot of the staircase.

"Your Majesty?" one of them asked, noticing him.

The other three immediately saluted him and squared up their shoulders, putting on a fake charade of being productive and vigilant, despite Patrych having just seen them laze about.

"What are you doing *here*?"

"Am I not allowed to speak to my ancestors?" Patrych replied sharply, not even bothering to look the Guardsman in the eyes. He was one of the newer ones so he had yet to learn his place, but Patrych had expected better of his three comrades.

"I, erm, no of course you are, Your Majesty."

One of the whispers suddenly made him aware that there was something amiss.

"Why are there four of you standing guard here?"

"Orders by Colonel Tress, Your Majesty."

"*Colonel*? Since when? Is she *in there*?"

As the newcomer was about to reply, Patrych noticed the *things* in his eyes. With a quick scan, he noticed all four of them shared the aberration. It had somehow happened again… Truly, his Kingdom needed a change. His proud institution of Royal Guardsmen was so easily perverted by demonic influences, he objectively reasoned, as he clenched the corded muscles in his legs and arms.

Time seemed to slow as all but the newcomer noticed the change in Patrych's body, but still it did not save them.

Like a crash of thunder, his right fist shot out and pulverised the newcomer's against the stone wall behind him. He weaved under a clumsily-swung blade aimed at his head, then lanced his left fist up into the solar plexus of the wielder. As the swordsman began to keel over forward, Patrych rammed his elbow down into the back of his head, snapping his head against the stone floor where it bounced once before his body fell still.

The remaining two were in the middle of speaking the incantations of their magical attacks, when Patrych spun on the heels of his feet and launched forward with a kick of his powerful legs, which cracked the flagstone under him. He came up right within reach of them before either of them could finish, then grabbed one's head with his right hand and crunched it shut, while lifting the other by his throat, immediately killing his incantation.

After he released the grip of his right hand, he put the hand on the last man's throat and began squeezing slowly, *pops* and *cracks* emerging from his neck, while he tried desperately to fight back against Patrych's inhuman strength.

Then it was over.

He looked around at the four dead bodies and felt nothing but frustration. *This time* he would not leave the clean-up to Sirellius. No, he would destroy whatever foul taint had infested his city.

With powerful strides, Patrych moved through the catacombs to the place where he knew he would find Colonel Tress. Only minutes after killing the guards she had left behind, Patrych found the traitress in the ritual chamber that had for decades served as an embalming chamber for the Royal Family and select few Aristocratic lineages.

"Right on time," Tress said as she locked eyes with him. She was standing on the opposite side of the room, behind the offering bowl to the vile Entity that kept Patrych alive. Before he could get to her, she carved open her left arm and let a deluge of foul blood fall into the awaiting ritual vessel, where an oily black flame with a core of brilliant pale blue flickered with a life of its own.

No sooner had her tainted blood touched the bowl than the entire room changed. A fissure formed in the ground beneath them and the vile flame grew to great proportions, its colour changing to an absolute crimson like the blood it had imbibed. Then tendrils of crimson blood emerged from its brilliant core and shot outward, sticking into the walls of the chamber, as though anchoring itself forcefully.

One tendril picked up the corrupted Colonel and shoved her inside the flame, where she was immediately consumed.

Then a powerful wave of pain sent Patrych to his knees, as though his very soul was being dragged out of him by the foul thing that had taken over the Daemon itself.

As he knelt there on the stone floor of the tomb, he felt a teasing hand run along the length of his spine and up to his cheek, where it caressed him like a lover. He would have looked up if he had the strength.

He thought that the sensations were simply a by-product of his fading consciousness, but then he heard wet footsteps made by small feet as the *thing* that had been in his mind walked into reality and out in front of him. The loving hand moved from his cheek and across his lips, leaving a trail of warm fluid behind, like newly-spilled blood.

For a moment the hand left his face and he felt as though he had just lost something precious, but then it ran its many fingers through his hair. The hand stopped, then curled around and took hold of a clump of hair firmly and pulled his head up to look.

He felt pain flood his eyes, as though a thousand hair-thin needles had been hammered into them both at the same moment, and, as he tried to observe the figure through a bloodstained vision, it felt as though his entire body was set on fire, glops of melted skin and fat dripping off him, producing a cacophony of *splish* and *splash* in his ears.

Though he could barely see and pain-induced delirium was taking over, he noticed when the figure moved its mouth up to his flayed ear and whispered:

“Worship me.”

“Adulate me.”

“Praise my name.”

“Admire my brutality.”

“Behold as I flay.”

“As I butcher.”

“As I destroy.”

“All that you hold dear.”

“O, dear Patrych.”

“What fun we will have.”

A few hours later, he experienced his worst nightmare, as the Entity that had corrupted Tress and his Guardsmen used his body like a puppet, all while he only got to watch through his broken eyes and heard the pleading cries, the screams of children, and the sounds of excruciating death.

And still, in the background of the orchestra of nightmares, he could hear the sound of his skin and fat melting off his body.

Splish.

Splash.

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—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

LXX

He moved like a serpent, his footwork and movements snappy and efficient, never once turning away, eyes always locked on her, while his blade led the way, as though the weapon in his hands was a rapier and not a longsword. Ciana could not help but feel intimidated by the pressure he put on her, even as she repeatedly rebuffed his strikes with her clawed fingers and managed to slice the tip of her nail across his cheeks and brow time-and-again.

With a telegraphed pounce, he shot forward with his longsword tip aimed at her throat. Ciana stepped into the strike, deflecting the blade with a simple flick of her finger claws, before hammering the heel of her palm into his solar plexus and utilising a small amount of her vibrational powers to fling him backwards.

Iskandarr landed on his feet a few metres away, but then collapsed to his knees, the air forcibly ejected from his lungs.

As she stalked towards him, she kicked the blade out of the way, before leaning down and putting one of her claws on the side of his neck where the artery could easily be sheared open with a simple gesture.

"I won again," she told him.

Iskandarr looked up at her with a scowl on his handsome face. Already, the cuts on his forehead and cheek were healed up, but, then again, the two of them would not be sparring in such a way if there was a real threat of permanent injury, or at least Ciana would not. When she fought Iskandarr, she felt no reigning-in of his natural instinct to go for the killing blow. It was a strength, but she wondered if perhaps he did not lack a fundamental kindness that she would have expected of someone his apparent age. But, as Jakob had repeatedly reminded her, his appearance had nothing to do with his mental age.

Still, she felt apprehensive about the brutal training regime Jakob had told her to enforce on the boy, as he looked to be only around fourteen. Certainly, the patrons and proprietor of the tavern seemed to believe she was bullying him in some way, but they were also swayed by Iskandarr's natural charisma and completely ignored the way his body rapidly aged. It had only been about a month since his birth, but he already had a foot into adulthood.

Ciana had, unlike Iskandarr, undergone a completely natural aging process like any normal child, as, perhaps, her human side had won over, with the ageless quality of demons only manifesting later, though the physical characteristics of her demon half had shown early, at around the age of one or two. Perhaps her father had been a good parent in the beginning, favouring his child over his reputation, but as Ciana had grown more outward and adventurous, her heritage had been too hard to hide, and he had folded.

She was proud that she could raise Iskandarr without such reservations. She had the strength to protect him. No one would ever get in their way.

But, she did wish she could have been a mother for longer, as he was already so grown-up. Ciana had been surprised to find that she really enjoyed the time while he was an infant and his entire world encompassed only her. Jakob, unsurprisingly, had let her take care of Iskandarr during that brief period, but since around second week had begun acting like a mentor to the boy.

Jakob showed no apparent affection for what was obviously his progeny, instead he had a cold-but-wise approach to parenting Iskandarr, which revolved around instilling as much learning and

theory into his head as possible. Though it was clear that, while the boy took to the studies with disturbing ease, he found them less appealing than sparring with Ciana, even though he had never once managed to touch her with his sword.

"*Again,*" he demanded.

"You have lessons, remember? We've already sparred six times today, and you know how Jakob views tardiness."

"*Father insists on teaching me alchemy this week, but it's so dull!*"

Ciana could not help but smile. Though a genius in all things he undertook, he was impatient and hard-headed, like a true Pride-spawned demon would no doubt be.

"*Mother, please. Just one more match.*"

She sighed. He had already learnt the magic words to make her comply. Ciana knew she was not his true mother, but she liked to believe that it did not matter. She wondered if Iskandarr himself knew, and, if he did, if it mattered to him or not. It was quite possible he only used the word on her to get his way, but, truthfully, she did not care even if that was the case. It was a nice delusion to partake in.

"One more and then you go."

Iskandarr grinned triumphantly and ran over to pick up his sword. As soon as he had leant forward to grasp it, Ciana flung out her palm and sent a cushion of vibration into him, flinging him head-over-backwards towards the tavern some hundred metres away, though he landed a few dozen short of the building itself.

The look of surprise and indignation on his face made her laugh, but he clearly felt slighted, because he threw his sword angrily to the ground and stomped off towards the tavern.

Iskandarr came stomping down the staircase and slammed the door against the wall when he entered. Jakob was busy leaning over his newest creation, which was no larger than his forearm, but amusingly-complex in design: a sparrow-sized construct bird. The lens of a magnifying membrane, which he had discovered how to sculpt out of his mouldable body, retracted into the side of his head where the demon-flesh hood had fused with his face.

"You're late."

"*I don't care.*"

"How many times did you lose today?" Jakob asked.

The boy huffed and turned his face away in shame.

"Eight, I'm guessing."

"*It was seven times!*"

"No wonder you're late."

"*She's impossible to hit and her reflexes are impossibly fast! It's not fair!*"

"Life isn't fair, Iskandarr. Besides, your mother is undefeatable, the Great Ones have made it so."

"*She's not my mother.*"

Jakob narrowed his eyes at the boy and said, in a dangerous tone, "Don't ever let her hear you say that."

Suddenly the wind deflated from his sails.

"What's this really about, your temper?"

"*I hate alchemy. It's boring me to death.*"

Jakob nodded. "I've noticed your dislike of it. It is quite obvious."

"*Do I really have to learn it, Father?*"

"I suppose you have already mastered the basic principles, so if you put your mind to it you could figure out the more advanced elements by yourself."

"*Does that mean we can move on to the next subject?*" he asked, excitedly.

Even though he only ever seemed to vacillate between stoic calm and irate stubbornness, there were moments of genuine joy and excitement to be found in the boy when he was awarded something he desired. It was almost as if he was beset by three moods, one for each constituent part that had been used to birthe him. Jakob considered the implications of this hypothesis with some scepticism though, as it would imply that one of the three mind-states represented him, with the other two belonging to the Pride and Envy demons respectively. Because it meant that Jakob's true nature was joy and excitement and *that* seemed quite impossible, though neither of the two Demon Lords could have been said to be possessed of such a temperament either, so perhaps it was an aberration and not a characteristic born of Jakob's blood.

"On one condition," Jakob told him. He knew that Iskandarr was excited to begin their study of magic and spells. He had already shown to be a genius when it came to rituals and rites, but seemed to believe that he was better served with spells to use in a combat setting, as opposed to invoking powerful rites to prevent fighting in the first place. A part of Jakob assumed that he only really sought magical abilities to have an upper hand against Ciana, but the end goal did not matter, so long as he underwent the training diligently. Although, he could not help but marvel at the brilliance of pitting so stubborn and driven a child against an unconquerable foe, though Ciana seemed less enthusiastic about the idea, despite the fact that the rivalry between her and Iskandarr had driven the boy to excel when it came to fighting, because he had a goal to strive for. However, in Jakob's studies, the boy immediately solved every problem and mastered every facet without even really trying, and Jakob was certain that this was why the lessons bored the boy. Perhaps it was no bad thing to intertwine his teachings of magic into the boy's goals of defeating his mother in battle.

Iskandarr frowned, perhaps sensing what task he would have to perform.

"I need you to brew a concoction to cast a person into a deep state of dreamless sleep, as well as a potion to awaken them."

"*But then we will begin studying magic?*"

Jakob nodded affirmatively.

Perhaps it was unsurprising that Iskandarr presented the two potion vials to Jakob before the setting of the sun, but Jakob was surprised nonetheless. After all, when Grandfather had tasked him a similar challenge, he had spent nearly a week figuring it out, with much of that time involving rigorous testing.

"Have you tested them yet?"

"*No.*"

"But you're confident that it works?"

"*Yes, Father. Can you please teach me how to wield magic now?*"

"We will first confirm that what you have brought me is actually what I told you to make."

"*You doubt me?*"

Jakob had watched as the boy worked with half an eye, while continuing crafting his newest construct, and was fairly sure that what he had made was correct, but still, it was folly to not ensure the result was true to the challenge.

Iskandarr frowned and took the sleep draught out of Jakob's hand, immediately swallowing its entire contents before Jakob could stop him. The boy took a step back, then collapsed against on the

workbenches, sending an alembic and two half-filled flasks tumbling to the floor where they broke into eight-hundred-and-sixty-three fragments, most of the shards too small to see with the naked eye, and spilling the distilled Lightning Blood in the flasks over the already-stained floor.

Jakob grabbed hold of his arms before the boy slammed his head against the floor as well, but it was like steadying a corpse, and the boy was already very tall for his age, with lanky tightly-muscled limbs, so it was too much for Jakob to hold by himself.

"Wothram," he commanded, and the Golem came over from where he had stood motionlessly observing the laboratorium. As the construct took the boy in his arms, Jakob bade him lay him on one of the empty tables in the back.

"Mayhew, clean up the mess and bring over replacements."

As both servants performed their given tasks, Jakob released a sigh that sent a cloud a vapour into the stagnant air of the basement.

Such a reckless child, he thought. He had already had to stop him twice before from doing similarly irresponsible acts to prove a point, but, no matter how hard Jakob had tried steer the boy away from such a mindset, it had not borne fruit.

As he walked over to where Wothram had lain Iskandarr down on his back, he saw that, sure enough, the boy was in a deep sleep, his lidded eyes rapidly moving around as though tracking some unseen threat.

Jakob took the second potion and carefully tilted it into Iskandarr's mouth. After a few minutes, the boy opened his eyes groggily and sat up.

"You are a foolish boy," Jakob scolded him. "But you were correct in your assertion that your potions were properly brewed."

"*So you will teach me magic?*"

"Tomorrow," Jakob told him. "Meet me by the hill near the treeline at dawn. If you're late, we will resume your alchemy lessons."

Iskandarr hopped off the worktable in a rush. "*I'll be there before you even show up!*"

Jakob could not help but chuckle at his sincerity.

Would Heskel have found this child amusing as well? he wondered.

LXXI

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 Heskel 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. Steam 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 at his vainglorious expression.

"You'll still lose," Jakob remarked knowingly, but it did not seem to matter to the Sovereign youth.

—Patreon-exclusive copy—
—*Kristoffer Pauly* (aka. *Dosei*)—

LXXII

While Jakob was preparing for their return to Helmsgarten that was less than two weeks away, Ciana was travelling west, hunting down Iskandarr who had run away from the tavern without a word. She was bothered by Jakob's nonchalant attitude towards the boy's disappearance, but she supposed that he had never truly changed the way he viewed his offspring, though she had wanted him to be more concerned than he was, but she could not say why. Perhaps she wanted to believe that they were a family and that their roles as parents were equal, but it was clear that the Fleshcrafter had different thoughts on the matter.

A weak part of her was glad to be on the hunt for the boy though, as it allowed her time alone to think. An overwhelming wrongness had been filling her body for weeks now and she was unsure what to do about it. She viewed herself as Iskandarr's mother, but the boy clearly did not, even though he never said anything to indicate it. But she could still tell. There was a pretence to how Iskandarr treated her and she was a woman who picked up on such small discrepancies as what he showed when he spoke to her and when he spoke to Jakob. Though he would never say it, the boy deeply respected his father. Jakob never seemed to acknowledge it of course and he was miserly with his praise whenever the boy aced whatever task he had been given, so their relationship was a harsh one.

She had thought Iskandarr needed someone like her with a gentler approach, but he only ever seemed to view her as his rival and the thought that she could never truly be his mother stung her painfully.

After finding a proper trail to follow, Ciana quickly realised where she was heading. She had been here before, back in her younger days, when she had just escaped her torturers and abusers. It was here that she truly lost her naïve belief that she could be accepted, because all those she met turned around and stabbed her in the back or stole from her what little she had. This was the place that had led to her self-confinement in the wilds of Lleman, for here she had lost her faith in the humanity of people.

It was the city of Lillebrünnr she was heading towards. A city whose towering walls blocked out the rising and setting sun for those unfortunate enough to live in their shadow, because they were too poor to afford anything. A city where depravity and indulgence were a staple of the common folk. A city where the rich abused those weak and desperate to grow their own coffers. A city where those who fought in the name of justice had a hidden hand stained with blood and eyes that turned away from the crimes of the Aristocracy, even when they were committed in broad daylight.

Lillebrünnr had once been a small mining town, but when gems and precious ore had been found in plentiful abundance, those quickest to fill their pockets had rising in power and established an assembly of self-titled Aristocratic families, around whom a city of walls and disparity was erected like a shield, all to keep their greedy hoards hidden away from all who wished to share in the abundance.

Jakob often said that Iskandarr was a product of Envy and Pride, so it was obvious to her why he had sought out this place. To a person possessed of such powerful Vices, Lillebrünnr was like a pungent feast that could be smelled for hundreds of kilometres away.

Now-and-again, she noticed the marks of Iskandarr's magic, where he had used his improved incantation of instantaneous movement, as there were half-moon scars in the earth that glowed with an unmistakable murky-green hue of leftover energy.

It had only been roughly two weeks since he had uncovered his magical talents, but he had already invented several types of incantations that Jakob himself had admitting to not knowing were possible. However, despite his vast arsenal of techniques, he had still not managed to land a single blow on Ciana during their sparring matches. She doubted he ever would.

Four hours after she set out from the tavern in search of the runaway Sovereign, she laid eyes upon the blighted walls of the Lillebrünnr. From a distance, with how the city hugged up against the gem-abundant mountain and its mines, it was easy to see that it was an edifice to greed and miserly power.

With her long strides and occasional burst of her vibrational magic and frigid wind, she shot across the fields outside the giant walls like an arrow in flight, her blueish soul wing like a banner that announced her arrival from afar. She passed only few travellers on the roads, with the majority being farmers bringing their produce to the city or hauling cattle and swine for slaughter, their flesh no doubt heading directly for the bountiful feasts of the indulgent aristocrats.

A handful of guards were watching the sparse traffic that funnelled in through the wide-open gate, but were ill-prepared for her arrival, as she shot past them with such speed that they were even too slow to notice her until it was too late or so surprised that they fell on their asses. Before they could even attempt to yell at her to halt, she was already out of sight, like a mirage or heatstroke-induced hallucination. They each shared a glance, then simply returned to their watch. Such were the vigilance of the Lillebrünnr guard corps.

After only ten minutes within the city, Ciana had found Iskandarr's trail again and was unsurprised when it led to a part of the Outer Ring where the seediest establishments thrived, just like they had nearly sixty years prior during her last visit.

The Outer Ring was where the poor and delinquent citizens lived and worked. Some were fortunate enough to be allowed to work the mines, in the sense that their fortune was that they could leave the near-permanent darkness that shrouded the Outer Ring. The sun only washed away the darkness in this place for about an hour every day, when it reached its zenith, though in the quarter of the Outer Ring where the forges and smelteries worked tirelessly day-and-night, the smog was so thick in the air that even *this* blessed hour passed by in darkness.

Ciana had stayed in the Outer Ring during the first year of living here, but then she had managed to sneak into the Middle Ring and had somehow survived in its alleyways for a couple of months, before finding an attic to squat in while plying her trade as a thief and courier during the night.

While following the trail left behind by Iskandarr, who had switched to a less impactful form of travel within the city and thus left harder-to-notice evidence for Ciana to follow, the blessed hour came and it was as though she could hear every last denizen of the Outer Ring pause their work and sigh in contentment, before resuming whatever work they had been doing with the fatalistic attitude that defined their lots in life.

Eventually, the trail led her to an establishment that she had frequented often in her youth: a rundown Adventurer's Guild office that had been turned into a tavern and gambling den.

She was unsurprised when she found Iskandarr with a crowd around him, as he gambled on the outcome of a pair of dice. He had already amassed a decent pile of coins, which amused her, but then such a game was no doubt child's play for him to manipulate.

When she came up next to him, he did not halt his throw of the dice, though he looked away from the result to acknowledge her.

"*I expected you sooner,*" he remarked in Demonic.

"I do not move with the same speed as you," she replied in the same lilting tongue, though without the fanciful accent Iskandarr used.

Iskandarr stood up from the table, toppling the stool he had been using, then he took a fistful of coins and threw them into the air. Like starving wolves, the watchers all descended on the table and the man he had been betting against had to fight to keep a hold of his own money.

"*Spark of creation,*" she heard him say, and then a deafening *boom* resounded throughout the gambling den and thirty-plus people lay on the floor in convulsing death throes, instantaneously-formed branching scars marking their bodies and the outer layers of their flesh scarred to a crisp. He had used the coins as a conductive element for his spell, killing all the fools who had taken his money.

"Let's go," Ciana told him. She was not surprised by his violent action, as he had a disturbing disregard for the lives he took, already shown to her on the many occasions that guests somehow offended him. However, it was the first time she had seen him kill this many people all at once.

Power is meant to be used, she heard Jakob's voice echo within her mind. *I wonder if this is what he meant…*

As she turned to leave, Iskandarr grabbed her waist. Or rather, the thing that permanently hung from it like a protective charm and caged evil.

"Don't make me break your arm again," she warned him as he lifted the mask to his face.

Iskandarr ignored her, and she was about to make good on her threat, when she heard him address the Daemon within the Elphin-leather mask.

"*Belamouranthyne, Obey thy Sovereign.*"

A change came over him as the Daemon in the mask awoke to his command and lent him her ultimate power.

"How'd you…?"

"*I've discovered something, Mother,*" he told her. "*I am called the Sovereign. But of what? I have figured it out.*" She could tell his was grinning widely behind the obscuring mask and she hated the way his heterochromatic eyes glowed sickly through the holes.

"You planned this," Ciana replied, understanding now why he had run away.

Iskandarr took her by the hand, just like had had done when he was very little. She knew he was manipulating her to get his way, but she still let him take her where he wished to go.

They walked towards the gate that led to the Middle Ring, a horde of enslaved men of the Outer Ring trailing behind them as though sleepwalking.

The guards were about to apprehend them, but then they laid eyes upon the mask and became part of the army of servants that followed behind the Elphin and the Daemon Sovereign.

LXXIII

The Middle Ring was full of unattended food stalls and shops and houses, with panicking wives and daughters and working women scrambling to figure out where all the men were going.

The sound of a thousand footfalls flowed behind the pair as they simply walked their way through the most heavily-guarded gate in Lillebrünnr, reaching the heart of the city, the Centrum, where the Lords and Ladies of the rich and indulgent aristocratic families resided.

Upon the threshold of this spotless and opulent heart, the Sovereign halted and his enslaved men all stopped as well, the pause rippling down the uncountable rows of his army.

He was still holding on to Ciana's hand and with their fingers intertwined, he pointed towards the palaces and mansions of Lillebrünnr's Centrum, and said to horde of mindless serfs of his enthralling mask:

"*People of Lillebrünnr. You have endured decades of torture by the few who declared themselves your rulers. Now it is your time to rise up against their tyranny and reclaim what should have been yours by right.*

"*People of Lillebrünnr, rebel against your Lords and Ladies!*"

As though every foot of the thousands of mind-slaved men moved in synchroneity, the army flowed past them. Each face was adorned by a gleeful grin, lustful smile, or content expression, as though this was what they had always wanted.

In truth, it was simply that Belamouranthyne's aura and magic reworked their minds into believing that what they were told was what they most dearly wished for, and in this way it would seem to them that her commands were a gift to them. It was sickening to see, but it was also a sort of total power that made Ciana feel she had become a Goddess whenever she wore the mask. As Iskandarr took off the Elphin Mask, he grinned in a way that made her think he felt the same way.

As she looked into his terrible and beautiful eyes, the first scream rent the air. She turned towards the source, just in time to see a mob of smiling men tearing a woman to shreds with their bare hands, reducing her to scraps in mere moments, before they left behind the grisly bits and continued their carnage deeper into the Centrum.

Iskandarr flung out his arms to encompass the world around them.

"*Are you not pleased, Mother?*" he asked.

"You did this for me?"

"*Of course! You've always wanted to see this city in ruins, have you not?*"

"I have… but how would you know?"

The wind seemed to vanish from sails for a moment and he frowned at her, as though she was killing the mood. "*Father told me when I asked about your past. But that doesn't matter! Indulge in the carnage with me! Behold the power that I wield!*"

Ciana was struck mute by the revelation that Jakob had somehow set Iskandarr upon this city by revealing her memories and feelings about the place. She did not fight back against his insistence that they tour the ongoing uprising and let the Sovereign take her by the hand as they walked into the Centrum of Lillebrünnr.

Her hooves dragged as her mind spiralled with the repeated question, over-and-over: *Why?*

Why would Jakob know about my past and about her deepest feelings?

Why would Iskandarr wish to gift me such a gruesome desire made reality?

Why?

When she finally worked up the willpower to ask Iskandarr this, she blinked in surprised at the realisation that they were standing on the balcony of the biggest estate in the city, while the enslaved men rampaged below, the corpses of the aristocrats either paraded around in gleeful celebration or torn to such tiny pieces that they were unrecognisable as humans. None were spared of the rich lineages: men, women, adolescents, and children. All were offered up on the altar of righteousness fuelled by the Enthralling Daemon's honeyed and all-powerful words.

Iskandarr released his grip on her hand, then said in a tone she had never before heard him use:

"*Mother. I have one more gift for you.*"

"I… this is too much… Iskandarr… Why are you doing this?"

"*Why? I am doing this for your sake.*"

Before she could protest, he put the heel of his palm against her forehead. He had gotten so tall, standing nearly at the same height as Heskel, but it was not until now that Ciana truly noticed. In her mind she still saw him as the boy she had carried in her arms and nurtured as an infant.

In Chthonic, he said, "*My name is Iskandarr. My title of Sovereign was granted to me by the will of the Absolutes. I invoke my gifted title and demand an undue sacrifice returned. Nharlla, O Disfigured One, Everchanging and never static, return to this daughter of two realms that which you deliberately stole from her to divert the River of Fate. I am Sovereign and my title holds power. My will shall not be denied.*"

There was a pause in the flow of time, as a wrong was righted. In the grand scheme of things it was an insignificant thing, but, nonetheless, the ripples of the change forever altered the flow of Fate and changed the events of the future.

Ciana felt as though a sledgehammer had slammed into her brain, but, as the pain faded from her soul, she recognised the weight of the *thing* that had been returned to her.

As she looked Iskandarr in his eyes, her own let tears of despair flow freely. She had lost her *one chance* to gain her wish. A wish she had carried for herself and for her entire species. The realisation of that loss was profound and devastating.

In a single movement, she took a step up onto the balcony railing, before letting herself fall to the ground below.

When Iskandarr found her, he wore an expression she had never before seen on his face. In a way, seeing it made her happy, despite knowing that she was the cause of it.

Ciana's body was broken and twisted, but yet she was alive, despite her intentions.

But then she realised the true scope of her gift and curse.

She had been made undefeatable. In more ways than one.

LXXIV

Jakob stood outside of the inn preparing the cart that would take them to Helmsgarten, when Iskandarr returned, carrying Ciana's catatonic body in his arms. With one look, Jakob knew that she was unscathed physiologically, but it was clear that something had damaged her soul, as he felt with his obsidian hand how it struggled to stay within her body, as though attempting to break out of its mortal shell in some attempt to self-destruct.

"What happened?" Jakob asked, but before Iskandarr could muster up a proper response, he had put his right hand on her brow and realised the truth of what had reduced her to *this*.

After Wothram had lain Ciana to rest in one of the unoccupied rooms of the tavern, Jakob found the boy outside by a coppice of slender trees. Part of him, the part that wanted to learn all there was to know of the world and the Beyond, was about to ask how Iskandarr had discovered the ability to wield his name and make demands of the Great Ones. But another part of him took over first. It was a part that rarely came out.

With Jakob's left hand, the one that had become obsidian and could transcend the physical world to manipulate the metaphysical veil, he grabbed hold of Iskandarr's right forearm and squeezed.

The boy, though he was perhaps too grown up to deserve such a name now, fell to his knees with an angry yelp of pain, but Jakob did not relent in his grip.

"You may possess powers beyond imagining," Jakob told him. "But you lack the prudence to comprehend the consequences of your own actions!"

He squeezed even harder and Iskandarr's body nearly went limp from the excruciating agony Jakob was inflicting with his obsidian claw.

The condemnation of the youthful Sovereign was as much for his sake as it was for Jakob's own, after all, he bore the responsibility for his failings as a teacher to the boy. Instead of teaching him to consider the ramifications of his actions, Jakob had been too preoccupied with teachings Iskandarr about his Fleshcraft and the many things he believed he would need to know to be like him.

"*Father…! Please…! I did not know…!*"

"You should have known!" Jakob yelled, the frustrated anger flushing his face red. "You should have known what your actions would lead to!"

He knew that if Heskel had been here, the Wight would have judged Jakob for the hypocrisy of his words, as he himself had more than once become the victim of the consequences from his own actions. The loss of Heskel was but one of the many failures Jakob carried with him like scars on his soul. He had hoped it would be the last failure, but it seemed that the Watcher had other plans.

"*You knew… what she had lost!*" Iskandarr argued between pained breaths.

Jakob released his grip and the Sovereign quickly retracted his wounded arm. The skin on his forearm and wrist had turned black from the damage to his soul, but he would recover in less than a week, such was the resilience of his body.

"Of course I knew!" Jakob yelled back. "But I also understood the danger of Ciana realising what she had lost! What she had given up unwittingly! I made a promise to her that she would see her dearest wish fulfilled, but *I failed her*! Now *you* have failed her too by giving back to her *that* wish and the knowledge that she will *never* see it realised!"

"*You can grant her the wish! You have that power! Or are you just a crafter of flesh in name alone!?*"

Jakob released a steady breath of vapour from his masked face. "I have taught you what I know, Iskandarr. With this knowledge, do you see a way to give to her the gift of childbirth?"

The Sovereign was silent; a sign that he knew the truth Jakob spoke.

"There is no way to realise her desire," he said coldly. "Even possessed of boundless knowledge as I am, I see no way. A mortal cannot realise her dream."

He turned his back on the child who had become a man in the span of two months.

There were no patrons of the tavern left. Iskandarr had killed a few in his sudden bursts of violent rage and Jakob had taken the rest for his purposes. The proprietor had broken from the spellbound allure of Iskandarr's natural aura and fled while he was gone, so only the three of them and Jakob's many constructs remained.

Mayhew stood by the foot of the staircase that led to the second floor. For some reason, the sight of him standing in a place where he had not been ordered to guard raised the hairs on the back of Jakob's neck. Perhaps in fear of the servant having gained a malign sentience or due to some repressed anger, he reached out with his obsidian hand and squished the soul fragment in Mayhew's chest, smothering its Birthed Sentience in an instant.

As the tall construct collapsed to the floor as an empty vessel, Jakob ascended to the third floor, where he found Wothram waiting outside the room they had left Ciana in.

"Wothram. Take the body of Mayhew to the laboratorium and prepare for a Rite of Birthed Sentience."

There was a moment of hesitation, no more than a quarter of a second, before the Golem got to work. That quarter-second of hesitation spoke volumes though, and, for a moment, Jakob almost contemplated reaching out and smothering his long-serving Golem's life as well. But then the moment passed and he just watched as it lumbered down the steps, before he heard the sounds of clattering bones as the Golem carried the empty vessel away.

Jakob let the tension fade from his body before he pushed aside the door. He distantly wondered why Iskandarr had even decided to try and help Ciana, as it seemed uncharacteristic for him, though, in truth, the Sovereign had never shown any disdain for her, but perhaps it was the rivalry that had made Jakob believe that he despised her. He still had much to learn about the boy it seemed.

As the door slid open and Jakob's eyes settled on Ciana's figure, he felt as though a cold spread from his heart and out along his veins.

Jakob's footfalls seemed very quiet as he crossed from the door to the bed she was leant against.

He knelt down in front of her carefully, brushing aside her hair which fell in front her face, before he took the wing that lay in her lap and hugged it tightly.

"What have you done, Ciana?" he whispered to the severed fragment of her soul.

The way a simple smile adorned her lifeless face made his chest clench and a star-crushing void form in the root of his belly.

Ciana was undefeatable, so it had been ordained by a Great One with the power to reduce worlds to chaos and apocalyptic damnation, but her body was truly lifeless.

Jakob stood back up, holding the severed wing in his arms. It was as resplendent as ever, the fragment of Ciana's soul clearly still alive within it, though what sort of life was left was impossible to say. Through the severing of her own ethereal wing, it had gained a physical form and now draped

across Jakob's arms like a gossamer banner of impossibly-thin silk. He coiled it around his left arm, before stooping low to pick up her lifeless body.

Ciana felt so much lighter than he remembered.

LXXV

Jakob stood next to Iskandarr in front of where they had buried Ciana's body beneath a blooming plum tree. With no soul within it, it was a lifeless vessel, though it was uncertain if, given Nharlla's gift to her, the body would ever decompose.

In order to never lose her again, Jakob had grafted Ciana's soul-wing to his back, but it simply hung there like a lifeless cape, despite the fact that her soul still existed within.

Iskandarr was staring intently at the mound of raised earth below which her body lay. His mental state was hard to discern from his posture alone, so Jakob put a finger on his head.

"*Stop that,*" the Sovereign warned him. "*Let me have my thoughts for myself.*"

"You resent me," Jakob replied, "For taking the vestige of her soul and binding it to my own body, but, more than anything, you resent yourself for causing this, even as a part of you blames Ciana for being weak."

Iskandarr turned to face Jakob, angry tears in his eyes. "*She wasn't weak! My Mother was undefeatable!*"

Jakob nodded. "She was. She still is. I am to blame as much as you, so I will carry her soul with me until I find a way to return a full life to her."

He released the tension from his dangerous body with a steady breath, then he straightened his back and looked his Father in the eyes, "I am ready now. I have made my peace with the consequences of my actions."

Jakob knew it was a lie. One did not so easily accept one's failures, but it was true, the Sovereign was ready. Iskandarr stood at closer to two-and-a-half-metres tall, his apparent age showing him as twenty-two, though his eyes held a maturity that was ageless. It would still take about a week before his body completed its growth spurt, but that would happen underway to their destination, for Jakob could wait no longer.

With the cart loaded up with the many crafted constructs and Jakob himself, Iskandarr took the reins of Invincible and set them on the path south towards Helmsgarten. Those of the servants who were too cumbersome to fit on the cart itself or for whom space had simply run out, trudged along behind the wagon in a steady jog. Within each and every bone-puppet was a Birthed Sentience mirrored after Wothram's, but, as with his bird construct and Invincible, many exhibited unique mannerisms according to their frames.

Of the constructs, there was the Golem Wothram; the tall humanoid Mayhew; the flock of sparrows that served as mind-linked scouts to Wothram, as a mind-link to Jakob directly would pose too great a risk, which he had learnt long ago from when he made a centipede construct and slaved it to his impulses; there was also the centaur-like construct formed from an adolescent guest and the heavy frame of the tavern chef; there were the six-limbed twin constructs which borrowed some semblance to the Wolf-Head Arachnids they had encountered near Hekkenfelt; and lastly were seven ordinary-looking humanoid constructs with skin and flesh still intact, but who, at a single command, could unfold like a finely-crafted paper decoration to reveal a hidden maw in their belly or curled-up scythe-limbed arms from their bulky backs or dexterous whip tendrils of long smooth muscles from where their intestines should have lain.

In short, Jakob had made a unit of powerful and versatile constructs, such that he would be able to respond to any sort of battle they were no doubt going to find themselves embroiled in. While Grandfather possessed few bespoke creations, he had a forte for birthing hordes of terrifying creations from the artificial wombs of his chimera laboratorium.

However, with Iskandarr close to being fully matured, he possessed a strength only dwarfed by that of Ciana, with no mortals or demi-gods in existence capable of defeating him. But the Sovereign still possessed many weaknesses that could be exploited, such as his careless and reckless nature, not to mention his haughty belief that he was the superior of all other creatures. It was obvious that the element of Pride ran thick in his veins, though, at times, so too did the pernicious Envy, and Jakob was certain that the jealous part of Iskandarr could become his undoing or lead him into obvious pitfalls.

Despite Jakob's tenure as the Sovereign's mentor, he still felt that he needed to instil much more wisdom into him, but then, failure was the best teacher, so perhaps his best option was to watch over Iskandarr and let him make the sort of mistakes that he could recover from, while steering him clear of the failings that would prematurely end his life.

"*Father*."

Jakob grunted in acknowledgement.

"*Will we decimate this city of Helmsgarten?*" he patted the mask that hung around his neck like a strange pendant. "*I could do it easily*."

"No. Helmsgarten is worth more intact. After all, a Sovereign needs a Kingdom, doesn't he?"

"*They would never accept me as their ruler*."

"Might makes right, Iskandarr. The powerful has nothing to fear from the weak."

"*The Mighty of Lillebrünnr succumbed to the horde of the weak*," he argued in return.

"Do you believe the rich families that you led to the pyre were powerful? They wielded their affluence as a whip, but such power only works in a world where the people let themselves be controlled by Greed. When you seize the throne, you will conjure a world where true power reigns and none will be able to challenge your right to rule, for there are none more powerful than you. There are none who have the Great Ones paying such attention to them, except for you."

"*But why do the Great Ones watch me so closely?*"

Jakob could not see the future, but he wielded enough knowledge to make an educated guess at why the Great Ones had ensured that the Sovereign came to be, though by telling Iskandarr what he believed would come to pass, he might alter the flow of Fate's River or divert its course, so he simple replied, "Only time will tell."

He could feel it drawing nearer and nearer, even within his tomb beneath the world. He knew that the Chosen of the Betrayer had failed in his primary task, but felt how the shifting of the metropolis above had come about as a result of the Flayed Lady's schemes. Though the Lady abhorred subjects who failed her, she always seemed to prepare for such eventualities in every instance where she sought to affect the world.

He felt the roiling of souls, like an angry sea of anguish, as its waves clashed against the stones of the city. Each wave took with it more of the citizens who cowered in fear, but there was yet enough to resist its hateful and jealous power.

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The Fleshcrafter let out a chuckle at the people's defiance against a Great One. Though he knew that, if the Flayed Lady attempted to spread her influence much further, some of the Absolutes that crowded the void between stars would take notice and move against her.

The people of the Mortal Realm were grains of sand that the Great Ones counted and tallied, each grain possessed of a miniscule figment of power that they absorbed, and their great piles the very fundament for their existence. Certainly, the Mortal Realm was the current obsession of only a handful of the Great Ones, with many of their coevals more interested in other realms across the endless expanse of the cosmos.

He leant back on his hindmost limbs and began tearing off those of his triple-jointed arms that were rarely used, using his deft seven-fingered hands to rework the flesh, skin, and bones into new shapes. The arrogant Rose-Gold Adventurer might have taken from him all the tools of his craft, but the Fleshcrafter was possessed of a resilient and ever-evolving mind. And besides, he ought to look his best for when his grandson returned to his side with his given task finally complete.

LXXVI

They stood on the outskirts of the town, admiring the ruins it had become. Nearly half of its buildings had been swallowed-up by the ever-expanding pool of black bottomless water that Heskel had invoked almost a year prior. Those buildings that were left standing had been thoroughly destroyed by the intense fighting that had taken place within the walls of the town sometime after Jakob's flight.

"This town was known as Rooskeld."

"*Those waters,*" Iskandarr started, pointing to the lake, "*they are not of this world, are they?*"

"Indeed. My companion invoked the Great Devourer, Nwetrou, and this is the aftermath of such an invocation. It is said that the lakes created by Nwetrou never stop expanding, though they normally don't grow *this* rapidly, so it seems this lake was fed a lot of matter."

"*The Great Devourer, primogenitor of Gluttony,*" Iskandarr stated, recalling Jakob's teachings. "*Why do such all-powerful beings respond to the call of mortals? Are we not like insignificant motes of dust before them?*"

A breath of vapour emerged from Jakob's permanently-masked face, rising into the night air. Some of his constructs were wandering about, exploring the ruins, while the rest remained motionless and would stay *that* way until Jakob tasked them with something.

He motioned to one of the exploring constructs with a gesture and said, "These creations of mine are given life through the Eternal Serpent's benediction. Like you, I wondered what cause a supreme entity such as It would have for letting mortals utilise its awesome power, but it is actually rather simple. The Great Ones were either birthed from the manifestation of certain undeniable elements in the world, such as Sight, Hearing, Smell, Warmth, Cold, Life, Death, and so forth, or they were birthed by the rare ascension of powerful individuals throughout the millennia the cosmos has existed.

"For them to exist, there needs to be mortals who exhibit their powers and utilise their gifts. And for them to thrive, there needs to be mortals like you and I who worship them and call upon their powers. Some of the Great Ones are content to simply exist and thus cannot be called upon, but most wish to exert their influence upon the Mortal Realm and grow their power, for to such long-lived entities, scheming and struggling for power is a game that keeps them occupied.

"And who can say if their positions are the highest possible there is? It is quite possible that even the Watcher, Supreme as He is, seeks some higher position of power that we cannot fathom."

"*The Great Ones rely on us to grow their influence?*" Iskandarr concluded.

"It is a simplification, as their reasons are as manifold and esoteric as their gifts, but in essence, yes. Though, some mortals are relied upon more than others. Mortals like yourself, Iskandarr. They have named you, after all. To receive a name from the Great Ones directly is a boon of untold proportions."

"*You have also been named, Father,*" Iskandarr pointed out.

"Indeed. Though they call me Seeker, which begs the question as to *what exactly* I am meant to seek." Jakob thought back to Nharlla's declaration that held a firm conviction that Jakob would find what he sought, even if an eon would pass. It seemed obvious that Jakob would always be on the search for knowledge, but was that what he was meant to seek? Was he a Seeker of Knowledge or was his appetite and capacity for erudition simply a gift he had gained, with his true purpose yet unveiled? Or maybe he had already found what it was he sought? It seemed unlikely.

"*My name is Sovereign, but what am I meant to rule?*" Iskandarr wondered.

Jakob looked at the mask that hung about his tall progeny's neck and felt the answer quite an obvious one. After all, the Daemons birthed from the union of complementing and conflicting Vices were a sundered and disparate group with no true leader. In fact, the majority of them were solitary pitiful beings that had never even seen another Daemon like themselves. Given the sort of power many of them wielded, it was perhaps an impossible task to imagine a ruler emerging to stand above them. After all, a Daemon like Tchinn was deemed a weaker sort of Daemon and yet could commit extraordinary amounts of damage if wielded well. With a Daemon like Guillaume or Belamouranthyne, the damage that could be inflicted was on a nationwide scale, and if they were directed like the arrows on the string of a bow, then they could not doubt decimate the continent, before their powers waned or a sufficiently-powerful counterforce could emerge. One who wielded their reins would be the ultimate being imaginable and would come very close to rivalling the power of a Great One. But was this what Iskandarr was meant to become?

Jakob reached out and grabbed the mask that hung about Iskandarr's neck. He looked at Jakob's hand, then lifted the simple string up over his head and handed Jakob the powerful object.

With his question obsidian fingers, he tried to pry information about the entity the Mask housed within, but it was like a wall met his reality-piercing nails, preventing him from touching the soul of the Daemon. It seemed Heskel had bound the Daemon within the mask with the type of supreme skill that had always defined his work.

Jakob lifted the mask up to his face and invoked the Entity within, "*Belamouranthyne, my eyes are thine and all they see belongs to thee.*"

Nothing happened.

"I thought so," Jakob said, returning the Elphin Mask to Iskandarr. "But why does she respond to you?"

"*Father, I do not know. What I do know is that my will cannot be denied.*"

"Like a true Sovereign, I suppose."

The rats had answered the Beckoning Bell en masse. With a few words of power, they were slaved to his mind and his eyes, and moved through his devastated workshops and laboratoriums according to his whims. He had in the past toyed with the concept of mass enslavement and mind absorption of lesser creatures, but today was the first time he had put it to use.

Controlling such a multitude of different minds was taxing, but he had nothing but time, and over the following few days he learnt to use the power well enough that he could simultaneously command two dozen rats individually, with the rest of the horde slaved to the actions of these select few.

Utilising his command over the vermin, he began to pull the scraps of ruined work and samples towards his inner sanctum, where his true hands could work on them and make some simple servants to speed up the revival of his sewer kingdom. But it was an undertaking that would require more time than he had, and, for all he knew, his mentee thundered towards him with flames in his eyes. He deserved it, for all he had done, but hoped a naïve sort of leniency that the boy might have would see him spared.

But the Fleshcrafter was no blind optimist, so he continued to gather the ruins of his life's work to his inner sanctum, recovering what he could and cannibalising the rest for parts. He was determined to put up a fight if he had to, and he knew the boy well enough to know how to exploit his way of thinking.

He wished that he had not set loose the Wrath Demon he had nurtured for all those years, but he was nothing if not a servant to his Lady and her machinations, though her gifts had dried up as of late. But he knew that she had already gifted him more than most other mortals ever received. Granted, her way of offering power always came with a price or an exaction, his missing body was a testament to that, as were his many other setbacks. However, if not for his diligent offerings to her, he would never have acquired all his vast stores of arcane knowledge and esoteric lore.

While a finger was taken from his left hand, his right hand was handed a fragment of power, such was her gift-giving, always.

But the Fleshcrafter would eventually gain the final bit of power he needed, and then he could at least enact the plans that had been decades in the making. He would reach for the cosmos and they would deign him with an answer. Goddard, the Fleshcrafter who bore many names, would ascend to Their glorious ranks and he would at last be absolved of all the things he had sacrificed and all the crimes he had committed.

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LXXVII

After weeks of travel, they at last laid eyes upon the imposing walls of the metropolis, from which the nation earnt its name: Helmsgarten.

Jakob's entourage of construct servants had expanded after Iskandarr had hunted down and slain a group of guardsmen who had fled the city and its protecting walls. Their bodies had become simple humanoid puppets, for Jakob did not wish to expend too more energy nor time upon remaking their simple frames into something stronger.

When only half a kilometre separated them from the large gate of Westgate, Jakob had Wothram and the other inactive servants abandon the wagon, before hopping onto Invincible's back and heading for the walls with them left to catch up to him and his steed.

Iskandarr for his part had already surged ahead, utilising his unique form of rapid movement that turned his body into a blazing projectile that Jakob could not fathom how he even managed to control. The Sovereign waited for Jakob and his army of servants atop the gatehouse on the wall, but already before Jakob had made it to the massive wide-open doors, Iskandarr had begun releasing his potent lightning upon the district that lay beyond.

Instinctively, Jakob pulled out the spell-tome that held Tchinn, and he clutched it to his breast, while hanging on to Invincible's reins with his left hand, as the steed galloped through the threshold and into the metropolis.

Once Westgate was revealed in full, he scarcely had the time to bring the brunt of his Daemon-spawned magic to bear upon his attackers, as a surging horde of mindless humans rushed for him, their bodies deformed by strange malign growth that shone crimson in the waning evening light.

Hundreds of former citizens came for him, but before he could strike down more than a dozen with the aid of Tchinn's blood manipulation, devasting lightning strikes vapourised them from above, before the caster leapt into their midst like a fallen star, sending powerful tremors through the ground that Jakob felt even as he remained seated upon his mount.

Moments after, his constructs surged past him. The most recently crafted ones wielded the weapons they had carried before their deaths, while the rest utilised the destructive tools Jakob had gifted them with. Rending claws of hardened bone tore the twisted and abominable horde to shreds, powerful limbs peeled flesh and limbs from bodies, and all of it was commanded by Wothram, who moved in the midst of the constructs like the eye in a storm.

The Birthed Sentience that they all shared quickly learnt from the battle and the opponents they fought, and Jakob could see as minute changes were made between every strike, slash, and blow, as the experiences and observations of all those ever-evolving minds fed back into the focal point that existed with Wothram, who in turn immediately learnt from the knowledge he was fed and returned instructions to all the servants, increasing their effectiveness to such a point that the horde of abominations were slain and repelled only minutes after they had joined the fray.

Even Iskandarr looked about him at the destruction wrought by Jakob's creations and quickly decided to return to his side, rather than waste his energy on a task better handled by them.

"*This is not the city you told me of,*" Iskandarr remarked.

Jakob remained seated atop Invincible, but the Sovereign's height was such that they still almost spoke eye-to-eye when he replied, "It seemed a failure of mine continues to haunt me."

"*What should we do?*"

"It is clear that our visit to Grandfather's laboratorium must wait until we have dealt with this."

When they had pushed their way deep enough into the metropolis to reach the Breadbasket district, Jakob realised the true enormity of what he was dealing with, as they were repeatedly assaulted from all sides by the twisted citizens of the city. There had to be tens of thousands of them, and their entire ire was focused on them as they pushed they way north through the city, heading for where the mind that controlled them dwelled in the deep.

It was obvious that Guillaume was behind the mass possession, but it was not by his power alone, as there was no way for him to unfurl his aura to its fullest extent with the way that Jakob had drawn his ritual and written the contract. Granted, the devious Daemon had managed to twist the contract to allow him to assault Jakob, but he would sooner be banished back to his realm than have his full aura unleashed, such was the specific wording that Jakob had written.

The way that the possessed and twisted puppets moved against them also spoke of an altered mind-state, as normally Guillaume had exhibited a measured and calculated control over his vessels, while this bordered on some animalistic frenzy that co-opted his ability to spread his possessing blood, but lacked his instinctual finesse. Almost as if the Daemon was himself possessed. But what sort of Entity had *that* power?

In a way, Jakob felt he already knew, but it was an answer he would rather not believe possible. For if a Great One like Her was capable of directly interfering in the Mortal Realm to such an extent, it spoke volumes of the power she had amassed.

"*They have not spread beyond the city,*" Iskandarr noted, only moments after collapsing a building onto a mass of the possessed citizens.

"Maybe they are unable to," Jakob replied. "But it means little to us either way. We must find the One that controls them."

Thus far, they had only lost two constructs, the ones created from the guardsmen only a day prior, but even his tireless servants would reach their physical limits, as their bodies would not endure the constant attacks forever. Sooner or later their reinforced limbs and bodies would break. Jakob just hoped that they reached the Castle before then.

"Wothram! We move north at haste! Ensure no gaps are left open!"

Silently, the Golem complied and the formation of the constructs changed shape, becoming like a wedge, while Jakob rode forward with Iskandarr running alongside him.

With his spell-tome he turned the puppets into exploding fountains of blood, while Iskandarr utilised his destructive lightning to mass-electrify whole swathes of the oncoming bloodfiends.

As though touching down upon hallowed ground, Jakob and his entourage found a brief respite when they reached the Haven district. At first, a foolish part of him thought that maybe the Eight Saint and his veneration held some sway after all, but then he touched his hand to the limestones beneath them and felt how they had absorbed the indescribable energy of the Watcher's gaze, back when Jakob had invoked His attention to obtain an Eye that has Witnessed the Divine.

He at once knew that his theory about *who* was possessing Guillaume had to be spot on, though he was loathe to believe it. But if the Flayed Lady's claw guided the fiends that thronged the city, then she would be careful not to interfere in works of other Great Ones, least of all the one she was directly opposed to. He was sure that he would find a similar sanctuary from the fiends if he went to Market West.

"*The All-Seeing has directed one of his eyes upon this place,*" Iskandarr commented shortly after, coming to the same conclusion somehow. Jakob wondered if the Prideful or Envious parts of the Sovereign were responsible for his otherworldly senses to such things as the power and influence of the Absolutes.

"I invoked the Hymn of Devouring Madness in this place," he revealed. "It seems the very stones yet recall the power that washed over them."

"*And from this power a safeguard is created, for the possessed do not cross the water to assault us here.*"

"That is because they are led by the Flayed Lady."

Iskandarr nodded, "*She yet seeks to destroy us. When her champion failed, she had already prepared this place to trap us.*"

Jakob had a realisation just then. "Perhaps what I seek from Grandfather is of more value than I realised. I can see no other reason as to why she would do this if the goal was to simply defeat us."

"*Father.*"

The serious tone in Iskandarr's voice surprised Jakob, but also made him worried about what he would say next.

"*You will seek your mentor and I will destroy the Daemon that lurks in the Castle's depths.*"

Jakob was about to admonish his reckless plan as nothing but suicidal folly, but then realised that he was perhaps only held back by Jakob's company, not to mention that he seemingly wielded a power over daemons that made him uniquely-suited for this very task.

"Very well."

"*Hand me the tome you wield,*" Iskandarr added.

Without really thinking about it, Jakob obliged his progeny.

With the spell-tome holding the Covetous Daemon in his long-fingered and claws hands, Iskandarr spoke thusly:

"*Daemon that dwells in the pages of this tome, heed thy Sovereign and unfurl thy soul. My will cannot be denied. Be released of thy infernal bonds and manifest thyself before me.*"

A vile light of bright frost-blue and murky swamp-green began coiling around the spell-tome, before a *thrum* in the air grew-and-grew until Jakob thought his ears might explode, then came the wrenching sound of a hundred pages all tearing in half at once, before the vile light exploded outward and left behind full-bodied creature, the very creature that had been trapped within Jakob's spell-tome for who knew how long.

A hiss emerged from the figure, who bore the appearance of a serpent with reptilian arms and legs. The scales of the creature glimmered emerald and gold, and its hetero-chromatic eyes mirrored their hues, while its half-metre tongue tasted the air and it looked around with a mix of disdain and obvious desire.

"*At last,*" Tchinn remarked, "*It has been so long since I possessed a body of my own.*"

Jakob could not believe it. Not only had Iskandarr miraculously unbound the Daemon slaved to the pages of the spell-tome, but he had somehow manifested its True form into existence, rather than just its untethered soul.

Then he felt the aura of the Daemon wash over him, but he had experienced the auras of Demons far greater and so he retained his faculties, though he could not completely shut out the intrusive thoughts.

"*Covetous Tchinn,*" Iskandarr said, "*Aid my Father in his task and I will let you return to your abode. As the Sovereign, my will cannot be denied.*"

LXXVIII

Jakob felt ill at ease, as he brought his band of constructs down into the sewer tunnels beneath Haven, for he had never before had a Daemon in its true form at his beck-and-call, but just like when Tchinn was bound to the tome, he obeyed every command that Jakob gave with naught but a hiss.

Part of him still worried for Iskandarr and vacillated between regret at leaving him to deal with Guillaume alone and pride at his progeny showing such unrestrained potential. The child he had created through the Rite of Harmonious Unity had matured into an Entity of such power as the world had never before seen, and Jakob felt sure now Iskandarr would fulfil the desires of the Great Ones who had brought his existence into reality through a careful alignment of an untold number of fates. After all, when Jakob considered all the things that had led him to this moment, it was clear that the thread of his life was bisected by hundreds of other lives, who in turn were only possible thanks to dozens of lives before theirs. It made his head hurt just to think of the grandness of the Great Ones' schemes, for they were so complex that it was surely impossible to observe them without watching from the void above over countless centuries, while each and every thread of fate reached its proper destination.

Now that Jakob had carried the Sovereign to his rightful destination, did it mean that his fate was coming to an end? Or was there still more in store for him yet?

Unlike the time when Heskel and Jakob had ventured below Haven on a quest for the Adventurers' Guild, he and his entourage had this time come through one of the larger entryways that lay near the pervasive river, such that even his steed could enter without much trouble.

With Wothram and half his constructs leading the way, and the other half as rearguard, Jakob sat atop his mighty equine construct that trotted in the midst, while the reptilian Tchinn slithered alongside him.

"How come you answer to the name I have given you?" Jakob wondered. After all, 'Tchinn' was a name he had given the Daemon, despite the fact that it no doubt already had a given name, else it could not have been summoned and bound as it were.

"*You summoners are mistaken about Daemons*," Tchinn hissed in reply, "*To us, names are transient possessions, and we may possess many. We do respond to our given names, but we are not so strict in our adherence to them as our single-minded progenitors.*"

Jakob made to reach out and touch the Daemon with his hand, such that he might absorb the knowledge of its true name and wield some power of it, now that Tchinn was essentially without bonds, but before he could touch one of his fingers against its scales, a tremor rolled through the tunnel and made his party halt in its tracks.

Wothram looked to Jakob, seeming to have something to report, after all, he had made sure the bird constructs were released high into the sky, such that they might observe what lay ahead above ground, as well as track Iskandarr's progress.

One of the constructs, a former guardsman who yet had vocal cords, announced in a clipped emotionless tone: "West wing Castle collapse."

"I see, no cause for concern then. Onward."

With Iskandarr's might unfettered, his fell lightning was of calamitous potency, though Jakob wondered just what he sought to accomplish by collapsing the castle on top of his foe, but, knowing

the Sovereign, there was a plan behind it, even if said plan was some temerarious and arrogant scheme to catch his quarry unawares.

He tried not to think too much on it though, for whenever Iskandarr was the focus of his mind's eye he felt his rationale falter and stutter, letting cautiousness and worry take the fore.

Jakob released a steady breath, returning his attention to his present surroundings.

"Tchinn, use your Heartbeat Sight to ensure there are no ambushes lying in wait. Grandfather has many eyes in this place and the fact that we have delved *this deep* without being challenged is curious and not a little bit disquieting."

With Jakob's constructs being tireless by nature, and his mortal endurance aided by his steed, they had already travelled far during their short foray into the sewers, bypassing the middle layer and reaching the beginnings of where those living souls without a Scent Mask would find their faculties begin to betray them, given the pervasive and overpowering odour of the Bone Beetles that thrived on the hills of corpses in the deepest layer.

"*I sense nothing ahead nor below,*" Tchinn stated. "*No running blood nor beating hearts.*"

That was deeply troubling to Jakob, for Grandfather's hordes of chimera we as living as any other animal and thus should be possible for the Daemon to sense and manipulate, even through the thick stone that surrounded them.

"How far can you sense such things?"

"*In my true form, I can feel the blood of all living beings in this city and hear the drum of their hearts like an orchestra.*"

"That cannot be," Jakob mumbled, "Grandfather's laboratoriums should be housed with lifeforms in all manner of sizes, each with blood running in their veins and hearts beating in their chests. Is there truly nothing that you sense?"

"*There are clumps of gathered critters in the tunnels above us, which move with an uncanny unity, but nothing below.*"

"Is it possible that your senses are obscured by wards?"

"*It is possible.*"

To Jakob's knowledge, Grandfather had not adorned his laboratorium with such sigils as what Heskel had taught Jakob to use to evaded being scried upon by hidden eyes. But then, it had been several years since his last time in these foul halls, and the Fleshcrafting Master was no slouch.

"Wothram, we proceed with haste, but remain prepared for anything."

Jakob found the first remains of Grandfather's ruined work even before they reached the bedrock upon which the entire sewer system lay. Something very thorough had reduced experiments, subjects, tools, and samples to indistinguishable rubbish and unrecoverable scraps. It was so devastating an affair that Jakob feared he would find his Mentor dead in his sanctum, denied of his glorious return.

As they finally reached the true depths, Jakob's constructs had to basically shovel piles of dead and decomposed creatures out of their way. Even these had been reduced to unsalvageable ruin by a determined mind, as if the perpetrator knew exactly how to combat Grandfather's ingenuity. In a way, it seemed as if the same sort of gift that Ciana had wielded had been used for much of the initial destruction, before a terrible jagged claw had followed soon after and truly left nothing of use in their wake. Jakob was quite sure that he now knew where the Rose-Gold Adventurer had gone when he had disappeared during their fight in Hesslik, as well as where he had gained the new limb used to attack Iskandarr and Ciana outside the tavern.

It seemed the Old Spider had supported the Champion of the Flayed Lady and paid the cost of that association, though in truth, Jakob had known for a long time that Grandfather venerated the vile Betrayer. He could hardly fathom why he would do such a thing, but then, his mind was incomprehensible to Jakob and always had been.

At last they reached Grandfather's true laboratorium, with its large open spaces that were full of workplaces, handmade machines, vats of gestating creatures, scores of gibbering slaves, and the air of geniality and madness. However, it too was a ruin and the memories of its once-was greatness was all that remained, superimposed in Jakob's mind's eye over the reality of what truly remained.

Jakob was about to warn Wothram to stay alert, when the ruins of the laboratorium shifted and an enormous creation of misshapen parts lifted itself up from the stone floor, shedding torn vats, scraps of machines, and the remains of dead slaves like it was simply a layer of dust.

The Monster thundered towards them on several-dozen misshapen legs adorned with hands and claws. It was like a giant cross between a centipede and an earwig, though its constituent parts were so disparate and unorganised that the resemblance seemed more a coincidence than deliberate design.

His constructs moved forward to meet the Monstrosity head-on, eschewing guarding the rear, though Jakob himself remained behind, letting his creations do the task they were created for. As Wothram's powerful fist connected with the Creations face, a hideous rend formed along the cranial plate of what served as its head, before the shockwave travelled down its length and the whole thing came to a halt for a second, giving the rest of the constructs enough time to pounce on it and tear it apart.

Jakob laughed at the sight, then yelled into the ruined laboratorium, "IS THIS ALL YOU CAN MUSTER, O GRANDFATHER!?"

With a gesture, he sent his force forward, leaving the ruined misshapen creation where it had been torn to bits, though he still could not help but remain ill at ease, for he knew his Mentor well and straightforwardness was not his way, so there was sure to be more lying in wait.

"Still nothing?" he asked Tchinn.

A simple flat hiss came in reply, which he assumed to be a negative.

Once again, the constructs had to clear away a lot of debris to allow them to pass through the once-glorious facility. Part of Jakob felt nostalgic and dejected at the sight of Grandfather's life's work reduced to such a state, but another part of him wondered if the idea that his Mentor had been a genius was perhaps not a mistaken belief that had taken root early and still made him blind to the reality that Grandfather had clearly failed and become a pitiable creature for whom death was a mercy.

Perhaps instinctively sensing that they were entering a den of power and true evil, the construct force closed in around Jakob's steed. Even Tchinn seemed taken aback as though feeling the potent magic that had been performed within.

As they crossed the threshold into Grandfather's inner sanctum, Jakob carefully dismounted his steed, leaving it by the entryway. The pervasive glowing fungus seemed more concentrated and brighter within this place. Jakob was hit by a memory of his first time seeing the place following his summoning, but it seemed so much smaller now.

At the far end of the room, half a corpse lifted itself up off the floor on four arms. Jakob could not supress a chuckle at the sight. Even his Mentor, O Fierce and Cruel Underking as he was known, was so much smaller than he remembered.

"*You have changed much since I saw you off,*" Grandfather remarked in something very close to warmth and kinship, with an undertone of pride.

"You remain unchanged," Jakob replied back. It seemed he had used a lot of his own mass of arms to create the creature that Jakob's constructs had instantly defeated. In short, he was a pathetic sight.

The constructs moved forward, preparing to encircle and slay the defenceless Underking.

"Wothram, stay your hand."

Though his creations did not move closer, they remained on guard. Wothram had evolved a lot in the last half day of commanding Jakob's many constructs, but it was hard not to be a bit intimidated by the efficient strength he possessed.

"*Where is Heskel?*"

Jakob did not reply.

"*And why doth your back carry the wing of an Elphin?*" A grin manifested on the Old Corpse's face. "*Did you slay her and pick the parts you liked best? Is that the sort of beast I raised you to be?*"

"You did not raise me!"

Grandfather chuckled, his voice coarse as though his lifeless lungs were full of dust. "*You are right. I was never a parent to you. I left such trifles to my useless son.*"

Jakob's eyes hardened and he stepped forward, preparing to slay the pathetic Mentor he had once feared deeply, but now only loathed with his entire being. As though his foot triggered a tripwire, something let go of the ceiling above and fell down upon him, before either his creations or the Daemon could intervene. But before the hideous claws of the Creature could tear open Jakob's face, the Elphin wing on his back unfurled like a shield, its seemingly-brittle impossible-thin veil like an impenetrable undefeatable barrier. With a flick, the wing sent the creature away, and moments later the steed Invincible stomped it to shards of bones and ruins.

Jakob turned back to look at the man, that pitiful cretin, and said, simply: "Wothram, please tear his body to pieces, but leave his head intact."

As Grandfather's protesting and flailing body fought back against Jakob's constructs, Tchinn came up besides him and said, "*I sense something hidden in this room.*"

Letting go of his mortal senses and feelings, Jakob began to feel it as well. He held out his left hand, that four-fingered obsidian creation gifted to him by Nharlla. The flow of soul and emotions in the air seemed to catch on one of the corners in the small chamber that Grandfather had been confined to, and Jakob made his way to it, using his hands leverage parts of the stone wall loose to reveal a compartment that held several scrolls of varying sizes, with one as big as the one that had allowed Heskel and Jakob to summon Nharlla to this realm.

Tchinn reached out to touch one, but quickly withdrew his hand as soon as his fingers connected, as though he had been scalded by a painful flame.

With an annoyed hiss, he asked, "*What matter is this!?*"

"It's tungsten," Jakob replied.

LXXIX

He saw the world through a smeared bloodstain, but still felt every moment and sense of his twisted new body, even though he could no longer control the hideous limbs of his loping and gnarled frame. As he tried to comprehend the visions he was seeing through his obfuscated vision, he felt a sense wash over him from the Entity that rode his body like a steed: it was fear.

For a long while now, his body had been fleeing from something that left destruction in its wake, though his sense of hearing was significantly reduced due to the loss of his ears, but he still felt the colossal *boom* of every explosion that nearly erased his body from existence.

Stop moving you coward! Face our pursuer! he tried to yell at his own body, but it would not obey him. It had not listened to him for a long time now.

The air shook around him, before erupting in a piercing light that even his obfuscated eyes could see and flooding his mind with an immense pain that seemed to leave an imprint on his mind, as though the sensation echoed repeatedly, like waves washing over him again-and-again.

This time his body seemed to turn toward its attacker, and Patrych finally laid eyes on the creature they had been fleeing from for the last hour.

Even through his eyes, he clearly saw the figure before him, and noticed how its eyes wept with heterochromatic glows that seemed opposed to one another, yet occupied the same horned frame.

At first he believed he was looking at a demon, but the Entity that controlled him would not fear any ordinary demon, for it itself was a creature of manifested dread and nightmares.

"*I am the Sovereign!*" yelled the figure, as Patrych's malformed body loped towards it. "*I will cleanse this city of your foul influence and claim it for myself! My will cannot be denied!*"

Unsurprisingly, Grandfather remained alive, even as just a head.

"*Why does this human yet retain his life?*" Tchinn asked, prodding the Old Corpse's forehead with one of his claws as he held the severed head aloft by the wispy hair that stubbornly clung to his scalp.

"*Is this to be my punishment?*" Grandfather asked jokingly. "*To become the entertainment for a Daemon… Even for you, dear Jakob, that seems extraordinarily cruel.*"

"Be quiet," Jakob told him as he read through the scrolls. He had left the largest for last, as it clearly seemed the most significant, but all of the scrolls contained within them immensely-powerful rituals, such as the one that had summoned Jakob to this realm, as well as the Hymns that Grandfather had passed on to him in bits-and-pieces, jealously hiding their true versions from him.

As he unfurled the largest of the scrolls, his eyes widened in surprise, then narrowed in suspicion.

He turned to his erstwhile Mentor and demanded to know, "How did you obtain these!? Where did you find such scrolls!?"

"*A loyal servant is often rewarded well for their troubles, though the one in your hands was one I discovered in the capital of Heimdale, beneath their most ancient academy. If you would believe it, that entire city was built atop the ruins of a millennia-old civilisation whose Emperor attempted the ritual you are looking at, and failed.*"

Jakob was unsure what was truth and what was falsehood or exaggeration, so he reached out with his right hand and absorbed the memories directly from his Mentor's mind. Surprisingly, he was

telling the truth, though what he left unsaid was that he himself had worked for more than a century to fulfil the esoteric tolls of the ritual himself, but in doing so had allied himself with the Flayed Lady, who, amusingly, had ensured he could never reach his goal, thanks to locking him inside his sewer sanctum in a timeless state of not-quite-alive and not-quite-dead.

"I see," Jakob said matter-of-factly. If he had retained the ability to, he would have grinned. If he had possessed the arrogance for it, he would have gloated. Instead he did neither, and simply bade Wothram and his constructs take the scrolls with them, preparing to leave.

"*Don't you want to know why I did what I did!?*"

Jakob gave him a glance of pity. "I already know everything you could possibly tell me, Nharlla has gifted me such a power. While you were busy grovelling at the feet of your worthless Lady, I accomplished more than you could ever have imagined. I no longer need anything from you. But, I will give you a final mercy, for old time's sake."

Tchinn let Grandfather's head fall to the stone floor, as Jakob beckoned over one of the guardsmen constructs and ordered it, "You are to watch over this pathetic corpse's remains. If it ever dares speak again, you are to take it outside of this chamber."

Grandfather's eyes widened in the realisation of the fate Jakob had just cursed him with. But Jakob knew from the look in his eyes that the Old Spider yet valued his miserable life and so would not dare speak, lest he be taken from his sanctum and reduced to dust.

"Wothram, we're leaving."

After climbing back atop his steed, Jakob cast a final glance at the head that remained on the stone floor, while the bone construct man had its eyes locked on it, awaiting a signal that might never come.

Just before leaving Grandfather's earshot, Jakob said, "I know what you did to Heskel. This is your reward for all the injustices to heaped upon him and I. This is the reward for defying the Watcher. This is your reward for tutoring an Apprentice so well that he would never again have need of your wisdom."

Then he left the inner sanctum of the ruined grand laboratorium.

As Jakob and his entourage neared the entrance to Haven district, Tchinn warned, "*A mass of hearts await us in the world above.*"

"Can you sense their intent?"

"*They seem frightened, but relieved.*"

"I see." Then he remembered a thing that he had noticed from delving into Grandfather's mind. "Tchinn, if you would kindly wipe out all the rats in the city, that would please me greatly."

A hiss followed, before the Daemon replied, "*It has been done.*"

"Thank you." He imagined the surprise pain of dozens of mind-linked bodies all dying at once would make the Old Corpse yelp out loud, ensuring his death at the hands of the single-minded construct that watched him, but there was no way for him to find out, and in truth he did not plan to ever return to those foul depths and find out.

After emerging from the sewer entrance near the river, Jakob rode his steed to the highest point of the district, looking for signs of his progeny. In the far distance, he saw the ruins that the Helmsgarten Castle had been reduced to and knew that Iskandarr had fulfilled his task. To attest to this, he saw no signs of the fiends when he looked out over the river to the other districts nearby, where before they had swarmed like waiting wolves.

A fork of green-tinted light lit up the horizon, followed a few seconds later by a *crack* of thunder that could be heard across the entire city, so loud and powerful that it was as though the Gods themselves had visited their wrath upon the mortal world.

Jakob knew that there was likely little he could do to aid his progeny, so he instead bade Wothram and his constructs begin preparations for the ritual engraved into the large tungsten scroll he held in his arms.

His clawed, monstrous hands could not reach the Demon of Lightning, for he moved with such suddenness that it was as though his entire body was possessed of the element that shot forth from his hands.

Patrych heard the invocation again, his mangled ears picking up on the sound and somehow understanding the alien language it was spoken in.

"*Spark of Creation,*" his powerful voice intoned, while Patrych's body once again attempted to get in close, while firing off dozens of tiny flechettes of blood that curved through the air on ponderous hard-to-predict trajectories. But the self-proclaimed Sovereign dodged them all, zipping back-and-forth with lightning on his heels.

"*Seek the object of my scorn,*" he continued.

His twisted and over-long figure once again attempted to launch one of its hideous claws at the Lightning Sovereign, but he kept moving around with that impossible speed, as though simultaneously casting two incantations; a feat that was surely impossible.

As the power of the spell drew to a close, Patrych's body turned and began to flee, having already been scalded once by the devastating power. Though he wished for death to take him, he likewise feared the power of their quarry, for the lightning strike they had survived already had felt like Patrych's entire body was steamed alive, the temperature carefully managed to ensure he felt the entire thing, and the echoes of that pain filled him even now.

"*Voltaic Serpent!*"

A cataclysmic lightning strike hit the world, lighting the city with such power that it usurped the sun, and in the powerful light, Patrych could have sworn he saw a four-hundred-metre-long serpent of pure energy, with a tail stuck to the clouds above and a maw coming straight for his body, as it sailed through the air following a massive leap from the part of the wall they had been running along.

Another lightning strike hit them, and in the light, Patrych saw those fangs of energy close around his twisted body like a cage, before the energy of the entire unbelievable Voltaic Serpent surged into his body.

He felt himself falling, unsure if he had regained control of his limbs, but, with the little bit he could see, it was obvious that no much was left of his body. Then he hit the ground and felt the pain of the moment so intensely that he cried out in pain, his actual voice emerging from whatever was left of his face.

Moments later, a *crack* of static emerged next to him, before he felt the air around the remains of his body become charged with static, as energy built up for a final blow.

Patrych still had a desire to live, despite it all, but he was unable to fight back. The Sovereign was truly a calamitous force and he briefly worried for his people, but then realised that not many were left anymore, the vile Entity that had taken over him had made sure of that.

Then he heard those now-familiar words and knew the end had come.

"*Spark of Creation.*"

LXXX

Iskandarr found Jakob as he was putting the finishing touches on the ritual described within the scroll that Grandfather had possessed for maybe over a century.

"*It is done,*" his progeny told him. "*I have destroyed the malign growth along with the Daemon whose soul was used as its seedbed.*"

"I assumed as much, once the sounds of lightning fell silent. You have truly surpassed all my expectations of you, and I assure you they were high."

Iskandarr nodded. "*You met with your Father?*"

"He is not my Father. He never was. He wasn't even family. Just some crazy old man to whom the years had not been kind."

"*Did you kill him?*"

"I realised that it was too good a punishment for one such as him, so I made sure he would suffer. To one who loves the sound of his own voice and to one who desires to live eternally, the punishment I designed is the cruellest I could come up with."

"*You told me that cruelty was a waste, that it was inefficient.*"

"I suppose I must have said something along those lines, but there are always exceptions to the rules, Iskandarr."

The Sovereign looked at what Jakob had been carving into the limestones of the plaza. "*And this? What ritual do you now plan to undertake?*"

Jakob handed him the tungsten scroll, whereupon it was detailed.

"Nharlla pointed me towards *this* in return for siring you. I believe it is my just reward for my dutiful service to the Watcher and his many Vassals."

"*The Trial of Ascendancy?*" Iskandarr read out loud in confusion.

"If I could grin, I would," Jakob told him.

The Sovereign kept on reading: "*It says the tolls are: 'The Power to Ruin a Nation', 'True Sight', and 'Unchallengeable Mastery'. What do they mean?*"

"I thought I had taught you better than this," Jakob replied.

"*The Power to Ruin a Nation could be a thousand different things and Unchallengeable Mastery… unchallengeable by whom?*"

"Unchallengeable by the Great Ones, of course!"

"*Father… do you possess such a thing?*"

"Don't be daft. It is the one thing I share with my Mentor and which the Great Ones Above find so fascinating about us."

"*Fleshcrafting?*"

"Indeed."

Though fully mature by now and bearing the appearance of a true Sovereign, there was a sincere confusion on Iskandarr's face. "*What happens if you ascend?*" he asked, genuinely concerned.

"Who can truly say? Nharlla promised me my search may take a million years, so I suppose I would continue to be a Seeker of Knowledge. But I would also join the ranks of the Watcher's Vassals. After all, have you never wondered where the Absolutes like the Flayed Lady came from? Surely her ascendancy was born of a similar ritual, though whether she ascended from our world or another, I

cannot say, but her maliciousness and betrayal is not an element inherent to the fabric of the universe. Surely you can see that."

"*And what about this True Sight? Does that pertain to Chthonic?*"

"I believe so. And, though you are correct in saying that there are many ways Ruin may be brought to a Nation, it is often said that the ultimate power to Ruin a Nation lies in the hands of its ruler. That ruler is you, Iskandarr. Though it is not much of a city any longer, Helmsgarten is ours by right now, for you have shown that none may stand in our way, not even the Betrayer and her servants."

Iskandarr looked at the carvings in the limestones and Jakob followed his gaze. It was clear that the ritual had been meant for Jakob, for its lines made a shape that was inherent to his being now. Seen from above by one of his bone-shaped birds, it would be quite obvious to whom the ritual was meant, for it stated, in the Chthonic Sigil Alphabet: *The Seeker*.

"*You intend to go through with this.*"

"Power is meant to be used," Jakob replied, stating the obvious.

"*That is not why you are doing this. I can see through you enough to tell.*"

Jakob chuckled. "May you continue to grow wiser with every day, Iskandarr."

"*Is this farewell? Will you leave me as well?*"

He was about to reach out with his right hand, but then he stopped himself, before reaching out with his left. Iskandarr seemed to grow tense, perhaps still remembering the pain Jakob's obsidian hand had inflicted on him when his actions had led to Ciana's death.

With his four obsidian fingers on his son's shoulder, Jakob promised him: "If you call upon me, I will listen."

Then he let go and walked towards the centre of the enormous sigil. In the distance, huddled between the temples and houses of the Haven district, the few survivors of the Flayed Lady's machinations watched on. None dared come near, as they feared the man who wielded lightning, the reptilian monster whose very gaze seemed to call their blood from their bodies, and the hooded abomination of a Magister with his army of terrifying bone servants.

Jakob looked up towards the clouds, which seemed to have parted for him, as though this was all some stage play and things were following a prescribed formula. Then he lifted his arms out and invoked the ritual:

"*I come as a humble Invoker before you,*"

"*In my eyes reside the True Sight,*"

"*In my blood rests the power to Ruin a Nation,*"

"*In my heart blooms my Unchallengeable Mastery,*"

"*I am the Father of the Sovereign,*"

"*I am the Son of a Monster,*"

"*I am the Seeker of Knowledge,*"

"*Absolutes, whose attention wanders from mortal realm to mortal realm, behold me in this very moment and judge me on my merits,*"

"*Deem me wanting and visit devastation upon this plaza,*"

"*Or deem me worthy and deign me to ascend to your lofty halls,*"

"*I come as a humble Invoker before you,*"

"*But I leave this mortal plane to stand amongst you,*"

"*As an Ascendant,*"

"*As an Absolute,*"

"*As a Great One Above!*"

Once every millennium, an Invoker stands above the rest and reaches out towards the formless void between the stars. If deemed worthy, the void reaches back and the Invoker is granted ascendancy of body and mind. The Ascendant is an entity of boundless potential, whose merest gaze might scald stars and quake the heavens. They are known to the few mortals, who are gifted with a fragment of the True Sight, as the Absolutes and the Great Ones Above.

The Ascendants are Entities that exemplify a Mastery and are multifaceted Beings whose existences are shaped according to something that they seek or hold dominion over. Some take great interest in the mortals of the many realms beneath their gazes, while others are more concerned with their individual pursuits. Some find great power from the worship of mortals and others seek to usurp their betters by cunning schemes that play their adherents against each other.

There are no two Ascendants alike, and it is a rare few who rise from mortal stock and join the Absolutes in their cosmic pantheon. In the millions upon millions of years since the first of the Great Ones began their schemes, many haughty mortals have sought to stand among them as equal, but most were deemed wanting. Occasionally, some of the Absolutes find mortal champions whom they seek to elevate to become their Vassals, such that they might grow their untold power and stand above their brethren.

One such mortal was deemed worthy on that day. He bore the mark of the Watcher of Worlds and was favoured by many of its Vassals. Although the Betrayer, that hateful and jealous Entity, sought to prevent the mortal from his Ascension, he proved himself resilient to her wicked machinations.

For exemplifying the values deemed necessary in an Ascendant and for his role in fulfilling one of the Watcher's carefully-spun threads of Fate, he was lifted from the mortal coil and given a seat amongst those he had worshipped his entire life.

From the Ascendancy a tremor rolled across the endless expanse of the cosmos and was felt by all mortal creatures in their mortal realms, though hardly any seemed to comprehend what the sensation meant. Even the realms of the Saints of Virtue and Vice were not left untouched, and many of the Demons within and the Daemons that existed on their fringes found a desirable object of worship in this newly-ascended Absolute.

He was known as the Seeker of Knowledge and the Father of Monstrosity, but he would later become known by many more names, for an Absolute is a multifaceted Being not so easily defined.

Iskandarr stared at the sigil that was permanently burnt into the limestones of the district once reserved for venerating a Saint. He looked around at the bone constructs and saw that their leader, the one named Wothram, had begun giving them orders, as they began to move towards the Castle that Iskandarr himself had ruined with his devastating powers.

The Covetous Daemon that had served his father for several years stood nearby, having witnessed the Ascendancy.

"*You are absolved of your obligations,*" Iskandarr told the Daemon.

"*I never desired to be set free,*" the Daemon hissed in reply. "*Though my servitude to the Seeker was brief, it was a time I cherished.*" It turned its reptilian heterochromatic eyes to Iskandarr, then said, "*I would serve you, my Sovereign, if you would allow me such a pleasure.*"

Some beings were made to serve and some were made to rule. It was clear where they both fell on that scale.

"*Very well,*" Iskandarr told him. Then he lifted the Elphin Mask up over his head, spinning it around so he looked at the face that had been moulded by skilled hands from the skin of a half-demon human like his Mother.

"*Would you serve me too, Belamouranthyne?*"

"*If my lust is sated, you may be my Sovereign,*" her honey-coated voice told him.

Iskandarr put his hand on face of the Mask and drew out the essence of the Daemon trapped within, such that her true body manifested before him. As the Sovereign, this was his talent, for there were no Daemons who could challenge his rule and there were none that could disobey his will.

Belamouranthyne flexed her voluptuous naked body with a yawn, then began walking towards the people who hid amongst the buildings of the district, letting her enthralling aura fall over them. Iskandarr knew that a quirk of her power was that it only took hold on the minds of men, but her control over them was of such intensity that this weakness was hardly felt. He still remembered how he had used her power to turn the entire male population of Lillebrünnr against its leaders, but he had other ideas of how her power could be used now, especially as he was a Sovereign with a city in ruins.

Without requiring him to tell her, Bel gestured around her and said, "*Adulate me and venerate your Sovereign! Show your worship of me through him and forge from these pitiable remains a city that is worthy of his title!*"

Hundreds of starry-eyed men came from all over the district that had served as their sanctuary for weeks or more, as the fiends of the Flayed Lady ran amok everywhere else. It was mildly off-putting how the men took to the work with immediate enthusiasm, and, as the Enthralling Daemon wandered through the ruined city, she brought out thousands more who had hidden away.

With their enthusiastic mind-slaved workers, the two Daemons and their Sovereign would soon have a proper kingdom to call their own.

As Iskandarr walked towards the ruined Castle, with Covetous Tchinn on his heels, he looked to the sky above and wondered if his Father looked down at him.

He would become worthy of his name and please the Great Ones well, so that he one day too might ascend to their lofty halls, to stand next to his Father as his equal.