



Jakob had spent the past few weeks combing through the catacombs for secrets, but had thus far come up empty-handed. Hessel 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 Hessel 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 laboratories? 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 laboratory.

*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.”