



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?”

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“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.

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**“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 Heskell 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?”

Heskell 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.”

Heskell grunted, then said, **“Lead to Svalberg. Quick.”**

With a powerful kick, Ciana launch off from the branch and flew towards the next. The Brute followed close behind.