

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 Heskell 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, Heskell 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 Heskell 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 Heskell 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 borrow 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."