

# 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 stench 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 sowed 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 laboratory 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 Heskell 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. Heskell 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, Heskell grunted and said, "**Slum: tainted. Upriver seek.**"

Caught off-guard by one of Heskell'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, Heskell. 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 Heskell 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 Heskell, 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?”

Heskell 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.

Heskell, 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 plisives and rough pronunciations.

Jakob looked to Heskell, 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 Heskell, 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 Heskell 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.

Heskell 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...**” Heskell 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 Heskell’s talkativeness, Jakob finished the sentence: “...*for its beastly flesh and beastly ways.*”



Jakob woke up, curled within the embrace of Heskell, 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.”

Heskell 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.”

Heskell 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 laboratory.”

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

“How big is it?”

After having Heskell 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, Heskell 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 work surface, 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 Heskell set up the laboratory.

“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 Heskell.

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

Jakob nodded thoughtfully. “A bigger rat, but with smaller and sharper 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*?”

Heskell 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.”

Heskell 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 Heskell 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. Heskell 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.



The following week, Jakob worked diligently in his laboratory. At night, he and Heskell 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 laboratory 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, Heskell put a firm hand on his shoulder. Though Holm was tall, he was still beneath the towering Wight.

"Thank you, Heskell. 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 Heskell 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 liveness 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 Heskell'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 Heskell 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 Dependiant*, 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, *Necrosript*, 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 Heskell 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. Heskell 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 Heskell.

“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.

Heskell 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?”



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 Hessel, who was dragging an unconscious Holm by his hair. One of the Wrought Servant's eyes was melted away, but it seemed Hessel 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 Hessel. It was a lesson in not expecting the unsaid to be obeyed.

With a few strikes and throws, Hessel 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 Hessel 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 Heskell 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?”

Heskell 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 Heskell.

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

Heskell 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!”

Heskell 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 laboratory.”

“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 Heskell 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.”

Heskell 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 laboratory, 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.

Heskell 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!?”

Heskell 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 short swords 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 dripped from ears, mouth, and nose.

The third man managed an impressive dodge of a swing from the Wight and came right at Jakob, short sword 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 plunk 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 laboratory 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 unsettled 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.”



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 damndest 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, steadying 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-blond 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 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.



## 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 Karmmeig, 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, Heskell and Holm had been sent out on errands, while Veks lounged in the laboratory, 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 Necroscrip 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 Heskell 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.”

Heskell and Holm found their way back into the basement laboratory 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, Heskell 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*?”

“Heskell 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, Heskell 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.”

## 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 Heskell 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 Heskell, 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 Heskell, 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, Heskell groaned in pain and discomfort, like a deep predatory growl.

A sound like leather being slowly ripped apart filled the laboratory, 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 Heskell 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?"*

Heskell 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, Heskell! 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."*

Heskell 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 Heskell 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 Heskell'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, Heskell 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.”

Heskell 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 Hesel 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 Hesel 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?"

Hesel 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.

Hesel 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 Hesel 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 Heskell 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.



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.

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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 laboratory, 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 Heskell 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.”

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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 Heskell, 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.

Heskell 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 procure 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, Heskell. 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 laboratory.”

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 Heskell had disobeyed his Creator by also obeying his initial command to protect his heir, after all, letting Raleigh ‘play’ with Jakob would go against Heskell’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.”

Heskell 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.





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 laboratory.

"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 Heskell'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 Heskell’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.”

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The *Incarinate* 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 Wilhelm*. 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 Wilhelm 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.

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“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.

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“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 laboratory 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 jealousy 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.



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 Heskell 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.

"Heskell."

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 Heskell, 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 laboratory 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 Wilhelm 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, Heskell 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 Heskell 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 chattered 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.

Once again Sig had to question the Lady and her wisdom in leading her to this madman and his servants.

## 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 Heskell.*”

“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 Heskell 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.

“Heskell 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 they 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 unlike 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 craftsmanship 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,**” Heskell 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,**” Heskell 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 Heskell said it, his scent-mask sputtering vapour.

“Indeed.”

## 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 Heskell 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 Heskell 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 Heskell 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 Heskell 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 Hemolatriy, 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 Hemolatriy 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 rib-cage 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 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 latter serving as the outer layer, strangely enough. 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 short-swords 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 Heskell 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, Heskell 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 Heskell 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 Heskell 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 labororium 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.

“Hemolatriy 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, its 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 archnemesi?"

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 relented, 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.



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, Kable,” 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*, Heskell’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.

“Heskell. 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.

Heskell 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,” Kable 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, Heskell 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 Heskell 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. Heskell 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 Heskell, 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?” Kable 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, Heskell 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,” Kable 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,” Kable 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 Kable’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.

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“That was close,” Kable 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 Heskell 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 Heskell 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 Heskell.

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 Heskell 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?"

Heskell 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 Heskell’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.

Heskell, 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 cowed 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 Hesel 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 Hesel, 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 Heskell, 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 Heskell. 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 Heskell 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, Heskell’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.”*

## 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.

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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.

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“Unwise.”

“We will see,” Jakob replied. Clearly Heskell did not approve of giving the Huntsman such powerful weapons as the Hemolatriy 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 Hemolatriy 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 complimenting demons, with the former being dangerous and unpredictable, and the latter being condensed amalgams of their two archetypes. Given that Hemolatriy 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 laboratory, a collection of hearts showed a considerable group of humans.

“You were correct, it would seem. I count nine people: four within my laboratory, 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 Hemolatriy, 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 laboratory, 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, Heskell 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."

## 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."

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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.”

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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 chattered 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 chattering 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!”

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“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 Heskell 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 Heskell, 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 Hemolatriy 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 laboratories 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 earned. 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 corpses 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 actuality 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 Heskell 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 the 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.



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.

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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 spongy 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 laboratory."

"***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 Hesel has set up, so that I may begin work on making the new visage you wish to inhabit.”

Hesel 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.*

Hesel 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, Heskell. 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?”

Heskell 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.”

Heskell 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 Heskell turn to the pile of bodies yet to be disassembled, he grinned beneath his scent-mask. “Not of human flesh, Heskell. 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.

Heskell was laughing.



**“Marvellous!”**

Ringed around Jakob and Heskell’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-robos 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 Heskell 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, Hessel 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 Hessel 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 Heskell at Jakob's behest: a Necroscrip 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 Heskell and Jakob were both unaffected by its corroding touch thanks to their precautions.

"Heskell, 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 Heskell 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.

Heskell 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 laboratory 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 Hemolatriy 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, Heskell 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?”

Heskell 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.

With a flip and mid-air rotation of her entire body, Sig severed Heskell'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, Heskell 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 clawed outwards from within her bowels 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 Hemolatri 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 Heskell 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 Heskell 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,**” Heskell 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 Heskell, 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 corpses he now wore, Marll and Purll, were docile and easily-controlled after only a few Chthonic sigils were inscribed upon them.

Heskell 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 Heskell had, by Jakob’s prompting, defied his Creator.

“Let me see the Relic,” Jakob told his Lifeward.

Heskell 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.

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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 bobbing 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 be 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.

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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 Heskell 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. Heskell 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 Heskell 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 laboratory-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.”

Heskell 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, Heskell 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.**"

## 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, Heskell, 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 Heskell, 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 Heskell.

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. Heskell quickly got in front of him, misunderstanding the situation.

“I have forgotten to introduce you,” Jakob said flatly. “Heskell, 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, bumping 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 Heskell 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.

Heskell 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,” Heskell 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 earned 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.