

XXXXIV

They were on the trail, with Ciana proving herself almost equal to Heskel in terms of her ability to track their prey. The three of them were in the Gravenlight Forest, eight kilometres northwest of Hekkenfelt, following the leads on their newest quest to track down the wolf-head arachnid nest. It seemed that the farm Ciana and Heskel had helped was but one of nearly two-dozen that had been regularly preyed upon by the nightmarish chimera for half a decade.

Jakob bent low to lift up a clump of tangled web with his new nine-fingered prosthetic. Though the trees were not closely-packed, the canopies were a tangled mess, and, as such, very little light hit the understory, making it hard to see well despite it being midday. Ciana was well-accustomed to night-time hunting, but she was surprised to find that Heskel and Jakob had no difficulties in the near-total dark either.

“Marll, my scope please,” the Fleshcrafter commanded in Demonic.

A tendril lifted from his strange robes and handed him an object. While Heskel continued sniffing the air and scouring the understory for clues, she walked up to Jakob to see what the object was.

He was holding it to his eye, like a one-eyed pair of glasses such as those Magister often wore, and was studying the adhesive clump of web.

“What are you doing?”

Instead of an answer, he handed her the scope and she looked through it at the web in-between his nine fingers. She was surprised to see very clear details on a miniscule level through the glass lens, but had no idea what she was truly looking for.

Perhaps sensing her confusion, Jakob explained, “It is genuine web, not the keratin imitation Heskel and I are capable of crafting.”

“I don’t know what that means?”

“It means that we are looking the web of a chimera. Unless, Lleman naturally has giant arachnids in its forest.”

“It doesn’t,” she replied confidently. She had not been this far west before, but the much bigger forest in the heartland and on the border of Lleman definitely had no such creatures. “So we’re on the right track?”

“Indeed. For a moment, I was afraid that we might simply be looking at the work of a rogue Magister with similar talents as me, but, to my knowledge, there are none in our world capable of creating chimera like Grandfather.”

“So we’re close to one of his old laboratories?”

“Let us hope so.”

When Ciana looked at Jakob, after they had tracked down and slain the group of six wolf-head arachnids that lived in the Gravenlight Forest, she knew that he was disappointed. After all, there had been no grand laboratory secreted away within the nest, nor in any part of the forest for that matter.

“What now?” she asked.

Jakob let out a puff of spent air. “We will return to Hekkenfelt with the trophies and proof, then see if we can find other reports of errant chimera. Grandfather’s laboratories must be around here, I know it.”

“Why do you need to find them?”

“Because one of them is where Hesel was created.”

The Brute, who had been busy beheading their prey, paused his work and grunted apprehensively.

“Why do you fear what truths we will find!?” Jakob suddenly exploded at his companion.

Hesel got up and let his carving blade fall to the stone ground of the cave they were in. “**Not all knowledge is good.**”

Ciana put a hand on Jakob’s shoulder, and he seemed to let some tension escape him, though he was clearly still frustrated.

“I will decide that myself,” he answered the Brute.

As they were travelling back to Hekkenfelt, they stopped by one of the farms that had been affected by the predators they had now eradicated. Ciana initially thought it was to assure the farmers that their cattle was now safe, but it seemed Jakob had other plans.

“Have you faced other predations?” he asked the man who ran the farm with his two brothers and their wives and children.

“I ‘aven’t seen’t much. I ‘aven’t even seen’t them monsters what slain my sheep.”

“What about your brothers or the women in your farm? Have any of them seen monsters that are out of this world?”

The farmer started scratching his thick grimy beard with his work-calloused hands. “My niece swore she saw an odder once up that creek yonder hill,” he replied and pointed southwest.

Jakob shook his head and returned to where Ciana stood.

“No luck?” she asked.

“I’m unsure what I expected,” he replied. Then he turned back towards the Farmer and told him, “Bring your brothers over here for a moment.”

The man nodded dutifully and went to fetch the two men.

Jakob walked past Ciana, putting his back against hers and said, “Bring out the Mask. We will collect three more faces today.”

With what felt like an eagle’s talons gripping her heart, Ciana looked at the three farmers standing before her, expectantly. She did not like the way their eyes continued to stray up-and-down her body, but she also did not think they deserved what she was about to subject them to.

Jakob still leant against her back, his eyes averted from her. She had thought him kind, but now there was a brutal side to him. A demanding side that did not allow her to forsake her given task.

From the sealed hide pouch on her waist, she withdrew the Mask and lifted it to her face.

“Wos that for?”

She put it to her face, where it seemed to stick as though tiny hooks anchored it into her flesh. Then she spoke the incantation in Demonic:

“Belamouranthyne, my eyes are yours and all they see belongs to thee.”

She felt power flow from the mask and into her face, along with a stinging pain and biting cold. Immediately, the three men became spellbound to her visage and started grinning blissfully, ignorant of what she was about to ask of them.

At last I am fed, the Daemon spoke through her mind. *Turn around and feed me the one who hides in your shadow.*

The Daemon held no sway over Ciana, but its charismatic words were almost enough to make her use the Mask on Jakob as well.

It will be so easy. Make him yours eternally.

She ignored its honey-coated words though, for she yet owed the Fleshcrafter and the Brute a great debt.

“Look upon me,” Ciana said, shakily. The three men seemed to relax at just her uttered words, as though they somehow calmed them. As though they loved her with the entirety of their beings.

“Gift me the skin of your faces.”

Immediately, the three brothers began digging their dirty and chipped nails into the flesh on their faces and tearing at it. Globes of bloodied fat and meat fell from their hands as they worked arduously to offer themselves to her.

It was brutal to watch, but it helped numb her to the sight by imagining that they were the very same people who had spat on her as a child and sold her to hands of the slavers, who in turn passed her on the Magisters at Svalberg.

Some minutes later, they all three knelt before her, staring lovingly into her eyes and lifting the ruined remains of their ripped-off faces up towards her as though offerings of adoration. Suddenly, Heskell came over and took the offerings from them. Even though she knew the Brute was somehow immune to her enthralling gaze, she did her best not to look upon him.

After Heskell walked away with the scraps of the farmers’ faces, Ciana looked upon them, and, just as she spoke her next command, a curious boy came around the corner of the nearest grain windmill, where he had apparently been hiding.

“Kill each other,” she demanded, before realising that the boy had heard and seen her as well.

Immediately, the three farmers starting biting and punching and scratching and stomping and kicking and strangling each other, while the boy ran over with a blissful grin, seemingly intent on joining in on the deadly skirmish. Before he could join in however, Heskell ran over and grabbed him firmly in his arms, the boy kicking-and-spasming.

He came up to Ciana, utterly calm, holding the child up before her. She dreaded what he would ask of her, but then he simply said.

“Tell him to ignore your commands and return to his normal life.”

Shaken that she had almost condemned a child to death, she quickly looked the boy straight into his joyous and blissful eyes, telling him, “Return to your normal life, you are exempt from this command.”

Heskell set the boy down, who then, rather placidly, walked past his father and uncles killing each other, continuing on towards the main farm building.

“Take the mask off,” Jakob said. “We’re leaving.”

Ciana breathed a sigh of relief, before uttering the incantation to release the Daemon’s hold.

“Belamouranthyne, return my eyes to me for thy offering has been duly given.”

Call upon me again soon, Ciana Half-spawn.

While the three faceless farmers fought and bled on the soil of their farm, nearby sheep watching with vague interest and the lone windmill turning slowly, the trio left.

They saw Hekkenfelt in the distance, when Ciana raised her voice awkwardly. Despite having found her strength, there was still certain things with which she remained uncomfortable.

“Jakob,” she started, “I have a question about something.”

“Is it about using the Mask?” he guessed.

“No, that I do willingly, even if it disturbs me.”

He halted, surprised by this it seemed. “What is it then?”

“You know how Elphin are born... erm...”

He nodded understandingly.

“Well, I was wondering. After the ritual that connected me with my Demon progenitor, have I become... whole?”

Jakob seemed to consider the question for a bit, when Hessel answered, perhaps to illuminate him.

“Asking if she is fertile.”

“I understood as much, Hessel... I am not *that* daft to the unspoken word.”

The Brute shrugged, which made Ciana chuckle a little.

Jakob turned to regard her, locking his eyes with hers, which always made her slightly uncomfortable. The crazed look from earlier, caused by the recently-titled *Lightning Blood* tonic, was gone, but his stare was no less intense.

“The ritual realigned your soul with that of your lineage and gave to you the powers you were owed from birth, but denied for being half human. However, it did not change anything about your physiology.”

“So, I’m still...?”

He nodded simply. A small hope she had held for the last few weeks crumbled at the straightforward gesture of confirmation.

“Can you make me... whole?”

Hessel grunted a denial, though there was a soft edge to it.

“It is uncharted territory for me, though I have repaired a male reproductive organ before, but it is much less complex. There is a chance that Grandfather has the knowledge.”

“Can we go see him?”

“That would be unwise,” Jakob replied. “We are not on amicable terms.”

“I see...”

“There is another way.”

She lit up at the tiny hope presented to her. “How?”

“We are summoning Nharlla, when the branch pieces that Wothram guards in Hekkenfelt belong to a thousand-year-old tree. He may gift you the ability to have children, if you ask it of him.”

“He can do *that*?”

“There are no limits to what the Great Ones Above are capable of,” he replied reverently.