



He moved like a serpent, his footwork and movements snappy and efficient, leaving once turning away, eyes always locked on her, while his blade led the way, as though the weapon in his hands was a rapier and not a longsword. Ciana could not help but feel intimidated by the pressure he put on her, even as she repeatedly rebuffed his strikes with her flawed fingers and managed to slice the tip of her nail across his cheeks and brow time-and-again.

With a telegraphed pounce, he shot forward with his longsword tip aimed at her throat. Ciana stepped into the strike, deflecting the blade with a simple flick of her finger claws, before hammering the heel of her palm into his solar plexus and utilising a small amount of her vibrational powers to fling him backwards.

Iskandarr landed on his feet a few metres away, but then collapsed to his knees, the air forcibly ejected from his lungs.

As she stalked towards him, she kicked the blade out of the way, before leaning down and putting one of her claws on the side of his neck where the artery could easily be sheared open with a simple gesture.

“I won again,” she told him.

Iskandarr looked up at her with a scowl on his handsome face. Already, the cuts on his forehead and cheek were healed up, but, then again, the two of them would not be sparring in such a way if there was a real threat of permanent injury, or at least Ciana would not. When she fought Iskandarr, she felt no reigning-in of his natural instinct to go for the killing blow. It was a strength, but she wondered if perhaps he did not lack a fundamental kindness that she would have expected of someone his apparent age. But, as Jakob had repeatedly reminded her, his appearance had nothing to do with his mental age.

Still, she felt apprehensive about the brutal training regime Jakob had told her to enforce on the boy, as he looked to be only around fourteen. Certainly, the patrons and proprietor of the tavern seemed to believe she was bullying him in some way, but they were also swayed by Iskandarr’s natural charisma and completely ignored the way his body rapidly aged. It had only been about a month since his birth, but he already had a foot into adulthood.

Ciana had, unlike Iskandarr, undergone a completely natural aging process like any normal child, as, perhaps, her human side had won over, with the ageless quality of demons only manifesting later, though the physical characteristics of her demon half had shown early, at around the age of one or two. Perhaps her father had been a good parent in the beginning, favouring his child over his reputation, but as Ciana had grown more outward and adventurous, her heritage had been too hard to hide, and he had folded.

She was proud that she could raise Iskandarr without such reservations. She had the strength to protect him. No one would ever get in their way.

But, she did wish she could have been a mother for longer, as he was already so grown-up. Ciana had been surprised to find that she really enjoyed the time while he was an infant and his entire world encompassed only her. Jakob, unsurprisingly, had let her take care of Iskandarr during that brief period, but since around second week had begun acting like a mentor to the boy.

Jakob showed no apparent affection for what was obviously his progeny, instead he had a cold-but-wise approach to parenting Iskandarr, which revolved around instilling as much learning and

theory into his head as possible. Though it was clear that, while the boy took to the studies with disturbing ease, he found them less appealing than sparring with Ciana, even though he had never once managed to touch her with his sword.

“*Again,*” he demanded.

“You have lessons, remember? We’ve already sparred six times today, and you know how Jakob views tardiness.”

“*Father insists on teaching me alchemy this week, but it’s so dull!*”

Ciana could not help but smile. Though a genius in all things he undertook, he was impatient and hard-headed, like a true Pride-spawned demon would no doubt be.

“*Mother, please. Just one more match.*”

She sighed. He had already learnt the magic words to make her comply. Ciana knew she was not his true mother, but she liked to believe that it did not matter. She wondered if Iskandarr himself knew, and, if he did, if it mattered to him or not. It was quite possible he only used the word on her to get his way, but, truthfully, she did not care even if that was the case. It was a nice delusion to partake in.

“One more and then you go.”

Iskandarr grinned triumphantly and ran over to pick up his sword. As soon as he had leant forward to grasp it, Ciana flung out her palm and sent a cushion of vibration into him, flinging him head-over-backwards towards the tavern some hundred metres away, though he landed a few dozen short of the building itself.

The look of surprise and indignation on his face made her laugh, but he clearly felt slighted, because he threw his sword angrily to the ground and stomped off towards the tavern.

Iskandarr came stomping down the staircase and slammed the door against the wall when he entered. Jakob was busy leaning over his newest creation, which was no larger than his forearm, but amusingly-complex in design: a sparrow-sized construct bird. The lens of a magnifying membrane, which he had discovered how to sculpt out of his mouldable body, retracted into the side of his head where the demon-flesh hood had fused with his face.

“You’re late.”

“*I don’t care.*”

“How many times did you lose today?” Jakob asked.

The boy huffed and turned his face away in shame.

“Eight, I’m guessing.”

“*It was seven times!*”

“No wonder you’re late.”

“*She’s impossible to hit and her reflexes are impossibly fast! It’s not fair!*”

“Life isn’t fair, Iskandarr. Besides, your mother is undefeatable, the Great Ones have made it so.”

“*She’s not my mother.*”

Jakob narrowed his eyes at the boy and said, in a dangerous tone, “Don’t ever let her hear you say that.”

Suddenly the wind deflated from his sails.

“What’s this really about, your temper?”

“*I hate alchemy. It’s boring me to death.*”

Jakob nodded. “I’ve noticed your dislike of it. It is quite obvious.”

*“Do I really have to learn it, Father?”*

“I suppose you have already mastered the basic principles, so if you put your mind to it you could figure out the more advanced elements by yourself.”

*“Does that mean we can move on to the next subject?”* he asked, excitedly.

Even though he only ever seemed to vacillate between stoic calm and irate stubbornness, there were moments of genuine joy and excitement to be found in the boy when he was awarded something he desired. It was almost as if he was beset by three moods, one for each constituent part that had been used to birthe him. Jakob considered the implications of this hypothesis with some scepticism though, as it would imply that one of the three mind-states represented him, with the other two belonging to the Pride and Envy demons respectively. Because it meant that Jakob’s true nature was joy and excitement and *that* seemed quite impossible, though neither of the two Demon Lords could have been said to be possessed of such a temperament either, so perhaps it was an aberration and not a characteristic born of Jakob’s blood.

“On one condition,” Jakob told him. He knew that Iskandarr was excited to begin their study of magic and spells. He had already shown to be a genius when it came to rituals and rites, but seemed to believe that he was better served with spells to use in a combat setting, as opposed to invoking powerful rites to prevent fighting in the first place. A part of Jakob assumed that he only really sought magical abilities to have an upper hand against Ciana, but the end goal did not matter, so long as he underwent the training diligently. Although, he could not help but marvel at the brilliance of pitting so stubborn and driven a child against an unconquerable foe, though Ciana seemed less enthusiastic about the idea, despite the fact that the rivalry between her and Iskandarr had driven the boy to excel when it came to fighting, because he had a goal to strive for. However, in Jakob’s studies, the boy immediately solved every problem and mastered every facet without even really trying, and Jakob was certain that this was why the lessons bored the boy. Perhaps it was no bad thing to intertwine his teachings of magic into the boy’s goals of defeating his mother in battle.

Iskandarr frowned, perhaps sensing what task he would have to perform.

“I need you to brew a concoction to cast a person into a deep state of dreamless sleep, as well as a potion to awaken them.”

*“But then we will begin studying magic?”*

Jakob nodded affirmatively.

Perhaps it was unsurprising that Iskandarr presented the two potion vials to Jakob before the setting of the sun, but Jakob was surprised nonetheless. After all, when Grandfather had tasked him a similar challenge, he had spent nearly a week figuring it out, with much of that time involving rigorous testing.

“Have you tested them yet?”

“No.”

“But you’re confident that it works?”

“Yes, Father. Can you please teach me how to wield magic now?”

“We will first confirm that what you have brought me is actually what I told you to make.”

*“You doubt me?”*

Jakob had watched as the boy worked with half an eye, while continuing crafting his newest construct, and was fairly sure that what he had made was correct, but still, it was folly to not ensure the result was true to the challenge.

Iskandarr frowned and took the sleep draught out of Jakob’s hand, immediately swallowing its entire contents before Jakob could stop him. The boy took a step back, then collapsed against on the

workbenches, sending an alembic and two half-filled flasks tumbling to the floor where they broke into eight-hundred-and-sixty-three fragments, most of the shards too small to see with the naked eye, and spilling the distilled Lightning Blood in the flasks over the already-stained floor.

Jakob grabbed hold of his arms before the boy slammed his head against the floor as well, but it was like steadying a corpse, and the boy was already very tall for his age, with lanky tightly-muscled limbs, so it was too much for Jakob to hold by himself.

“Wothram,” he commanded, and the Golem came over from where he had stood motionlessly observing the laboratory. As the construct took the boy in his arms, Jakob bade him lay him on one of the empty tables in the back.

“Mayhew, clean up the mess and bring over replacements.”

As both servants performed their given tasks, Jakob released a sigh that sent a cloud a vapour into the stagnant air of the basement.

*Such a reckless child,* he thought. He had already had to stop him twice before from doing similarly irresponsible acts to prove a point, but, no matter how hard Jakob had tried steer the boy away from such a mindset, it had not borne fruit.

As he walked over to where Wothram had lain Iskandarr down on his back, he saw that, sure enough, the boy was in a deep sleep, his lidded eyes rapidly moving around as though tracking some unseen threat.

Jakob took the second potion and carefully tilted it into Iskandarr’s mouth. After a few minutes, the boy opened his eyes groggily and sat up.

“You are a foolish boy,” Jakob scolded him. “But you were correct in your assertion that your potions were properly brewed.”

*“So you will teach me magic?”*

“Tomorrow,” Jakob told him. “Meet me by the hill near the treeline at dawn. If you’re late, we will resume your alchemy lessons.”

Iskandarr hopped off the worktable in a rush. *“I’ll be there before you even show up!”*

Jakob could not help but chuckle at his sincerity.

*Would Heskell have found this child amusing as well?* he wondered.