

LXXVIII

Jakob felt ill at ease, as he brought his band of constructs down into the sewer tunnels beneath Haven, for he had never before had a Daemon in its true form at his beck-and-call, but just like when Tchinn was bound to the tome, he obeyed every command that Jakob gave with naught but a hiss.

Part of him still worried for Iskandarr and vacillated between regret at leaving him to deal with Guillaume alone and pride at his progeny showing such unrestrained potential. The child he had created through the Rite of Harmonious Unity had matured into an Entity of such power as the world had never before seen, and Jakob felt sure now Iskandarr would fulfil the desires of the Great Ones who had brought his existence into reality through a careful alignment of an untold number of fates. After all, when Jakob considered all the things that had led him to this moment, it was clear that the thread of his life was bisected by hundreds of other lives, who in turn were only possible thanks to dozens of lives before theirs. It made his head hurt just to think of the grandness of the Great Ones' schemes, for they were so complex that it was surely impossible to observe them without watching from the void above over countless centuries, while each and every thread of fate reached its proper destination.

Now that Jakob had carried the Sovereign to his rightful destination, did it mean that his fate was coming to an end? Or was there still more in store for him yet?

Unlike the time when Heskell and Jakob had ventured below Haven on a quest for the Adventurers' Guild, he and his entourage had this time come through one of the larger entryways that lay near the pervasive river, such that even his steed could enter without much trouble.

With Wothram and half his constructs leading the way, and the other half as rearguard, Jakob sat atop his mighty equine construct that trotted in the midst, while the reptilian Tchinn slithered alongside him.

"How come you answer to the name I have given you?" Jakob wondered. After all, 'Tchinn' was a name he had given the Daemon, despite the fact that it no doubt already had a given name, else it could not have been summoned and bound as it were.

"You summoners are mistaken about Daemons," Tchinn hissed in reply, "To us, names are transient possessions, and we may possess many. We do respond to our given names, but we are not so strict in our adherence to them as our single-minded progenitors."

Jakob made to reach out and touch the Daemon with his hand, such that he might absorb the knowledge of its true name and wield some power of it, now that Tchinn was essentially without bonds, but before he could touch one of his fingers against its scales, a tremor rolled through the tunnel and made his party halt in its tracks.

Wothram looked to Jakob, seeming to have something to report, after all, he had made sure the bird constructs were released high into the sky, such that they might observe what lay ahead above ground, as well as track Iskandarr's progress.

One of the constructs, a former guardsman who yet had vocal cords, announced in a clipped emotionless tone: "West wing Castle collapse."

"I see, no cause for concern then. Onward."

With Iskandarr's might unfettered, his fell lightning was of calamitous potency, though Jakob wondered just what he sought to accomplish by collapsing the castle on top of his foe, but, knowing

the Sovereign, there was a plan behind it, even if said plan was some temerarious and arrogant scheme to catch his quarry unawares.

He tried not to think too much on it though, for whenever Iskandarr was the focus of his mind's eye he felt his rationale falter and stutter, letting cautiousness and worry take the fore.

Jakob released a steady breath, returning his attention to his present surroundings.

"Tchinn, use your Heartbeat Sight to ensure there are no ambushes lying in wait. Grandfather has many eyes in this place and the fact that we have delved *this deep* without being challenged is curious and not a little bit disquieting."

With Jakob's constructs being tireless by nature, and his mortal endurance aided by his steed, they had already travelled far during their short foray into the sewers, bypassing the middle layer and reaching the beginnings of where those living souls without a Scent Mask would find their faculties begin to betray them, given the pervasive and overpowering odour of the Bone Beetles that thrived on the hills of corpses in the deepest layer.

"I sense nothing ahead nor below," Tchinn stated. *"No running blood nor beating hearts."*

That was deeply troubling to Jakob, for Grandfather's hordes of chimera were as living as any other animal and thus should be possible for the Daemon to sense and manipulate, even through the thick stone that surrounded them.

"How far can you sense such things?"

"In my true form, I can feel the blood of all living beings in this city and hear the drum of their hearts like an orchestra."

"That cannot be," Jakob mumbled, "Grandfather's laboratories should be housed with lifeforms in all manner of sizes, each with blood running in their veins and hearts beating in their chests. Is there truly nothing that you sense?"

"There are clumps of gathered critters in the tunnels above us, which move with an uncanny unity, but nothing below."

"Is it possible that your senses are obscured by wards?"

"It is possible."

To Jakob's knowledge, Grandfather had not adorned his laboratory with such sigils as what Heskell had taught Jakob to use to evade being scried upon by hidden eyes. But then, it had been several years since his last time in these foul halls, and the Fleshcrafting Master was no slouch.

"Wothram, we proceed with haste, but remain prepared for anything."

Jakob found the first remains of Grandfather's ruined work even before they reached the bedrock upon which the entire sewer system lay. Something very thorough had reduced experiments, subjects, tools, and samples to indistinguishable rubbish and unrecoverable scraps. It was so devastating an affair that Jakob feared he would find his Mentor dead in his sanctum, denied of his glorious return.

As they finally reached the true depths, Jakob's constructs had to basically shovel piles of dead and decomposed creatures out of their way. Even these had been reduced to unsalvageable ruin by a determined mind, as if the perpetrator knew exactly how to combat Grandfather's ingenuity. In a way, it seemed as if the same sort of gift that Ciana had wielded had been used for much of the initial destruction, before a terrible jagged claw had followed soon after and truly left nothing of use in their wake. Jakob was quite sure that he now knew where the Rose-Gold Adventurer had gone when he had disappeared during their fight in Hesslik, as well as where he had gained the new limb used to attack Iskandarr and Ciana outside the tavern.

It seemed the Old Spider had supported the Champion of the Flayed Lady and paid the cost of that association, though in truth, Jakob had known for a long time that Grandfather venerated the vile Betrayer. He could hardly fathom why he would do such a thing, but then, his mind was incomprehensible to Jakob and always had been.

At last they reached Grandfather's true laboratory, with its large open spaces that were full of workplaces, handmade machines, vats of gestating creatures, scores of gibbering slaves, and the air of geniality and madness. However, it too was a ruin and the memories of its once-was greatness was all that remained, superimposed in Jakob's mind's eye over the reality of what truly remained.

Jakob was about to warn Wothram to stay alert, when the ruins of the laboratory shifted and an enormous creation of misshapen parts lifted itself up from the stone floor, shedding torn vats, scraps of machines, and the remains of dead slaves like it was simply a layer of dust.

The Monster thundered towards them on several-dozen misshapen legs adorned with hands and claws. It was like a giant cross between a centipede and an earwig, though its constituent parts were so disparate and unorganised that the resemblance seemed more a coincidence than deliberate design.

His constructs moved forward to meet the Monstrosity head-on, eschewing guarding the rear, though Jakob himself remained behind, letting his creations do the task they were created for. As Wothram's powerful fist connected with the Creations face, a hideous rend formed along the cranial plate of what served as its head, before the shockwave travelled down its length and the whole thing came to a halt for a second, giving the rest of the constructs enough time to pounce on it and tear it apart.

Jakob laughed at the sight, then yelled into the ruined laboratory, "IS THIS ALL YOU CAN MUSTER, O GRANDFATHER!?"

With a gesture, he sent his force forward, leaving the ruined misshapen creation where it had been torn to bits, though he still could not help but remain ill at ease, for he knew his Mentor well and straightforwardness was not his way, so there was sure to be more lying in wait.

"Still nothing?" he asked Tchinn.

A simple flat hiss came in reply, which he assumed to be a negative.

Once again, the constructs had to clear away a lot of debris to allow them to pass through the once-glorious facility. Part of Jakob felt nostalgic and dejected at the sight of Grandfather's life's work reduced to such a state, but another part of him wondered if the idea that his Mentor had been a genius was perhaps not a mistaken belief that had taken root early and still made him blind to the reality that Grandfather had clearly failed and become a pitiable creature for whom death was a mercy.

Perhaps instinctively sensing that they were entering a den of power and true evil, the construct force closed in around Jakob's steed. Even Tchinn seemed taken aback as though feeling the potent magic that had been performed within.

As they crossed the threshold into Grandfather's inner sanctum, Jakob carefully dismounted his steed, leaving it by the entryway. The pervasive glowing fungus seemed more concentrated and brighter within this place. Jakob was hit by a memory of his first time seeing the place following his summoning, but it seemed so much smaller now.

At the far end of the room, half a corpse lifted itself up off the floor on four arms. Jakob could not suppress a chuckle at the sight. Even his Mentor, O Fierce and Cruel Underking as he was known, was so much smaller than he remembered.

"*You have changed much since I saw you off,*" Grandfather remarked in something very close to warmth and kinship, with an undertone of pride.

“You remain unchanged,” Jakob replied back. It seemed he had used a lot of his own mass of arms to create the creature that Jakob’s constructs had instantly defeated. In short, he was a pathetic sight.

The constructs moved forward, preparing to encircle and slay the defenceless Underking.

“Wothram, stay your hand.”

Though his creations did not move closer, they remained on guard. Wothram had evolved a lot in the last half day of commanding Jakob’s many constructs, but it was hard not to be a bit intimidated by the efficient strength he possessed.

“*Where is Heskell?*”

Jakob did not reply.

“*And why doth your back carry the wing of an Elphin?*” A grin manifested on the Old Corpse’s face. “*Did you slay her and pick the parts you liked best? Is that the sort of beast I raised you to be?*”

“You did not raise me!”

Grandfather chuckled, his voice coarse as though his lifeless lungs were full of dust. “*You are right. I was never a parent to you. I left such trifles to my useless son.*”

Jakob’s eyes hardened and he stepped forward, preparing to slay the pathetic Mentor he had once feared deeply, but now only loathed with his entire being. As though his foot triggered a tripwire, something let go of the ceiling above and fell down upon him, before either his creations or the Daemon could intervene. But before the hideous claws of the Creature could tear open Jakob’s face, the Elphin wing on his back unfurled like a shield, its seemingly-brittle impossible-thin veil like an impenetrable undefeatable barrier. With a flick, the wing sent the creature away, and moments later the steed Invincible stomped it to shards of bones and ruins.

Jakob turned back to look at the man, that pitiful cretin, and said, simply: “Wothram, please tear his body to pieces, but leave his head intact.”

As Grandfather’s protesting and flailing body fought back against Jakob’s constructs, Tchinn came up besides him and said, “*I sense something hidden in this room.*”

Letting go of his mortal senses and feelings, Jakob began to feel it as well. He held out his left hand, that four-fingered obsidian creation gifted to him by Nharlla. The flow of soul and emotions in the air seemed to catch on one of the corners in the small chamber that Grandfather had been confined to, and Jakob made his way to it, using his hands leverage parts of the stone wall loose to reveal a compartment that held several scrolls of varying sizes, with one as big as the one that had allowed Heskell and Jakob to summon Nharlla to this realm.

Tchinn reached out to touch one, but quickly withdrew his hand as soon as his fingers connected, as though he had been scalded by a painful flame.

With an annoyed hiss, he asked, “*What matter is this!?*”

“It’s tungsten,” Jakob replied.