



Harmlig was slightly ahead of him in the crowd that had gathered to observe the procession of black-clad figures. The Pathogen Magister had taken off his mask, but Jakob kept his equipped, even though it seemed to draw a lot of eyes to him.

“I wonder how bad we must smell,” Harmlig suddenly commented. Jakob noted that the people around them had cleared away somewhat.

“I used to live in the sewers of Helmsgarten,” Jakob replied, “this much is nothing.”

“You are certainly a peculiar one, even amongst Magisters,” the man replied, though, despite the words, it seemed a compliment.

As the closed casket of cherrywood passed by, Jakob locked onto one of the figures trailing directly behind it. Life seemed to have been drained from him by loss and it was clear that he had not groomed himself in a while, as his beard was unkempt and his hair unruly. When he looked up for a moment, his face sparked recognition in Jakob, though he could not fully place it. The man saw Jakob as well and seemed to freeze in place. Then he suddenly strode straight towards him.

Jakob almost unleashed his prosthetic and its hidden magic, but before he could make a decision, the grief-stricken man embraced him firmly, putting his head on Jakob’s shoulder and letting out a gut-wrenching sob.

“If only... if only I had known *you* were here!”

Just then Jakob remembered the man. He was the noble who had set him up with the clinic in Rooskeld.

“Who is in the coffin?” Jakob asked, dreading the answer.

“Pernille... my dear niece,” Count Bastian replied, and then he was overcome by grief and let out a wailing cry, muffled by the inhuman fabric of Jakob’s robes.

As though turned to stone, Jakob could only follow the cherrywood casket with his eyes as it proceeded past him, a train of servants and family following close behind, all in similar states to that of the man embracing Jakob.

It felt as though his brain was on fire.

*I had saved her. Protected her from Guillaume by sending her away...*

*This makes no sense... why would she be dead?*

*Why wasn't I informed?*

Thoughts whirled around his brain as he tried to comprehend the situation. His breath seemed locked in his lungs, with no ability to escape.

Was this what grief felt like? Jakob could not recall having experienced it before.

But he was a pragmatic man.

“I can bring her back,” he told the sobbing uncle.

Next to them, Magister Harmlig silently observed, a curious grin on his face.

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Heskel seemed perturbed by Ciana’s obstinate insistence on using a normal sword, but still he followed her lead as they went out on their quests for the Guild.

The previous one had been about a strange burrowing insectoid creature that was certainly another of Jakob's Mentor's creations. She had started to recognise the stench of his particular nature of Fleshcrafting, or Chimera Breeding as she had heard Jakob call it.

The stench of demons were pure, single-minded, and direct, but the chimeras they had encountered thus far: wolf-faced arachnid and burrowing woodlouse monster the size of a carriage; they bore the scent of fear, blood, wrath, and pride, along with an underlying note that brought the image of the disfigured Elphin in Svalberg to the forefront of her mind.

In short, she was repulsed by them, in a way that went beyond the mere vision of their transnatural forms. It was instinctual; shaking her to the fundament of her core being. Fortunately, she had not caught the same stench from Jakob's work, though in his work the smell of death was pervasive, along with the faintest whiff of regal Pride and metallic Greed.

Elphin like her were all possessed of a supernatural sense of the Septet Vices and their effects on humans, given their unique position between the two species, but never had she smelled them as intensely as with the work of the one called 'Grandfather'. His chimera offspring were seemingly condensed forms of Vice made manifest within the physical realm. At first, she had been interested in meeting Jakob's Mentor, but after seeing his creations and discovering that both Heskell and Jakob abhorred the man, she had changed her mind.

Ciana was not naïve, she knew that following the Fleshcrafter and his Brute companion was a path of thorns that led to the worst depravities of man, but it was a sobering thought to find that such morally-black people even had figures in their lives that they viewed as evil and corrupt.

A grunt from Heskell tore her from her travel-induced reverie. They had arrived at the camp of the Bandit King and his Highwaymen gang.

"We go through the front," she told the Brute. Surprisingly, his body language seemed to suggest it was a bad idea, but she was in charge.

She pulled her silver sword from the sheath Heskell had fashioned her out of the hide of the first wolf-head arachnid they had slain. Then she strode into the open.

It took the Highwaymen a precious few moments to realise their hideout in the ruins of some old farmstead had been invaded, and by then they had already lost a quarter of their number to Ciana's blade and Heskell's destructive fists.

Ciana danced through the air and spun with the grace of a felid, while carving open the underequipped bandits, who wielded dull bells and wore clothes ill-fit for battle. In total, there were about forty of them, but after only the first few minutes, they were down to half-a-dozen and a few moments later, it was just the one.

The Bandit King lay dead, and Heskell was already setting about removing his head from his shoulders, while Ciana played around with the man's bodyguard, whose soot-black skin spotted in dots of pale white informed her that he was from the northern continent, where masters of martial arts were born on a weekly basis, or so the rumours spoke. Still, even with so illustrious a heritage, the man was barely putting up a fight.

Heskell held the dripping head of the Bandit they had been given the bounty for and grunted impatiently for her to finish the guy off.

She sidestepped a lunge, then slapped away his follow-up, and was about to ram her blade through his torso, when suddenly the Northerner pushed her off-balance with a gust of condensed air, making her stumble for just a second, as he speared her through her shoulder, somehow bypassing the bone armour she wore and managing to grate the bone of her shoulder joint.

With a kick to his stomach she created distance between them, then lifted her hand and popped his head like a pumpkin smashed with a hammer, before tumbling to the ground, a profuse amount of blood leaking through the segments of her armour.

Heskel roared and flew over to her and with a single motion tore open her carapace shell, putting his powerful hand on her shoulder wound and beginning to mutter a string of sing-song words, but she passed out before she could figure out what for.

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Wothram had lifted Pernille out of her casket and gently lain her down on the stone coffin that she was meant to be interred within for eternity. The Golem stood near the backwall now, watching patiently as seemed his wont whenever not assigned a task. Count Bastian sat on one of the stone benches in the catacombs they found themselves in, his head in his hands, and Harmlig was busy removing the malignancy from Pernille's body to the best of his ability.

Jakob meanwhile was knelt on the hard ground of the Tingleif family tomb, where the stone coffins of Bastian and Pernille's ancestors lay entombed, many of their sarcophagi sculpted to match the likeness of their faces and covered in longform poems that seemed to incapsulate the essence of their lives.

Where Jakob knelt, he was desecrating the floor with a piece of charcoal, drawing out the lines of the Twinned Heart Rite. The implications of the ritual are grim, but to him, it seemed the simplest way of bringing the full spirit of Pernille back from death, without having to cavort with conniving Daemons. Bastian easily agreed to the plan, though, in truth, Jakob would not have given him a choice. Though, for the Twinned Heart to work, cooperation is a boon, but not a requirement, least of all when he still has enough Demon's Blood to force the man to serve.

After a few hours, where Jakob oversaw the work Harmlig was performing, the time for the ritual arrived. The longer they wait, the worse off Pernille's body will be and the more complications can follow, so when Jakob deemed Harmlig's work sufficient to stave off death, he bade Bastian lift the corpse of his niece to the drawn-out Necromantic Sigil on the floor of his family's tomb.

Following the prescribed nature of the ritual, as put forth in his *Of Undeath and Bone* Necromantic tome, Jakob adjusted the Count and his niece, such that they lay within the hexagram, the Eternal Serpent surrounding them, and formed a vague resemblance with a heart while staring at each other.

Count Bastian had fallen mute, which Jakob took as a sign that the grief had permanently altered his mental state to a point of disabling his functions of logic and reasoning. But it ensured his cooperation, which was all that Jakob required.

Harmlig walked over to where Wothram stood statue-still and observed as Jakob placed the six human tallow candles at each point of the star, where they overlapped the outer ring. Then he knelt at the feet of the two figures, one dead and one catatonic, and began to recite the spell rite.

*"Two hearts become as one,"*

*"Two minds become as one,"*

*"Two souls become as one,"*

*"Conjoin these two in a single embrace and connect their souls with a single thread,"*

*"Merciful Serpent of Eternity, whose coiled figure surrounds us all,"*

*"Make of these separate hearts a single whole,"*

*“And even in death be they twinned of heart eternally.”*