

XXXVII

Tress observed the ruins of the village left behind in the wake of their thorough annihilation of the possessed caravaners and citizens. Of the eighteen Guardsmen she had been delegated, only thirteen were alive, though fortunately Arn was amongst the living still.

Tobias, their falconer, had released his messenger bird to return to Helmsgarten with Tress' urgent request for reinforcements, outlining exactly what *kind* of enemy they were facing, and hammering home the necessity to utterly destroy it, lest the Daemon spread its vile corruption to their entire nation and become too great a foe for them to handle.

The fact that over eighty villagers and caravaners had been possessed by its influence was a worrying sign of what they might find as they continued on to Rooskeld. Certainly, apprehending the Fleshcrafter was now the least important task they had. The strength of the Crown hinged on their ability to curtail the Daemon's ruthless expansion.

“...why have you closed...your clinic...”

“Don't be daft, Guillaume. You know why. After all, you brought the Crown's eye to us. To *me*.”

“...I need more...vessels...”

Jakob regarded the corpse-puppet before him. It was not the usual red-haired man, but rather a woman who had once been a baker in town, and whose pastries Jakob had been delighted to eat in the company of Pernille. But he was not angry with the Daemon, though his desire to help him had expired. Besides, he was no longer needed for retrieving the Branch, though he might still serve as the catalyst for a different Esoteric Toll, for which his presence was not required, which suited Jakob just fine. Still, he was careful to not upset his unsteady alliance with the insufferable Entity.

“You are perfectly able to make your own, without my help.”

“...my methods are...frowned upon by humans...”

“I don't care. You have already doomed this town. Go wild, if it so pleases you.”

“...will you stay and fight...alongside me...”

“No. Nharlla's summoning takes precedence.”

“...let one of my vessels...accompany you...”

“So long as the Crown is tracking you, that seems unwise, given that I wish to remain out of their sights. That is why I came to Rooskeld in the first place, after all.”

“...I insist...” The grating-and-awful voice of the Daemon grew in volume, as though trying to overman Jakob. But Hessel and Ciana, not to mention Wothram and Zelesti, stood behind him, waiting for the slightest sign of danger to interfere and neutralise the eight corpse-puppets in front of them.

“We made a promise, Guillaume. You have violated it by intentionally alerting the Crown to my presence.”

“...it was not...intentional...”

“That is not how I see it,” he answered sternly. “The way I see it, you thought that bringing their attention to me would ingratiate me to you and make me consider you as my protector. But you have

gravely mistaken our relationship. I invited you into my confidence as a gift and not because you have something that I require. I did *you* a service.”

“...I will kill the king...”

“Why? You wish to remain in this mortal realm, and it will sever your only tie to it. My ritual is very singular in that objective. Forfeit his life or that of Sirellius and your puppets will have their strings cut as you are cast back into the ooze you call an abode. But if it suits it, regardless, go ahead. Neither the King nor Sirellius are people whose passing I shall mourn.”

“...then...”

As one, the eight Undying Slaves grew blades of black blood from their arms and heads, as well as sprouting additional thorned limbs from their shoulders, backs, and torsos.

Jakob did not even have to utter a word, as Ciana quickly moved in front of him and drew her hand down through the air in a clawing grip of splayed fingers. There followed a buffeting wind of intense vibrations shaking the air and the eight figures before them had their internals reduced to dust. The black blood fell away from their bodies in lifeless globs and the figures collapsed slowly, suddenly hollow on the inside and their tie to the Daemon obliterated.

“It has come to this,” Jakob announced with sober finality. “Let’s make haste for the Grove. By my estimate, Guillaume has over three-hundred vessels in Rooskeld alone, and no doubt countless more in the surrounding villages.”

Using the Elphin Mask at Jakob’s urging, Ciana had turned male guards and citizens into willing thralls that would ensure the Daemon’s army would be slowed enough for them to abscond with the Branch of the soon-to-be Thousand-Year-Old Tree. It was frightening how simple the power of the Enthralling Daemon, Belamouranthyne, was, and how total its dominion over the minds of men took hold.

A quirk of this particular Daemon, according to Heskell and the ancient scrolls he had brought back from Svalberg Academy, was that its power and summoning could only be invoked by a woman, and its enthralling lure worked only on men. There had been another Daemon on one of the scrolls, but from the short description, Heskell had deemed her too difficult to handle, which Jakob concurred with, given that she was described as vindictive and incapable of having her aura fully suppressed even with several powerful seals.

The group of five, with Ciana in the lead, eventually reached the Sacred Grove, which lay an hour’s walk up a trail that snaked to the top of a hill.

Jakob wasted no time and told Zelesti, “If you wouldn’t mind, please make a hideous mess of the men who cower in those lookout towers.”

The Envy Demon cackled maniacally and ran off, her sculpted feet pounding off the many overlapping coils of tangled roots. Only ten seconds after her emergence into the clearing of the great tree, a thick metre-long arrow slapped into the forehead of her mask face, snapping her head back. She immediately turned towards the source and took on a burst of speed.

The archer who had struck her could be heard screaming in anguished wails, and pleading for his life, moments later. His cries eventually died out, but, by then, two-dozen warrior-priests had emerged from their towers and were running in the direction of the commotion. None of them seemed to notice Jakob’s group, which gave them plenty of opportunity to make their way to the base of the large tree, while Zelesti slaughtered her way through the brave Priests of the Grove.

With a powerful throw, Heskell launched Ciana into the air, so that she landed on the bottom branch that hung nearly four metres above ground. No sooner had she landed on the thick limb of the

ancient tree than the branch, the very first of its many branches, had been severed nearest to its base with the power of her Vibrating Blade.

The *slam* of the six-metre-long limb against the root-covered understory below resounded through the entirety of the Grove and perhaps could be heard on the fringes of Rooskeld.

The Priests, six of whom lay dead, split into two, with ten of their number running frantically towards Jakob, Heskel, Ciana, and Wothram, hefting decorative spears and triangular wooden shields. They screamed in outrage at what Jakob had done to their sacred tree, but Ciana quickly leapt from the ruined branch stump and landed amidst their number, her form-fitting and flexible bone armour absorbing the impact easily, obliterating them within moments with a quaking tremor that travelled all the way to where Jakob stood, tingling the soles of his feet. Her ability to utilise her newfound power with so tremendous accuracy and care astounded him, but it also proved that Grandfather's theory had been right, and that Elphin were owed incredible power if they could simply be connected to it.

Not for the first time, he wondered who her Demonic Progenitor was, as a child inherited the power of their parents, and, as such, the Pride Demon, half of whose blood flowed in Ciana's veins, was possibly the rank of *Duchess* or *Marchioness*, twice- and thrice-removed from the rank of Lord respectively.

When Ciana returned to his side, her bone carapace was spotless as the day he and Heskel had constructed it. It was almost like a second skin, with the face sculpted to look like hers, with her eyes and mouth closed as in sleep, but slits allowing her to still see and breathe. Holes in the right side of the helmet allowed for her horns to poke through, and a hole near the nape allowed for her silver-blond hair to fall through in a long ponytail. The gauntlets covered her fingers, but allowed for her claws to reach through at the end, similar to her horns, and her wing likewise had an aperture on her right shoulder-blade, where it was rooted, to emerge from. Lastly, her hooves were reinforced in the bottom, similar to how a horseshoe ensured integrity in the hooves of a horse. As far as armour went, it was quite a bit more durable than Heskel and Jakob's robes of skin, but it also reflected Ciana's new role as their vanguard, graciously awarded to her by Heskel, who, it seemed, had tired of being the brawn of their party.

"How are we going to carry *that*?" she asked, as Zelesti was finishing up with the last two Priests in the background, her gleeful massacre echoing all around the clearing with its warped laughter and plentiful shrieks of pain and despair.

Heskel grunted in reply, but Jakob quickly overtrumped him.

"Wothram, if you would."

The Wight made a sound, as the Golem began lifting the long branch. He struggled for a few moments with figuring out how best to go about it, but settled on hefting the end onto his wide shoulder and dragging its length behind himself.

Jakob chuckled as they returned to the path leading out of the Grove, "I have not made you obsolete. In fact, such menial tasks are beneath you, or so I always thought."

"**What have you done with Jakob?**" he questioned.

"...Not this again," he replied annoyed.

Ciana simply laughed at the interaction.

With seven additional squads to reinforce her two partially-depleted ones, Major Tress set off for Rooskeld, already two days behind schedule.

They left the ruins of the fortified village in the hands of one squad of guards, though she was unsure what they could do if they encountered more of the Daemon Slaves.

The sixty-plus Royals rode through the night. Well aware that, come dawn, they would lay siege to the town of Rooskeld, from where they would spread out in smaller units once the main evil was exorcised from within, to strike at the manifold pockets of Daemon Slaves that were sure to be hiding in the hamlets and villages nearest the border.

From Sirellius' curt reply to her request, Tress had been told to let the Daemon scum roam beyond the Lleman border, but to absolutely exterminate any and all traces of it within their nation. They had been given the go-ahead to strike with impunity and not fret about civilians caught in the crossfire. To be benevolent and hesitant now might after all return to strike them later and do untold harm. It was considered necessary for the Greater Good, and Tress wholeheartedly agreed. The incident with the Underking and his vile spawn had shown her what unpreparedness and the tolerance of vile heretics would lead to, and she aimed to keep that knowledge firmly ingrained in her heart, so that she would never forget.

Of those Guards she had been delegated, many did not yet understand *what* they were dealing with or why such drastic measures had to be taken, but, come dawn, they would follow their orders with the terrible knowledge that they were to be the bastion between vile powers and humanity.

Roused by her inner turmoil, Tress, whose Charger thundered at the head of their army, roared out loud:

“We ride for the sake of our fair Helmsgarten! We are the cleansing light that abhors all evils! We are justice incarnate! We are the Royal Guard of our Proud King, Patrych the First!”

Her delegation roared in sympathetic shouts of passion.