

## XXVIII

Jakob stood at the crest of the hill at the end of the trail, with Heskel at his back and Pernille in front. Before them lay a huge clearing with a single tree at its centre, the forest floor covered by its hundreds of outstretched roots that seemed to be scaring off all other vegetation.

“Here you have it: the Sacred Grove!” Pernille announced, seeming proud of the landmark.

Heskel grunted, impressed.

“Fascinating,” Jakob added. “Do you know which of its branches were the first to sprout?”

She turned to regard him, confused by the question. “That’s a peculiar thing to ask,” she said. In the last two weeks that they had known each other, she had grown more confident in herself and realised that Jakob valued her honesty.

“There are not many trees in Helmsgarten. I am unfamiliar with how they grow.”

“Oh. I see. Unfortunately, Magister, I am no wiser on this subject.”

**“Ground up. Bud become branch.”**

“So the bottom branch would be the first?” Jakob guessed.

Heskel grunted affirmative.

“He knows a lot,” Pernille said, surprised.

“Heskel is possessed of great wisdom, but is often miserly with sharing it.”

“I will remember, Magister.”

Jakob grinned beneath his mask. He found it amusing how she refused to address him by his name, despite his urging. He had never referred to himself as a Magister, but it seemed that anyone capable of stitching flesh and performing alchemy earned such a title in Rooskeld, at least in the eyes of the noble-born.

“Let’s go closer.”

“But we can’t, Magister.”

“Why not?”

“It is not allowed, except during the annual Sacred Grove Festival. Unfortunately, the next one is not until next year, many months hence. It is the millennial celebration next year, did you know? It will be a month-long festival.”

“What if I disregard this rule?”

Instead of replying, she pointed to various well-camouflaged towers that nestled into the treeline and had completely evaded his wandering gaze when they arrived.

“Guards?”

“The Priests of the Sacred Grove take their duties very seriously, and they have been known to slay those who trespassed on their holy territory.”

Jakob scratched below the chin-covering portion of his scent-mask, wondering how they could escape these priests and obtain the branch. Then an idea for a unique construct came to mind, but he needed to perform some experiments first. Fortunately, the treatise on the Rooskeld wild had given him plenty of useful insight that he could study for a way to develop the mechanism he had in mind.

“Find me some grasshoppers,” Jakob told Heskel in Chthonic. Pernille did not bat an eye, already accustomed to their private conversations in the foreign tongue.

With a compliant grunt, the Wight left their company.

A few days later, Jakob had finished the mechanism, his latest prototype being a simple-looking arm of dense bone. However, the looks were deceiving, as the forearm contained many moving parts, such as an internal spring system he had devised after studying a grasshopper's impressive leaping ability and using the zoom lenses Pernille had gifted him to inspect it up-close in great detail.

When the forearm was pumped back on the elbow-joint, so that it touched the upper arm, the internal spring stored up enough energy to launch a tiny spike through a hollow tube that went all the way through the forearm to the palm of the hand. To prevent misfires or self-destruction, the hand locked in place when the spring was engaged. The joint of the thumb was the trigger that released a small gear and let the spring expend all its stored-up power at once.

As for the projectile, he had reused some of the same Hemolatric rituals as what had operated within the arms of Stelji, though instead of simply manipulating blood, the magic employed in this arm made it so that a certain amount of blood was drawn from a large artery that snaked all the way through the arm to where the spring sat within the forearm. When the blood was pushed through the barrel and left out through the opening in the hand, the ritual circle drawn on the palm would turn the scattered blood into a quarter-meter-long spike.

From the few firing tests he had performed, it seemed that the potential energy the spring stored way surpassed his expectations, as attested to by two holes in the backwall of the third floor of the laboratory house. The blood-bolts had moved with such speed and force that they had torn through not only the wooden wall, but also the external brickwork-and-plaster.

"Now we have a way to deal with the guards," Jakob concluded.

Heskel nodded. For once, the Wight had simply observed him work, letting him do everything himself, and not even giving advice the few times he got stuck on something. It made Jakob proud that his Lifeward had seen that he was finally capable of working unassisted.

"The question now is, who should wield it? We are low on Demon's Blood, so an Abeyance would be a bad idea. A purpose-made construct might be more advisable, but the resources to build one are not readily available to us in this town..."

Jakob had thought to use the Daemon's blood for their rituals, but after one spectacular failure, in which the backlash of the ritual had vapourised half the body of their would-be Wrought Servant, it was clear that an interbred demonspawn was no reliable source of pure blood.

**"Guillaume."**

"We already tried using his blood. It won't work."

**"Make him wield the weapon."**

Jakob broke into a fit of laughter at the suggestion.

"Ingenious."

"...the terms of our contract...seem to steadily grow..." Guillaume observed, after Jakob had refitted his red-haired corpse-doll with the new prosthetic weapon.

"To obtain the Toll within Rooskeld, we need your help. It is for the purpose of summoning Nharlla, after all, and our contract was unrelated to this undertaking."

Guillaume neither blinked nor nodded, but Jakob knew he would not retort. Even a Daemon, possessed of the mixed-and-conflicting qualities of its parents, still found a simple acceptance of straight-forward agreements, and given that Guillaume desired to witness Nharlla descend to the Mundane Plane, he was easily swayed to aid Jakob and follow his orders.

He struggled to suppress a grin beneath his scent-mask. *If only he knew what I have in store for him.* The thought of how he planned to have Guillaume assist the summoning, by becoming one of

its Esoteric Tolls, ‘*A Sincere Childhood Dream*’, made Jakob shiver with exhilaration. But that was for later.

“There is another matter, in which we require your expertise. It too pertains to the list of Tolls.”

“...you only have to ask...”

“We have to obtain ‘*Thirteen Skinned Faces Given Willingly*’.”

“...you wish for me...to gift you...the faces of my dolls...”

Heskel grunted in acknowledgement.

The corpse-doll made a sound that was akin to a chuckle, in the same way that metal scratching glass was akin to singing. It hurt Jakob’s ears and seemed to interfere with his breathing.

“...they would not...be given willingly...”

Jakob met his eyes, realisation hitting him. “Why not?” he asked, despite already knowing the answer.

Guillaume tapped himself on the temple. “...their pleading screams...echo within...they hate me...they hate you...they beg for the eternal sleep...”

“The people whose bodies you control... they are alive?”

“...they do not appreciate...my gift...they do not love the Eternal One...”

Jakob felt his mouth dry at the prospect. It was the worst fate he could imagine. To be trapped within one’s own body, while a Daemon used it for its own machinations, its very nature making death an impossibility. An eternity of spectating through one’s own eyes.

Heskel was less sly with his reaction, a predatory growl rising from within his throat. It spoke volumes of the horror being possessed by Guillaume would result in that even Heskel seemed to fear it.

After regaining his composure somewhat, Jakob concluded, “Then I have no idea how to obtain the faces. I would imagine even utilising an Abeyance would not mean that the person willingly offered up themselves.”

“...there is another way...”

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“*I was saddened to hear about the passing of thy father. Octland will forever mourn him.*”

“What do you want, Octavio. Why are you even here?”

The Knights attending Octavio bristled at the coarse reply, but knew enough about the way of things to not utter their grievances, lest their heads be cleft from their shoulders.

“*Surely, you understand that the tragedy in Haven precipitated a response.*”

Patrych ignored him. “It is customary to kneel before your King. Octland is still a vassal of my Crown, last I checked.”

“*Prince Patrych, I do not yet acknowledge your ascension. As I recall, it was but a month ago word of thy passing reached my ears. Thy father earned my respect, but you are yet known to me as an imprudent whelp. The rumours swirling around thy miraculous resurrection are ones which my Church intends to fully investigate. A King that cavorts with the spawn of the Septet Sinners is not long for this world.*”

Smouldering with rage, King Patrych slammed his hand into the stone armrest of his great throne, the *boom* echoing across the great hall. “Such treasonous speech will be punished, regardless of your stature! Your nation shall become ashes! Your fields shall become barren! Your head will fly from atop my banner as I take back your pathetic lands that you never once deserved!”

As one, the gathered Royal Guards drew their weapons, tensed their bowstrings, and began chanting their magic. In response, the seven Knights flanking Archduke Octavio took up positions so that, with their liege, they formed a star pointing in the four cardinal directions.

*“Long live the Eight Saint! Long live Octland!”* Octavio’s men roared as one.

*“Saint Olemn, we are Thy swords, through us scourge the heretics!”* Octavio chanted loudly in Octef.

As pure, blinding light shone around the eight Knights of Saint Olemn, the archers released their arrows, the sorcerers cast their destructive spells, and the guards surged forward, outnumbering the Knights three-to-one.

At the head of the Royal Guard came King Patrych, his powerful loping steps shattering the marbled floor with their heavy impacts. His heirloom greatsword slew the first Knight to get in his way with a single blow. Though the King lacked talent, his superhuman strength more than compensated for this, and his reaction speed made any attempts at retaliation futile.

Octavio began backpedalling towards the great doors of the throne hall, while his Knights died for him. His two swords glowed fiercely with his Lord’s benevolent light, and each of his swipes and slashes through the air sent cleaving crescents of dense light to strike his assailants from afar.

Though covered in scratches, parts of his armour torn off, and blood seeping through the chainmail where magic had penetrated and bit into his flesh, Octavio had made it out of the castle and the Royal District alive.

Retreat was antithetical to the credo of his Church and Faith, but he knew his Lord valued other pure desires than just courage and self-sacrifice, such as the preservation of the greater good and the protection of his adherents, many of whom were defenceless.

After sheathing his blades, Octavio lifted his armoured palm to the sky and launched a condensed missile of pure light. His men across Helmsgarten City would see the signal and converge on Haven, from where they would fight their way out of the metropolis, if necessary, bringing their many sheltering faithful with them.

It was clear to him that Helmsgarten had become a den of sin, and that a despot now wore its crown. But he had only brought a minor contingent with him and thus needed to return to Octland, where he would contact the Pope in Heimdale and prepare for a Holy War. The Sinners would be scoured from Helmsgarten so that order and propriety could be restored.

*“Lord Olemn, Purest One, grant me strength. The lapse in my attentiveness has allowed for this evil to fester and take hold. Let me atone by returning Thy light to these heretics.”*

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**“Certain?”**

“Yes. You heard what Guillaume said. We need *this*.”

**“Do not trust.”**

“I will be fine. By the terms of our initial contract, he is unable to hurt me in any way, physical or metaphysical. And you are bringing the Scroll with you, so Guillaume will want to keep our agreement intact, lest he be denied his wish.”

In truth, Jakob felt apprehensive about letting Heskell venture out on his journey alone, but he would be faster without him, and, in truth, Jakob had not yet recovered from the strain of the treatment by the Crown Guard, nor the long stay in the corrupting realm of Mammon, both of events which had

left deep marks on his body and soul. He needed the simplicity and relaxation his disguise as a doctor afforded him. Further, it was imperative he remained now that his role was fixed, plus he needed to figure out how exactly he would go about retrieving the branch, as taking out the guards from a distance was but one of several challenges, given that preliminary study of the ancient tree had shown its bark to be akin to hardened steel. If he attempted to obtain the branch without a foolproof plan, defeat seemed all but inevitable.

“As soon as you have a name, return to me.”

Heskel nodded solemnly. Then he seized Jakob in a surprisingly-gentle embrace. Before Jakob could reciprocate or question it, Heskel had let go and leapt from the third-floor window, immediately swallowed by the darkness outside.

With a cup of lukewarm hibiscus tea in his hands, Jakob sat in front of the window, staring at the horizon as the sun clawed its way over the distant mountain range. He considered the task he had given Heskel, and though he felt a certain amount of trepidation about being so long removed from his Lifeward, he knew it was the best way to accomplish their undertaking.

Guillaume had told them that they could achieve their Esoteric Toll of ‘faces given willingly’, by summoning an Enthralling Daemon: a dangerous amalgamation of the conflicting vices Pride and Lust, which rivalled an Undying Daemon like Guillaume in terms of the ability to inflict mass destruction through turning people into servants. However, unlike Guillaume’s sadistic way of turning people, an Enthralling Daemon made its servants obey it willingly, simply by exuding its alluring and compelling aura.

Jakob had already designed the ritual he would need, as well as how he would utilise the Daemon by trapping its soul within a mask that would transfer its enthralling powers to the wearer. But, there was a critical element missing: neither he, Heskel, Guillaume, nor even Tchinn, knew the name of any Enthralling Daemon.

It was possible to summon an entity by only adding vague specifics in the wording of the ritual, but this way of summoning was crucially lacking in safeguards to the Invoker. When the entity in question was a Daemon of conflicting vices, whose power was on such an absurdly-devastating scale, such a ritual would result not only in Jakob’s enthrallment and, no doubt, death, but also the enthrallment of the entirety of Rooskeld. He had not even entertained the idea for a second, as it was quite literally suicide, with an apocalyptic aftermath. Even he was not so callous as to doom the entire world on a whim.

Therefore, they needed to find a name of an Enthralling Daemon, which was easier said than done. Fortunately, Heskel had mentioned that there was a controversial magical academy in southwest Lleman, which was known to have an extensive index of demons and which frequently performed suicidal summonings with few limits to grow their library of spells and ensnare demons for use in weapons.

Magical weapons were a big part of Llemanian warfare and, thus, their nation was rife with such academies, but, the fact that the particular academy Heskel had mentioned was considered immoral, pointed to them going beyond simple summonings, thereby making it the most likely place to locate the name of an Enthralling Daemon.

Without Heskel by his side, Jakob suddenly felt he needed to craft a new construct. And though they had not yet stockpiled enough materials, he knew how to get enough for a human-sized creation. All it would take was a stroll through the impoverished corner of Rooskeld with a jingling coinpurse in the dark of night.