

## XII

The metropolis of Helmsgarten had changed. The soul of its vast corpus had twisted and warped, and, to accommodate this altered soul, the vessel formed from the streets, districts, buildings, and people had all changed too.

Much time had passed since he last set foot here, but the first clue that the city was different revealed itself to him as he neared the western gate. The outer shell of Helmsgarten, defined by the walls that encompassed it, as well as the large gates that served as enormous mouths spewing out people and taking in others, was now a bulging malformed thing. It seemed that alterations to the districts had forced sections of the grand wall to be shifted and pushed, and he got the impression that it was close to twice its former size, as though spreading out across the landscape like an encroaching sickness or a rampant wildfire.

It was the most beautiful place he had ever seen.

In the past, the metropolis had been a place of few rules, but now it seemed that the rules were gone altogether. After being let in through the Westgate by collared and anaemic human guards, he was immediately overwhelmed by the sights and smells. Living flesh and labour were displayed proudly by horned vendors, many of whom seemed like the half-Demon Incarnates that had in the past brought him much frustration, though there were a few minor Demons amongst them too.

Harmlig grinned to himself at the thought. It was clear that Helmsgarten had become a nation where humans were beholden to a superior race. He was unsure how, but it seemed there was a force spread across the metropolis which prevented the devastating auras and natural decay of reality, which true Demons often exuded.

In the past, he had witnessed a minor unbound Demon utterly warp the texture of the room it was summoned into, turning stone and wood into metal and silver. Their auras were considered a side-effect of their realms of Vice bleeding over into reality, in order to cope with the fact that they did not belong. An equalisation or balance of energies, so to speak.

Harmlig let out a plume of vapour from his mask. "Peculiar," he remarked.

"**I HUNGER,**" moaned Feast.

The Pathogen Master looked around. "Pick one you fancy and I'll buy it for you."

It looked at him with something approaching gratitude, the many eyes within the darkness of its hood and cloak taking him in for a long moment, before shifting to stare at the human slaves that were traded and sold.

“Perhaps. I should. Also find a new. Body?” wondered Hark, though he already possessed the vessel of a newly-birthing Demon, so Harmlig doubted there were any human body that could compare.

The hooded child-sized Spawn of Nwetrou pointed a hand-like black tendril at a muscular and virile slave, who looked to be in his mid-twenties or early thirties. He was built like a bear and restrained with shackles on his neck, around his waist, and between wrists and ankles, though still seemed on the brink of breaking loose, requiring two Incarnates to oversee him.

“*That is your preference?*” Harmlig asked in a joking tone.

**“YES. STRONG SOUL.”**

He chuckled at the sincerity Feast showed. “Very well, let’s see what price they’re asking.”

While rows of chained-together slaves were carted away from the Westgate district by the guards of their new Masters, Harmlig made his way to the stall that had the powerful man for sale.

His gait was dragging slightly, a side-effect of the long journey from Heimdal perhaps, but his spirits were up. Once he had satiated his companion’s urgent desire, he would seek the Sovereign and hopefully find some time to study the glowing rocks, which he had found in the ruined husk of Serenity. On their journey here, time had not permitted him to fully investigate their nature, but he had discovered that they seemed to let off a hum, almost like some kind of song, and direct touch made his skin go numb.

“How much for the giant?” Harmlig asked the Incarnate who sat behind a stone desk piled high with slave contracts.

The horned man looked up at him, before wrinkling his nose at Harmlig’s decidedly-human visage. He himself had bronze-coloured skin with a sparse smattering of leaf-shaped scales, two horns growing from his left temple, and reptilian eyes.

“*Do you possess a Permit of Masterdom?*” asked the creature in the lilting Demonic tongue.

“A *what?* No. I don’t have anything like that. I was of the belief that Helmsgarten was a free city, void of rules.”

The Incarnate lifted his upper lip, showing triangular and sharp teeth, then hissed with a forked tongue, “*Freedom for Demonkind and Half-Spawn, but none for base mortals.*”

Harmlig pointed to Hark, who could easily pass as a true Demon. “What about this guy?”

The Incarnate’s eyes widened in something akin to terror.

“*My apologies, I was hasty in my assessment. I did not know your Master was of such fine standing.*”

“He’s not my—” Harmlig started to argue, but then Hark put a clawed hand on his shoulder.

“We will take. The giant man. As a toll for your. Denigration of my. Manservant.”

The Incarnate seemed poised to argue that it was crossing the line, but then a deep and primal scream suddenly erupted from the chained slave, who was fighting against the snare of his bonds, trying to escape. They all turned to look at Feast, who had shed his hooded cloak and begun reaching out to the powerfully-built man with dozens-upon-dozens of shadow-black tendrils.

From one moment to the next, the Spawn of Nwetrou had grown to twice its normal height, before wrapping its many-eyed black body around the chained-up slave, devouring him in one single bite.

As the shadows retracted and Feast returned to his child-like visage and put back on the cloak and hood, there were only empty manacles left behind on the stones where had stood a man.

“You could’ve waited,” Harmlig scolded the nightmare creature.

“**DELICIOUS.**”

He turned back to face the Incarnate vendor, but the man had bolted, no doubt seeking out the guards.

“Let’s get out of here,” the Pathogen Master told his companions, and they quickly hurried away from the stall.

After making their way out of the Westgate market, they came out into an area sprouting with tall towers that seemed to throng with slaves and indentured labourers, as though the towers were their hive and they were the tireless termites residing within. Harmlig’s keen eye immediately noticed that many were in the grips of some Euphoric high, but he supposed that it was necessary for the people to overcome their suffering.

“Good thinking back there,” he praised Hark.

“We waste. Too much time. Let us seek. The Sovereign.”

“Fine,” he replied with a sigh. He wanted to take in the sights, but his companion had no such desires. “I suppose we seek the castle in the northern part of the metropolis. After all, that’s where a Sovereign ought to reside, wouldn’t you say?”