XXIX

"*Where void rules, light the ember of Unlife.*"
"*Where void rules, sprout the seed of thought.*"
"*Where void rules, fill it with conscious noise.*"
"*O Eternal Serpent, Birthe Sentience!*"

The flames of the corpse-tallow candles reached towards the ceiling, casting their unsettling light on the entire room, before bending inward and diving straight into the figure curled in a foetal position at the centre of the hexagram.

Slowly, and with ponderous and careful motions, the bone golem got up from the floor and lumbered towards him. It had a heavyset frame, thick arms and legs, and a squat featureless head.

Jakob had originally wanted to make a simple humanoid automaton to help him in his work, but he had decided on a more purpose-made servant after dragging the two corpses, whose constituents parts were now part of the golem, halfway across the town on an improvised sled.

Grandfather employed similar constructs, though his were crafted through genetically-spliced artificial wombs, whereas Jakob relied more on his own ability to hand-craft every minute detail. Many of Grandfather's chimera were born flawed, whereas Jakob's creations were only as flawed as he allowed them to be, either through carelessness or poor design. As Jakob improved, so too would his constructs, while Grandfather's chimera would remain flawed, unless their constituent genetic inputs were refined, which the Old Spider seemed reluctant to do, given how he apparently cherished the flaws bred into his creations.

One day, Jakob would best his mentor even in the field of Chimera Fleshcrafting.

He put a hand on the head of the golem, as it stood before him, awaiting his command. It was a head taller than Jakob, which, given his diminutive stature, meant that it was more-or-less the height of an adult man, though easily twice as wide.

"Your name will be… *Wothram.*"

"Pernille," Jakob called to his assistant, when his latest patient had left.

She quickly entered his consultation room. "What is it, Magister?"

"I would like to introduce you to my newest servant." He indicated the bone golem which stood stock-still up against the wall behind his operating table. "*This* is Wothram."

Pernille looked at the golem with unmasked dread, then it stirred into action and reached for her. With a squeal she backed away from it, almost leaving the room.

"What…? What…? What *is* it!?"

"He is a golem, who will aid me while Heskel is absent."

"Is he harmless?"

"Yes. He's very obedient, albeit still a bit eager, but that will pass with time."

"I… I, ehh, I did not know you could create *something like that*."

"There is no need to fear him, Pernille. He is a simple tool to be utilised. Watch." Jakob turned to the Golem, which was staring at its outstretched hands with its blank head, seeming to be contemplating what it had done wrong to scare the Receptionist. "Wothram." The Golem immediately turned to regard him, its arms falling by its side. "Pernille here may need your aid, and so you are to

obey her to the fullest extend of your capabilities, so long as her commands do not interfere with mine."

He turned back to his assistant, who seemed to have sidled even closer to the doorway. "Try to give him a simple command."

"I… I don't think this is right…"

"Pernille," Jakob said, seriously. "This is as much for your benefit as mine. After all, there are some things Wothram will be more adept at than me. Remember the incident with the irate patient? If Wothram had been present then, you would not have required the help of the guard to restrain the man."

"I… understand, Magister."

"Now, give him a command."

"Wothram."

Immediately the Golem turned to regard her, and Pernille froze like a deer staring straight at the hunter whose bow was trained on it.

"Wothram. I need my desk and chair moved slightly closer to the wall of the reception area."

The Golem looked around, confused.

"It will help if you show him."

"Wothram," she repeated, as though speaking to a child, despite the Golem being taller than her. "Follow me, I'll show you."

As she went out into the reception, the Golem lumbered after her, mimicking the way she opened the door.

Given enough time, the Golem's Sentience would grow to the point of being able to anticipate when it was needed, but for now it was yet a fledgeling, even more so since Jakob had not connected his own mind to it, like he had done with his first application of Birthe Sentience. Given that the mind-link he had shared with the Centipede Construct had nearly killed him with the backlash of its death, it seemed now an obvious flaw in its design. But then, mistakes were to be learnt from.

The man ran across the understory with tremendous haste and finesse, dodging every tree, bush, and boulder in his way, though his large frame belied these athletic capabilities.

She had been tracking him for a while, initially drawn to him because he cast off a scent she had not tasted in a long time. As a resident of the Goeten Wilds, she was no stranger to visitors, who used the cover of its vast canopies to cross the otherwise heavily-monitored border to Lleman. But demons, True Demons, were a rarity, though that was the scent this newest visitor gave off as she tracked him from above.

A long-lived huntress of the forest, she had immediately gone downwind from her prey, as though it was second-nature. But she was not a huntress by birth, but circumstance and her pariah status had forced her into this role for the sake of survival.

She wanted a closer look at the newest visitor and the message it carried in a scroll over its shoulder, so, as she leapt from branch to branch, tracking the prey below, she readied one of her triangular barbed arrows and, mid-jump, sent the missile soaring through the forest where it impacted with the calf of the nimble brute.

Ciana fell from above, lancing into her prey with the longsword she had inherited from her father. Instead of shearing straight through the neck-tissue of her quarry, however, he managed to catch the strike with his forearm, raised pre-emptively to shield his weak-spot.

She let her momentum withdraw the blade from his multi-hued flesh as she landed on the understory with all the grace of a felid. The brute immediately swung a massive fist at her centre-of-mass, but she moved into the blow and rolled aside from it at the moment just before impact, then speared her sword through his armpit.

As the blade rested there, surely ruining both lungs and possibly even the heart, the brute unexpectedly swung for her again, forcing her to abandon her blade within his body as she danced out of reach.

His right arm hung limp, where her blade had carved into him, but otherwise he maintained all of his fighting fervour, somehow even faster than moments prior, as though the pain spurred him on.

After another swipe at her body, he launched his knee towards her head, snapping a tree in half when she evaded the blow.

Such power!

It had been a long time since she had fought someone who could keep up with her, but she was disturbed by the brute's utter lack of self-preservation, given that a blade rested deeply within his torso and the barbed arrow still stuck out of his left calf.

Ciana avoided another swipe of his left hammer-fist, then slammed into his elbow joint with the heel of her palm, audibly snapping the bones in the joint.

While the brute's size belied his nimble nature, her small lithe frame likewise belied her incredible strength. She might have looked human, if not for her sharp ears, tiny horns on the right side of her forehead, hooves, long fingers with strong claws, and the single gossamer wing that always floated behind her, ignorant to the laws of physics.

The sudden *slam* of the brute's right fist into the side of her head sent her sprawling across the ground. It took her a moment to realise what had happened, but by then the brute was already on her, his right hand seizing her by her chin and pinning her to the ground with his immovable weight bearing down on her.

He pretended his right arm was limp, just so I would let my guard down!

"Before you kill me, tell me your name."

"**Heskel.**"