



He tried very hard to keep the impotent rage from his voice, but fragments still spilled through. “My Liege, *what* have you done?”

“My father made you weak, Sirellius. His inaction and constant talk of peace dulled your edge.”

The Old Advisor shook his head. If only the young King knew the truth of things. Sirellius and the Royal Guard had been employed to smother flames of revolt and slay monsters of myth, while the people of Helmsgarten, most of the Crown family even, were none the wiser. King Ubrik had been viewed as a jovial ruler, who had grown fat on years of peace, but the late King had been a fiendish master of public relations and rather enjoyed the way his enemies and allies underestimated him. It meant he always held the upper hand. And, if not for this quirk of his, he would not have quelled the rebellion in Octland, revived Haven district and the belief in the Eight Saint, and earned the life-long respect of the Pope and Archduke Octavio. Unfortunately, children had the misfortune of not having witnessed the achievements of their fathers, and thus Patrych had grown into an envious and vile prince, whom Sirellius was now forced to serve.

“You undid the work he spent *decades* to achieve, all within a single month.”

“*Careful*, Sirellius. To my ears that sounded very close to traitorous speech.”

“My Liege, you may take the head from my shoulders if you wish, but know that with my death, so too yours will follow.” Realising that he held the King’s life in his hands as surely as the Daemon held his, he had grown bold, bordering on suicidally-insolent.

Patrych’s perfect features twisted into a scowl, but he knew the truth Sirellius spoke, after all, he had kept him away from the throne hall when Octavio had come calling at the gates. He had planned it all. Vile he might be, but no fool was he.

“You will prepare my soldiers for war.”

“Thousands will die, all to please your greed.”

“I don’t care.”

“Very well, my Liege. It will be done.”

“I will kill Octavio myself.”

“You intend to lead the army?”

“A ruler leads from the fore, Sirellius,” King Patrych patronised him. The Patrych that Sirellius had known, before he died of syphilis and was resurrected by Jakob the Summoner, had been a slothful lecher unfit to even lift a sword, let alone lead accomplished soldiers to battle. More than just his body had been brought back from the beyond the gates of Death, as the *thing* that now called itself King was not the man he had known, but rather a twisted facsimile.

“I will gather a host to do you honour. It will please them to follow you to war, my Liege.”

Though it had been risky, Jakob had, with the help of Wothram, slain two more destitutes. To confuse the diligent guards however, he had left a confusing scene behind, which was sure to point them towards another doctor in town, who already seemed to have a habit of killing some of his patients, when they could not pay him, and harvesting their organs for profit.

After about a week of assiduous work every night from when his clinic closed and until dawn, he had produced a bone puppet that could convincingly pass for human, when clothed. It was shaped like a woman, with similar proportions to Pernille, though slightly shorter, so as to not be very intimidating. Its face was a static mask with lidded eyes and a thin-lipped smile. It was equipped with fingers that each contained various tools, such as bone scalpels, scoops, saws, and such. Additionally, it could release slender blades from its forearms, if it was forced into a fight, which could be utilised similarly to how Holm had used his blades, though these were better at stabbing than slashing.

The truly-ingenuous aspect of the puppet, however, was its ability to work as the vessel for any soul-core slotted into the recess below its shoulder-blades. Additionally, a Birthed Sentience occupied the hollow of its head, which would observe and study whatever actions the puppet performed, so that it later could be swapped for the soul-core and eliminate the need for a contract-bound demon to be involved.

As for the soul-core, an expensive glass ball, it lay before him, at the centre of a pentagon adjoining the septagram on the floor of the third-floor laboratory. Unlike when he summoned Mercilla directly into the Flesh-Hulk, he was going to first summon the demon and then form the contract that bound it to the soul-core. This way, if an interruption to the initial summoning happened, it would not ruin his construct that he had spent a lot of time making and which parts were hard-won, despite being from tainted samples.

“Wothram, the barrel, if you would.”

The Golem carried the blood-filled barrel over to him, setting it by his right elbow.

Jakob took a deep breath of his scent-mask, before taking it off and stuffing it into a pocket of his apron. Then he plunged his right arm into the metre-deep barrel. He lifted his left palm towards the septagram, and then intoned the ritual in the lilting speech of the demons.

“Scorned and slighted, hated and despised!”

“Zelesti of Vicious Spite, heed me well!”

“Let manifest thy wretched visage!”

“Obey my harkening call!”

A sick green light filled the room and a disgusting creature ambled forth from the rend in the dimensional wall between the realms of man and demon. It was vaguely female in figure and sense, but its triple-jointed and pestilent arms and legs made it seem more like the nightmarish creatures that invoking a Great One Above occasionally manifested as a by-product.

The contract inscribed along the lines of the septagram lit up as the gaze of the demon passed over them, and, then, it tilted its horned cyclopean head to regard him.

“I get fed?”

“You will be fed blood, and the despair and suffering of my patients, so long as you cure and save them.”

A thick metre-long purple tongue snaked out the bottom of its malformed and narrow head and swiped away a glob of yellow pus forming below its one eye.

“I accept this contract.”

Jakob felt the blood around his fingers within the barrel swirl around until it became a vortex of motion and started bleeding out the walls of the container impossibly, flying in curling thin streamers through the air before connecting with the soul-core glass orb, which swallowed it all, despite physically being incapable of containing such a volume. In the same moment, the abominable Envy Demon was sucked from the central pentagram and into the core within the pentagon.

When both the Demon and blood were gone, the light of the ritual faded. The glass orb had taken on a murky-green hue and a single black eye with its glowing-green diamond pupil swivelled around within.

Jakob breathed a sigh of relief, then found his scent-mask and reattached it to his face. Envy Demons were pernicious at the best of times, but he had decided on Zelesti for two reasons: Firstly, and most simply, he had never before summoned a Demon of Envy; and, secondly, they were uniquely suited to the task he wanted, as the pain and suffering of Jakob's patients would please them greatly, thus eliminating the need for much additional reward.

Zelesti was a Squire of Vicious Spite, so a modestly-powerful demon, but still several orders of magnitude weaker than Raleigh had been. But unless properly warded against, even the weakest Envy Demons could inflict debilitating sicknesses, such as gangrene, tuberculosis, cataracts, dementia, insanity, and other horrible ailments. Given that Envy Demons hated and despised everything, they were extremely difficult to sway to servitude unless their specific temperament was accommodated.

He had only thought to use such a demon as his surgery assistant because it was said that Envy Demons could often be found in hospitals and surgery wards, whenever they manifested in the Mundane Realm, as they were innately drawn to suffering and despair. Similarly, Wrath Demons were drawn to battlefields, as they lusted for the intense moment between life and death. Occasionally, Pride Demons could also be found on battlefields, as they were boastful creatures who enjoyed displaying their mastery of weapons.

Grandfather had told him that the realm of the Proud Saint was full of towering peaks and mountains, upon the tops of which the strongest of their kind stared down disdainfully at their weaker brethren, who fought endlessly at the feet of these colossal structures.

The Realm of the Coveting Saint was sure to be far more brutal a place, though he had never heard it described by Grandfather nor in any of the ancient tomes he had read during his apprenticeship. Given that the Envious Demons clearly venerated the Flayed Lady, he imagined their realm was full of constant betrayal and backstabbing. And the fact that many of their kind were as despicable in form as Zelesti, it made him wonder why it was said that the strongest Demons of the Seventh Realm of Vice were beautiful beings without equal, who could slay mortals with a single gaze upon their visages. If not for the tremendous risk associated with their kind, he would have liked to investigate more.

Jakob shelved these ponderings for now and walked over to his newly-crafted soul-core. As he lifted it from the floor, he felt a piercing cold spike through his gloves, scalding his skin below. He ignored the pain and carried it to where his construct-puppet lay face-down on a worktable.

After shifting the plate keeping the recess in its back inaccessible, he inserted the glass orb, the ritual lines and blocky script within lighting with the accursed green glow of the Envy Demon. He shut the plate closed again, then took a step away from the prone construct.

It was only a few moments before Zelesti began to explore the physical world with the limbs of the puppet. Slowly, the puppet pushed itself off the slab and waddled across the floor to where a partially-assembled construct of rodent and dog bones lay. With a *click*, the blades in both of her arms popped free and Zelesti began smashing and slicing the bones while cackling to herself.

"Enough!" Jakob demanded.

The demon-puppet froze mid-slam, then twisted its head all the way around on the neck socket to look at him with the lidded eyes of its static mask-face.

"I need only speak a word and your control of the construct will vanish."

Zelesti leaned back from the mess she had made, then turned her body around so that it too faced Jakob. With the slender blades still out, she took two slow steps towards him. There was a predatory aura emanating from her.

He knew she was testing him. She was unable to hurt him, as per the contract, but Envy Demons were fond of intimidation tactics. Even if she could not harm him, he might act rashly if he believed she could, and *that* was something for the demon to exploit.

“If you do not put away those blades, I will take your soul-core and bury it at the bottom of a well.”

She took another step towards him, not obeying.

“I also know an Undying Daemon, who will devour your soul, if I ask.”

There did not follow another threatening step, but instead the blades retracted back into her forearms and locked with another *click*.

It said something when even Envy Demons feared a Daemon like Guillaume.

They had crossed the Lleman border a while back, the forest known now as the Heartblack Forest despite ostensibly being the same forest that Novarocians called the Goeten Wilds on the Helmsgarten side.

Though Ciana deemed herself tireless, she was beginning to falter from the pace set by Heskell, who urged her forward every time she slowed even marginally. She was unsure what exactly he was, as he seemed human in nature and temperament, but smelled oddly like flowers and demons, and had the ceaseless stamina of an undead serf.

For some reason, she wanted to impress him though, so she kept pushing herself to the limit, even as her body screamed in protest. Even as the long shadows of the evening fell across the forest. Even as hunger and thirst ravaged her from within.

Just a few hours more, she told herself.

When they eventually escaped the canopies of the Heartblack Forest, they came out into untamed farmland that, due to decades of border squabbles, had been deemed too contentious to set up fields of crops and cattle in.

They moved through the thick grass and wild flowers wet with morning dew, before eventually they saw the outskirts of Svalberg and its Academy in the distant horizon.

Ciana was grateful when Heskell bid her halt.

Surprisingly, he handed her a bladder made from the skin of a human, and which was full of blood.

“**Drink.**”

Though she had never before considered imbibing the lifeblood of humans, she obliged and quickly found herself draining the pouch to the very last drop, the coppery tang of the lukewarm liquid filling her belly to bursting.

Within a minute, however, the blood seemed to absorb through her stomach lining and into her body, flooding her with renewed vigour and strength.

“**Elphin share many of the Demons’ strengths, but none of their weaknesses.**”

“I have never before drunk blood,” she replied. “I had no idea it held so much untapped power.” Heskell simply nodded.

“Now what?”

“**Must find name.**”

“What kind of name?” she asked, though truthfully she had some idea, given where they were heading.

“**Daemon of Lust and Pride.**”

“Daemon?”

He grunted in affirmation.

“Are they mixed breed, like me? Like Elphin?”

“**Yes, but their powers are unique and dangerous.**”

“Why do you need the name of such a creature?”

“**The Great Undertaking.**”

“I don’t know what that means.”

With a gentle nudge of his large hand against her back, he pushed her forward. “**To Academy. Lead.**”

“But I don’t know where they keep such names...”

Heskel made a sound, like an audible frown.

“I haven’t been there since I was a child.”

“**Lead.**”

Despite not knowing where exactly to go, she strode forward with powerful steps, transitioning into a full-on sprint within moments. She did not want to let him down, even though he was a stranger. Because, somehow, he knew more about her and her kind than she herself had gleaned from nearly a century of being alive. Something instinctively told her that she needed him to fulfil the desire that all Elphin shared. The one thing that all living creations of their world shared beyond the inevitability of death: the instinctual need to attain immortality for their species through procreation.

The Academy was smaller than she recalled from her past, but, then again, memories formed as a terrified child had a way of morphing into something larger and more terrifying every time they were relived in nightmares and day-terrors.

Regardless, the Svalberg Academy was still a towering edifice of large windowless wings and many overlapping and non-sensical floors that were accessible through exterior walkways that connected in ways that begot insanity in those seeking to make sense of the layout.

Ciana wracked her mind, trying to locate even the merest glimpse of those traumatic years in which she might have seen or heard about where they kept the names of their many summoned and yet-to-be-summoned demons. She recalled vast libraries and crypts full of macabre paraphernalia. But many of the more pertinent memories were overshadowed by the self-protective fog of amnesia that her child-mind had created to keep her fragile sanity intact.

“They have... libraries... I think.”

Heskel grunted understandingly, then walked to one of the walls of the easternmost wing where they had been able to sneak up close without being noticed by the floating imp-lights that patrolled the grounds of manicured hedges and flowerbeds.

With a couple punches he broke down the stone bricks and made a hole big enough for both of them to crawl walk through.

Barely a minute passed before they were swarmed by demonic sentries and irate Magisters, but the Brute shrugged off all their magical attacks with his bare flesh, and those errant strays that found their way to Ciana were repelled by the robe he had given her to wear.

She quickly drew her sword and moved forward with her companion, laying into the predecessors of her erstwhile torturers and their misbegotten demon slaves.

Just like when the Brute had fought her, he proved an unstoppable force that slew every challenger with frightening ease, though Ciana also made a show of her own excellence with the blade and the mastery of combat honed through many desperate years on the run.

As they mowed down the sentries of weak imps and laggard golems, while moving through the ornate halls of austere architecture and maniacal decoration, Ciana was assaulted by the memories of her childhood.

She remembered the lashings of tails and the burning tongues and frigid claws of the imp-slaves that abused her when the Magisters left them to their own devices. She remembered the way some of the female professors and students would ingratiate their way into her life, treating her momentarily as someone worth loving and adoring, only for the rug to be pulled away and it being revealed that they were toying with her.

With the sword her father had left behind, when she returned to their village and found him slain for cavorting with demons, she carved a bloody crest through the eastern wing of the academy. Tears streamed down her cheeks, stinging her skin like boiling water, but she did not relent for a moment, feeling the cathartic release of decades'-worth of hate be released with this ritualistic cleansing of her once-was sadistic masters. Though most of her torturers were no doubt long deceased, it did not matter, for their spirit resided in their predecessors and in the very fundament of the Academy.

Ciana vowed to burn it all down.

They eventually found their way to a vast library, once no more sentries or Magisters and their students contested their passage.

With a passing glance, Heskel decided that the hundreds of rows of shelves lined with books were all useless. In truth, she did not care if he found his prize or not. He had become her means to this new desire she had unearthed.

With a lit torch, she ran down the length of the repository, letting cleansing fire devour ancient treatises and dissertations on demons, unwieldy tomes of the Academy's long history, biographies of self-proclaimed experts in esoteric fields, and other texts that did not deserve to be studied.

When she left the hall, with Heskel in tow, the Brute made a sound of discontent.

"What?"

"Fear the one who burns the texts of history, for they ignore the lessons of the past."

"I don't care," she replied honestly.

"Not all knowledge is worth the paper on which it is written," he continued, contradicting his previous statement.

"Are you quoting someone?"

Heskel nodded. **"My Father and my Master are at odds. Their philosophies are at war."**

"You said your father is the one who holds Elphin sacred? Can I meet him?"

"Once, I would have brought you to him. Today, however, he is sick and disturbed. My Master will be a more benevolent teacher of what you seek."

"Sick? Do you seek to cure him? Is that why you want to find this Daemon's name?"

Heskel shook his head. **"Not all sickness can be cured. The Name I seek, I seek on behalf of my Master."**

"When we have found you this Name, and made Svalberg a land of ash, I will follow you to your Master."