

While Jakob was preparing for their return to Helmsgarten that was less than two weeks away, Ciana was travelling west, hunting down Iskandarr who had run away from the tavern without a word. She was bothered by Jakob's nonchalant attitude towards the boy's disappearance, but she supposed that he had never truly changed the way he viewed his offspring, though she had wanted him to be more concerned than he was, but she could not say why. Perhaps she wanted to believe that they were a family and that their roles as parents were equal, but it was clear that the Fleshcrafter had different thoughts on the matter.

A weak part of her was glad to be on the hunt for the boy though, as it allowed her time alone to think. An overwhelming wrongness had been filling her body for weeks now and she was unsure what to do about it. She viewed herself as Iskandarr's mother, but the boy clearly did not, even though he never said anything to indicate it. But she could still tell. There was a pretence to how Iskandarr treated her and she was a woman who picked up on such small discrepancies as what he showed when he spoke to her and when he spoke to Jakob. Though he would never say it, the boy deeply respected his father. Jakob never seemed to acknowledge it of course and he was miserly with his praise whenever the boy ached whatever task he had been given, so their relationship was a harsh one.

She had thought Iskandarr needed someone like her with a gentler approach, but he only ever seemed to view her as his rival and the thought that she could never truly be his mother stung her painfully.

After finding a proper trail to follow, Ciana quickly realised where she was heading. She had been here before, back in her younger days, when she had just escaped her torturers and abusers. It was here that she truly lost her naïve belief that she could be accepted, because all those she met turned around and stabbed her in the back or stole from her what little she had. This was the place that had led to her self-confinement in the wilds of Lleman, for here she had lost her faith in the humanity of people.

It was the city of Lillebrünnr she was heading towards. A city whose towering walls blocked out the rising and setting sun for those unfortunate enough to live in their shadow, because they were too poor to afford anything. A city where depravity and indulgence were a staple of the common folk. A city where the rich abused those weak and desperate to grow their own coffers. A city where those who fought in the name of justice had a hidden hand stained with blood and eyes that turned away from the crimes of the Aristocracy, even when they were committed in broad daylight.

Lillebrünnr had once been a small mining town, but when gems and precious ore had been found in plentiful abundance, those quickest to fill their pockets had rising in power and established an assembly of self-titled Aristocratic families, around whom a city of walls and disparity was erected like a shield, all to keep their greedy hoards hidden away from all who wished to share in the abundance.

Jakob often said that Iskandarr was a product of Envy and Pride, so it was obvious to her why he had sought out this place. To a person possessed of such powerful Vices, Lillebrünnr was like a pungent feast that could be smelled for hundreds of kilometres away.

Now-and-again, she noticed the marks of Iskandarr's magic, where he had used his improved incantation of instantaneous movement, as there were half-moon scars in the earth that glowed with an unmistakable murky-green hue of leftover energy.

It had only been roughly two weeks since he had uncovered his magical talents, but he had already invented several types of incantations that Jakob himself had admitting to not knowing were possible. However, despite his vast arsenal of techniques, he had still not managed to land a single blow on Ciana during their sparring matches. She doubted he ever would.

Four hours after she set out from the tavern in search of the runaway Sovereign, she laid eyes upon the blighted walls of the Lillebrünnr. From a distance, with how the city hugged up against the gem-abundant mountain and its mines, it was easy to see that it was an edifice to greed and miserly power.

With her long strides and occasional burst of her vibrational magic and frigid wind, she shot across the fields outside the giant walls like an arrow in flight, her blueish soul wing like a banner that announced her arrival from afar. She passed only few travellers on the roads, with the majority being farmers bringing their produce to the city or hauling cattle and swine for slaughter, their flesh no doubt heading directly for the bountiful feasts of the indulgent aristocrats.

A handful of guards were watching the sparse traffic that funnelled in through the wide-open gate, but were ill-prepared for her arrival, as she shot past them with such speed that they were even too slow to notice her until it was too late or so surprised that they fell on their asses. Before they could even attempt to yell at her to halt, she was already out of sight, like a mirage or heatstroke-induced hallucination. They each shared a glance, then simply returned to their watch. Such were the vigilance of the Lillebrünnr guard corps.

After only ten minutes within the city, Ciana had found Iskandarr's trail again and was unsurprised when it led to a part of the Outer Ring where the seediest establishments thrived, just like they had nearly sixty years prior during her last visit.

The Outer Ring was where the poor and delinquent citizens lived and worked. Some were fortunate enough to be allowed to work the mines, in the sense that their fortune was that they could leave the near-permanent darkness that shrouded the Outer Ring. The sun only washed away the darkness in this place for about an hour every day, when it reached its zenith, though in the quarter of the Outer Ring where the forges and smelteries worked tirelessly day-and-night, the smog was so thick in the air that even *this* blessed hour passed by in darkness.

Ciana had stayed in the Outer Ring during the first year of living here, but then she had managed to sneak into the Middle Ring and had somehow survived in its alleyways for a couple of months, before finding an attic to squat in while plying her trade as a thief and courier during the night.

While following the trail left behind by Iskandarr, who had switched to a less impactful form of travel within the city and thus left harder-to-notice evidence for Ciana to follow, the blessed hour came and it was as though she could hear every last denizen of the Outer Ring pause their work and sigh in contentment, before resuming whatever work they had been doing with the fatalistic attitude that defined their lots in life.

Eventually, the trail led her to an establishment that she had frequented often in her youth: a rundown Adventurer's Guild office that had been turned into a tavern and gambling den.

She was unsurprised when she found Iskandarr with a crowd around him, as he gambled on the outcome of a pair of dice. He had already amassed a decent pile of coins, which amused her, but then such a game was no doubt child's play for him to manipulate.

When she came up next to him, he did not halt his throw of the dice, though he looked away from the result to acknowledge her.

*"I expected you sooner,"* he remarked in Demonic.

*"I do not move with the same speed as you,"* she replied in the same lilting tongue, though without the fanciful accent Iskandarr used.

Iskandarr stood up from the table, toppling the stool he had been using, then he took a fistful of coins and threw them into the air. Like starving wolves, the watchers all descended on the table and the man he had been betting against had to fight to keep a hold of his own money.

*"Spark of creation,"* she heard him say, and then a deafening *boom* resounded throughout the gambling den and thirty-plus people lay on the floor in convulsing death throes, instantaneously-formed branching scars marking their bodies and the outer layers of their flesh scarred to a crisp. He had used the coins as a conductive element for his spell, killing all the fools who had taken his money.

*"Let's go,"* Ciana told him. She was not surprised by his violent action, as he had a disturbing disregard for the lives he took, already shown to her on the many occasions that guests somehow offended him. However, it was the first time she had seen him kill this many people all at once.

*Power is meant to be used,* she heard Jakob's voice echo within her mind. *I wonder if this is what he meant...*

As she turned to leave, Iskandarr grabbed her waist. Or rather, the thing that permanently hung from it like a protective charm and caged evil.

*"Don't make me break your arm again,"* she warned him as he lifted the mask to his face.

Iskandarr ignored her, and she was about to make good on her threat, when she heard him address the Daemon within the Elphin-leather mask.

*"Belamouranthyne, Obey thy Sovereign."*

A change came over him as the Daemon in the mask awoke to his command and lent him her ultimate power.

*"How'd you...?"*

*"I've discovered something, Mother,"* he told her. *"I am called the Sovereign. But of what? I have figured it out."* She could tell his was grinning widely behind the obscuring mask and she hated the way his heterochromatic eyes glowed sickly through the holes.

*"You planned this,"* Ciana replied, understanding now why he had run away.

Iskandarr took her by the hand, just like had had done when he was very little. She knew he was manipulating her to get his way, but she still let him take her where he wished to go.

They walked towards the gate that led to the Middle Ring, a horde of enslaved men of the Outer Ring trailing behind them as though sleepwalking.

The guards were about to apprehend them, but then they laid eyes upon the mask and became part of the army of servants that followed behind the Elphin and the Daemon Sovereign.