



Ciana remained as still as possible, while Heskel worked the fine brush across her naked skin. When the young Master, Jakob, had informed her what they required for the ritual, she had thought herself moments from being abused by a yet-another sadistic mind.

But, and it was odd for her to admit, given that she was in the centre of Jakob's laboratory and surrounded by nightmarish 'living' creations of bone-and-flesh, they were being very gentle towards her, in a way that comforted her fragile spirit.

It had been many years since someone last cared for her in a way that did not obviously benefit them. Even her own kind, Elphin with similar sob-stories, had not treated her this way.

Without turning her head, so that Heskel's pen would not be disturbed, she asked the Fleshcrafter, "Are you certain this will work?"

Jakob, who was working on the concentric rings and strange symbols that covered the floor they had cleared for the purpose of this ritual, answered a simple, "No."

"What happens if it does not work?" she wondered, dreading the answer. She knew enough about Demonological rituals to know that a wrathful punishment was incurred by those who invoked a flawed ritual, as well as the participants, unwilling more often than not, who took part.

"Safety measures have been taken, fret not."

"**Worry not, you are safe,**" the Brute concurred.

"You have become very talkative of late," Jakob remarked.

Heskel continued the precise linework over Ciana's abdomen, and only replied with an obstinate grunt. She suppressed a shiver as he ran the fine hairs of the pen across her flank and up the small of her back, before connecting the unseen drawing there to a ring around the root of her soul-wing. As always, her wing floated on some unseen wind that was felt by nobody else.

"How do you two know each other," she asked, trying to stop her body from trembling as traumatic memories flooded the front of her mind. Despite all this time, she did not react well to her bare skin being touched. Even something so gentle as a brush...

"Heskel is my Lifeward, gifted to me by Grandfather."

"Lifeward?" She had never heard the word before. "Like a surrogate parent?"

Heskel grunted in what might be considered amusement.

"She has a point," Jakob remarked.

"**A child follows its parent, not the other way.**"

"I would follow you, if that was your desire," he remarked sincerely. The candid way the pair spoke to one another was a type of bond that Ciana ached to possess.

Heskel's brush froze, before lifting from her naked skin, allowing her to release the tension in her body somewhat. She angled her head to view the Brute's masked face. The way he stared intently at the young man made her body ache only more.

"**Truthful?**"

Jakob paused his careful work as well and looked up from where he knelt on the wooden floor. "Would I lie to you? Is *that* my way? Grandfather may have thought you nothing more than a serf, but you are capable of being his successor, but, alas, he is too short-sighted to view you in such a way."

A harsh and guttural staccato emerged from the massive figure. Ciana had never heard a laugh like Heskell's before, but she found she rather enjoyed its genuine mirth.

“What have you done with Jakob?”

The young man looked quite taken aback by the reply, peeling his mask off and gazing with deep concern at his companion.

“Heskell... was *that*... was *that* a joke?”

Tress tugged abruptly on the reins of her thoroughbred Cloudvale Charger. The muscular beast dug its hooves into the gravel road, creating deep furrows in its wake. Her two nine-man squads of Guardsmen slowed their own mounts in response, and as one they dismounted and followed the Major to the gate of the fortified village.

Given that their mounts were bred for stamina and the strain of a sustained charge, the party had no need to find respite within the stone walls of this place, unlike the caravaners whose burdens were great and beasts often malnourished and mistreated.

“Major,” one of his subordinates began.

“What is it, Arn?”

“Were we not travelling to Rooskeld? Why have we stopped here?”

“Have you hunted a Daemon before, Arn?”

“No, ma'am. But we all have experience hunting demons, and our orders—”

“Then, shut your mouth, Arn. In the field, the orders of your leading officer are law!”

“Yes ma'am!” he obeyed and performed the double-handed Eagle Salute.

Tress turned to the men who had been observing the exchange. It was not an easy position for a woman, having to win the confidence of hard-headed men, many of whom had many years on her both in the Guard and the Adventurers' Guild. However, she knew that to be flexible when challenged, was to invite only more of its kind.

“Listen up, you lot!”

Each and every Royal Guard snapped to attention at the tone of her voice.

“I was gifted my rank as a badge of my ingenuity and outside-the-box-thinking, not because I can beat each and every one of you in a duel. I will extend the same question that I asked Arn to you lot: have any of you hunted a Daemon before!?”

Only one hand was raised. It belonged to a man who had once been a renowned Silver-Badge in the Guild, before joining the Guard. If not for his rigid thinking and the fact that he tended to defer all decisions to everyone else, he would have made a great First Lieutenant or Captain.

Tress nodded and Halkov answered simply: “They are multifarious and unpredictable, unlike their progenitors who are single-minded.”

“Thank you, Halkov. We are hunting a Daemon, you understand?” she locked eyes with Arn as she said it, but to his credit he kept his gaze fixed ahead, unflinching. If he made it through this unenviable task they had been given, she might recommend him for elevation to Second Lieutenant. An inquisitive mind was important, and though some of his sincere questions bordered insubordination, he was also a good person to have around, when things took an unexpected turn.

“Daemons are as unknowable as the most cunning fugitive you can imagine, but they also possess many powers that we are not fully cognisant of, but we know that *this* Daemon has the ability to infect the minds of others, turning them into willing slaves.”

“Ma’am!” Arn replied, lifting his hand to indicate himself amongst his fellows. “Does this mean we are stopping here, due to it being a prominent location on the road towards Rooskeld?”

“That’s correct, Arn. Now, form up. Assume everyone who encounter is potentially hostile. We will split into groups of three, with Arn’s group following me. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am!” the men replied enthusiastically.

After leaving their mounts by the gate, utilising their ill-tempered and untrusting nature to effectively blocking this single entrance into the village, the six groups of Royals spread out, with Major Tress’ travelling straight down the main street.

The village was eerily-silent, considering that nights were when the exhausted caravaners let loose and made merry with their fellows and the slaves of pleasure the many taverns offered. She privately wondered what would happen if the Archduke of Octland learnt of such places, given their strict punishment of adultery and premarital relationships. Though, now that Octland were at war with Helmsgarten, such fortified villages became strategic strongholds, so perhaps it would not be long before she found out.

She was pulled from her thoughts by a man stumbling out of a doorway, a single candlelight from within casting its glow on his face. It was frozen in horror.

Instinct took over, and Tress moved forward with a burst of speed, her slender steel shield on her right arm covering her helmeted face, while she withdrew the gothic mace from its sling. She squeezed the leather grip tightly in anticipation, but before she could make it to the frightened man, a deep gouge had formed in his chest and a female figure, with abyss-black eyes, stood on the threshold of the little house. Her right arm had a long blade of some dark matter growing from the middle of her forearm.

Arn sent forth a spear of ice, which severed the woman’s arm at the elbow, but before the frightened man’s corpse had even hit the ground, a new blade of darkness grew from the stump.

Tress hammered the heel of her armoured boot into the dirt street as she reached the possessed woman, then spun and crushed her head against the flimsy wooden doorframe with the bladed ball of steel at the end of her mace.

She had only just wrenched her weapon free, when the fallen civilian lurched upright, with black blades growing from his splayed fingers like claws and an abyss staring out from his eye-sockets. Tress was already pivoting to catch his claws against her shield, but, before they even collided, a scalding flame stripped the layers of skin, fat, and flesh from the figure, making him stumble backwards, as the bubbling matter fell off him in big globs.

The final member of Arn’s group came forward with his steel-tipped spear, and rammed it through the burnt-but-still-alive Undying Slave, crunching bone and piercing the man’s heart. But it seemed not to kill the creature, as he grasped the spearman by the throat and digging his bladed fingers into the meat there. Before he Undying could kill her comrade however, Tress swung her mace into his cheek and the exposed bone, destroying his boiling brain with the impact, but continuing to pound her weapon into his destroyed face until he no longer moved.

Arn came up to his fellow, already prepared the bandage the punctures in his neck, but, as he unfurled the blood-absorbent linen, the spearman dropped his weapon and started scratching at his throat, while his muffled screams echoed inside his silver close-helm. Then he went eerily silent, and despite the dark night, Tress saw his eyes fill with black, like a pond rapidly filling with ink.

She raised her shielded arm and roared, “*Wind of Cloudvale, contain my foe!*”

At the same time, Arn backed away and lifted his arms and shouting, “*Winter frost, erect a wall!*”

Not even a second passed from when Tress' containing cyclone had enveloped the transforming Guardsman and Arn's sheet of impenetrable ice covered him and his flame-wielding fellow, before enormous blades of blackened and crystallised blood emerged from inside the transforming spearman, annihilating his body while attempting to launch these horrifying blades at his assailants. But Tress' wind-barrier held fast and moments later when she lifted the spell, naught remained but bone fragments, errant flesh and fat, and crumbled silver armour.

Arn's barrier fell away as well, and the three of them were left to stare mutely at the destruction of their comrade, after only a drop of Daemon-blood had infected him.

"Arn. Go and collect the groups to our left, I'll go right. We'll return to the gate and, as a unit, we'll decimate this village. Make sure they know not to get too close to the Daemon's slaves!"

"Yes, ma'am!" he acknowledged and ran off with the flame sorcerer in tow.

This is worse than I feared... Tress admitted to herself.

Jakob looked over the lines for a third time. Despite his assurances to the Elphin, there was the distinct possibility of a destructive backlash, if what they were attempting should fail. But, for all his complaints about his mentor, this was a project that he had worked on for so many years that Jakob partially wondered if his release into Helmsgarten was not simply for the purpose of performing this ritual and seeing if his hypothesis was true.

Once, when he had been eight, he had found old letters from a woman that Grandfather seemed to once have had a relationship with. He had no idea what had happened between them, or where she was, if she still lived, but it was clear that it had imbued the Old Spider with a burning desire to discover how to unleash an Elphin's caged potential. If he had dared ask, he wondered if Grandfather would have punished him or been forthcoming, but, alas, Jakob would never know, and, when he had inquired Heskell about it, the Wight had revealed that he knew as little as he did, having also once read the letters.

When he arose from the floor, the Elphin tensed expectantly. She looked very timid, but, from what Heskell had told him, she was incredibly skilled with a blade, having easily matched Sig, without utilising any of the magic that should have been inherent to her due to her lineage. But they would fix that for her.

The Wight came up beside him, then grunted appreciatively.

"Is it ready?" Ciana asked.

Jakob nodded.

The blood symbols on her body had become tacky as they dried, and it was pinching her skin uncomfortably. The way the Brute and young Fleshcrafter stared at her, made her feel a unique sense of unease, finding suddenly that she could empathise with the cattle traded at market fairs. Despite having shown no signs that she should distrust them, she wondered now if she had been masterfully led into a honey-coated trap.

She took a deep breath.

"It is imperative you remain still for this," Jakob told her.

Ciana nodded imperceptibly. "What do I need to do."

The Fleshcrafter took off his strange mask and grinned. "You need not do anything."

He knelt to the floor before her, as though placing an offering by her bare and scuffed feet. Then he touched his ungloved hands to the outer ring of the elaborate pattern within which she stood.

In the lilting tongue of her birthmother, he spoke the litany of the strange ritual they were attempting. She followed to strange wording and usage of the language with some difficulty, but for the most part understood what it was: a simple plea, masking as a ritual.

"Here stands your progeny, O Saint of Pride, First of the Fallen."

"Here stands a lost child, whose heritage is denied, whose bright flame is smothered."

"Here stands the living embodiment of your splendour, but, alas, her shine is waning."

"I implore you, O Proud One! I beseech you in genuflecting reverence! Deign to gift this errant child of yours the light that will guide her true! Return to her that which by birth is her right!"

A tremor washed over the room, but Ciana remained stone-still, even as the air became charged and full of infinite potential, even as the dried dark blood set alight in a pure aquamarine glow that singed her body with its heartless cold.

Then, abruptly, a voice answered back to Jakob's call.

"A child of mine she is not, though half the blood of my progeny doth run within her. I shall return to her a half of the gift my children are owed. Rejoice in my benevolence. Adulate me in song. Do not forget the service I have done for your sake. Your payment to me is yet to come, Jakob of the Mortal Realm."

The light vanished and the blood, which covered Ciana's body and the floor, crumbled into dust, like thousand-year-old paint.

She was about to ask the genuinely-shaken Jakob, who still knelt by her feet, if the ritual was successful, but then she *felt* it. A surge of potential filling a bowl within her that she only now realised had been empty all her life. It was power, undiluted and fully-and-truly hers. A power she deserved.

Even when she thought the metamorphosis complete, the power kept entering her. A fever haze flowed through her body, flushing her pale-grey skin, and her back burnt like a blossoming wound dug by crude tools.

Jakob looked up and took in her transformation. Awe filled his eyes.

It seemed foolish now, but he had not realised the implications of the ritual until after he had invoked it and received a reply. Grandfather was surely mad for having come up with it in the first place, because, the Entity that was invoked was none other than the Proudful Saint himself. It was a bargaining plea to a Higher Being, whose existence bordered the threshold between Demon and Great One. A Being whose summoning, if indeed possible, would permanently alter the figment of reality and warp the minds of all within. Even now, he felt the burn of the Saint's gaze upon him, as though he was forever marked.

He was greatly troubled by the fact that the ritual's Toll was now expected of him, despite Jakob having assumed a Toll was unneeded, given that nothing was summoned or invoked in the true sense of the word, but rather a plea was made to right a wrong. He wondered just what sort of remuneration the Proud Saint, first of his kind, would require of him. Such a being, like the Great Ones Above that he mimicked, tended to think in the grand scheme of the future, so the repayment was sure to be something that would cause profound ripples that would benefit the Saint hundreds or thousands of years hence.

Jakob was still staring at the result of his injudicious plea. Ciana had remained physically unchanged, but her aura was different, and her wing, that manifested fragment of her soul, had grown into a two-metre-long paper-thin appendage that now ran all the way down to her feet, glimmering and glowing.

He got to his feet unsteadily and backed away a few steps, so that he stood side-by-side with Heskel. They were both witnessing the true form of an Elphin, the realised desire of their Mentor and Creator. Though her slender pale skin and seemingly-underdeveloped figure belied the strength that now resided within her, they both had enough experience with demons to pick up the tangible change in the room. The massive wing was the only visible change, but then, the wing represented her soul, so its transformation was a given.

“How do you feel?” Jakob asked, still trying to clear the echoes of the Proud Saint from the depths of his mind.

Ciana looked down herself, lifting her fingers and studying herself. It took an amusing couple of minutes before she noticed her wing in surprise. Then she answered, “I feel strong. Stronger than ever. It is as if I have knowledge that I have not learnt.”

“Such as?”

“It sounds weird, but I looked at one of the books lying on your table over *there*. I understand what it says, but I have never seen those letters before.”

Jakob followed her pointing claw. “You now understand Necroscrip? Fascinating. What else?”

“My breathing is different, I think?”

Heskel then asked, “**Have you found Magic?**”

Ciana looked at her right hand for a moment, lifted it in front of her and pinched the air, dragging her hand down in a straight line. In her pinched grip was a bizarre vibrating fragment of sound.

Jakob looked to Heskel for an answer, and the Wight tilted his head down ever-so-slightly.

“**The Aural Onslaught.**”

“Is that whose magic she now possesses??” Jakob muttered, reverently. It was a rare thing, but, given that Great Ones were the Primogenitors of Demonkind, a few of their kind, generally the strongest of them, possessed powers belonging to the Great Ones aligned with their Vice. In the case of Pride Demons, the Proud Saint included, their Primogenitor was The Keening, a formless figure that represented sound, vibration, tectonic quakes, hearing, and manipulation.

“Is that bad?” Ciana asked concerned, waving the blade of vibration before her experimentally.

“**Strong.**”

“You have been gifted a tremendous power,” Jakob concurred. “With a blade of sound and vibration, you can cut through anything and cause devastating damage to anyone around you, if you attune the sound of your blade to the right signal.”

Despite their assurances, she suddenly seemed terrified of her new power, and started shaking her hand to make the barely-perceptible blade disappear. In doing so, she accidentally cut straight through one of the tables they had moved for the ritual. The wood was carved through with so sharp a blade that the two halves came away with a perfectly-smooth cut.

“How do I make it vanish!?” she asked in panic.

Jakob chuckled at the sight of so tremendous a power in the hands of so careful a creature. “Imagine yourself releasing your grip of the blade, while simultaneously relaxing your fingers. It might work, at least if it’s similar to other spells of the same kind.”

Though it took her a few tries, Ciana eventually managed make the blade disappear.

“I don’t think I should use this power,” she said. “It seems more likely to hurt me or you.”

“Power is meant to be used,” Jakob scolded her. “Do not forsake the gift you were given, for to do so is to spit in the face of your progenitor.”

Heskel nodded. “**I will teach you control.**”

“Good idea,” Jakob concurred. “Once she had learnt to control it, we will finalise our plan to acquire the Branch.”

The Wight cast him a warning glance. He knew the unspoken challenge, so Jakob continued, “That is, Ciana, if you would be interested in helping us with our Grand Undertaking.”

The Elphin looked up from her hand and locked eyes with Jakob.

“I will follow you wherever you go. I owe you more than I can ever repay for this.”

Jakob nodded and Heskel grunted something that seemed almost merry, though he was sure he had simply misinterpreted the nonverbal answer.

“Also, I will make you some fitting attire. Having you walk around *like that* will only invite trouble.”

Ciana only laughed in reply.