

LXVIII

Jakob was brought back to reality by Ciana thundering down the stairs to the basement, Iskandarr in her arms. Her face was a mask of fear and from the sounds he had heard earlier, he knew she had fought off someone strong, but her body was spotless. She had not even worn the armour Hessel and Jakob had made her, and yet she was unscathed.

Without needing him to tell her, Ciana put the boy on an available table.

Looking at him, he knew that no wound was the cause, as the boy was as spotless as his protector, but his face was sallow and dotted with sweat. Jakob moved his newly-crafted obsidian hand over Iskandarr's torso, feeling the way his unique soul flowed within his small frame.

"What did this?" he asked.

"I don't know! He somehow exorcised the Creature that was attacking us, but then fell unconscious!"

"A Creature? Of what sort?"

"It doesn't matter, Jakob! Focus on the boy!"

He was taken aback by the tone in her voice, but knew that it was simply misplaced anger caused by her fear and feeling of impotence.

"He will be fine. He just requires rest. With how rapidly he is developing, he may be up and active in a couple of hours."

"Are you sure!?"

Jakob narrowed his eyes.

"Do you doubt me?"

"I... No. Sorry."

"He may be possessed of extraordinary abilities, Ciana, but he is not yet matured. He somehow exhausted his soul by *exorcising* your attacker, but there is no apparent damage. It's almost as if..."

"As if what?"

"No, nothing. Take him to one of the vacant rooms and watch over him. If he hasn't regained consciousness before noon, then you come find me."

Ciana visibly relaxed and went to take the boy in her arms. Before she could lift him up however, Jakob took his right hand touched her forehead, right next to her horns, with his index and middle fingers.

"I see," he remarked, mostly to himself.

"What did you just do?"

"I wanted to understand what you saw and my gift allows me such an insight through touch."

"Really?"

"Indeed."

"So, do you know what it was that attacked us?"

"It seems to me the same person who we fought in Hesslik."

"Are you certain?"

"Yes."

"But he used the same magic as me back then, not to mention he had more control over his faculties. What I fought out there was no man, it was a beast borrowing the shape of a human."

“He seems to have traded in the arm you severed with this new version. The manner of manipulating blood reminds me of Wrathful Demons,” he said.

“It didn’t look like a demon.”

“A shame nothing is left,” he replied. “I would have liked a sample.”

“The parts I cut off, the human parts, they are still out there.”

“I see. I will glean what I can from his erstwhile corpus then.”

Jakob left the basement before Ciana even had the chance to lift up Iskandarr.

A few days later, when Jakob was poring over the peculiar structure of the ‘Creature’s’ human parts, Iskandarr came hopping down the stairs. It was an odd thing how the boy’s mannerisms matched his apparent age of around five, but his speech and insights were of an ageless fashion.

“*Father*,” he greeted as he passed through the threshold to the basement, closing the newly-built door behind him.

It had surprised Jakob to find that Wothram possessed the talent for rudimentary carpentry, but, sure enough, when he had given the Golem the task, he had dutifully acquiesced and produced a functional door that was eerily similar to the one that had broken down under Kalameytas’ aura of decay.

“I expect you to be punctual, Iskandarr,” Jakob scolded the child.

“*Yes, Father. Have I missed much?*”

“I have left this piece for you to deconstruct,” Jakob said, ignoring the question and indicating the available worktable upon which lay a hand with the forearm attached.

Iskandarr had to step up onto a stool to reach the table, but, even then, his chin barely cleared the edge and his arms had to reach up and over in an awkward way to manipulate the limb. But he did not complain, for it was not his way. Though Jakob was sure the boy no doubt knew that in just a few more days he would grow to a proper height that he could stand upon the stool and properly use the worktable.

“*Do I not get a blade like yesterday?*”

“No. Yesterday was a lesson in dissection. Today I am teaching you how to understand the sample in front of you.”

“*Yes, Father.*”

“You may lift it off the table so you can see it better,” he told him. “I want you to use your senses to tell me as much about the sample and the person it came from.”

Iskandarr hefted the forearm off the surface of the table and took it as he stepped down off the stool, moving it around in front of him with narrowed eyes.

It was an absurd sight to behold and Jakob had to keep reminding himself that it was no ordinary child before him. Ciana had complained that Iskandarr was above such work as Jakob’s fleshcraft, but Jakob believed it would serve him well.

As with any craftsmanship, the skill one developed from it applied to more than just the niche of the particular craft. A butcher learnt to wield a knife with such efficiency that it rivalled the most well-practiced swordsmen and from his butchering came an intrinsic understanding of his prey’s anatomy, which rivalled a physician’s well-studied knowledge of bodies and their layout.

So too it was with Fleshcrafting: it required an objective eye that could discern healthy and potent samples from tainted and useless ones at a glance; a steady hand and calm mind to ensure cuts were made without damaging the tissue; and the ability to absorb knowledge and think outside common logic such that esoteric lore could take hold.

“Time’s up,” Jakob told him. “Tell me what you have learnt.” He walked over and took the limb out of Iskandarr’s hand and placed it back on the table.

Jakob was not like Grandfather, for he did not fear that his student would surpass him, rather, he relished the thought that such a thing was even a possibility. But even with such a mindset, he found it chilling how easily everything came to the boy. He was truly excellent in anything he set his mind to learning, and Jakob doubted the Demon Lords corpses that had fuelled his birth were the reason. Rather, it was as though the perfect mind had found a home in the strongest vessel the Great Ones knew how to scheme into physicality.

“It belonged to a human male,” Iskandarr started.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes. His bones may be denser and his muscles like steel, but he was human.”

“Go on.”

“A potent form of magic permeates his body, even after his death. There are no signs of decay, as if the body it was from was incapable of aging. The blood vessels have a peculiar nature, which makes it likely that he wielded fire magic with this hand.”

Jakob nodded. The man it had belonged to, Nøgel, had not only been favoured by the Keening One, but had also wielded simple fire magic, which had a tendency to distort the veins due to the heat travelling through the body before being fired off, and this would be more evident in the limb favoured to use such magic. Ice magic had a similar side-effect, while earth and wind magic impacted the lungs and organs more and left the veins unchanged. Jakob had only ever studied Stelji’s body, prior to remaking her, but knew from Grandfather that those rare few that wielded lightning tended to have visible signs on the surface of their skin, which often experienced micro-crystallisation, with occasionally gaining something very close to scale. Additionally, lightning magic also impacted the centres of the wielder’s brain that dealt with emotions and memory.

“He was possessed by the Flayed Lady’s power when he died.”

Jakob nearly choked, then he took a step towards the boy, putting his right hand on his forehead, trying to discern how he had made such a connection from studying the limb, as he himself had not found such signs.

Watching Jakob’s frantic expression, Iskandarr grinned, exposing rows of tightly-packed incisor teeth.

He removed his hand from the boy’s head, “You did not learn that from studying the sample,” he concluded.

“No, Father. I felt it when I exorcised him.”

“And how exactly did you feel it?”

“It was like a thousand claws digging into me and a loud screeching voice promising me an agonising death.”

Jakob felt a chill travel down his body. A threat from a Great One was nothing to brush off. Given their immense power, even the simple utterance of a threat from such an Entity could warp reality and manifest it into being. “The Flayed Lady will forever seek your life,” Jakob admitted to the boy.

“Why? I have done her nothing.”

“Not yet.”

Iskandarr looked up at him with his glowing heterochromatic eyes. Despite it all, there was still a childlike naivete to him, which, somehow, was even more terrifying, Jakob thought. In a way, it reminded him of himself. No doubt he could have avoided much trouble if he had properly understood the consequences his actions would manifest. But then again, perhaps he was here now exactly

because of those consequences, and perhaps it was now his role to instil a proper kind of preparedness into the young Sovereign, so that he would always be in charge of the consequences.

“You are meant for greatness,” Jakob told him. “Of all the beings in the endless cosmos, the Flayed Lady abhors rivals the most, after all, it was her very nature that gave birth to the Demons of Envy. One third of your body was made possible as a result of her hateful and jealous nature, and that alone might be enough for her to wish for your destruction, but I believe that the Great Ones have many plans for you and she wishes to usurp them, so your death would be the means to accomplish this.”

“*Father?*”

Jakob put his left hand on Iskandarr’s tussled silver-white hair. He felt the tremors of the boy’s soul through his obsidian fingers and understood the emotions travelling through his young body.

“*Do you fear death?*”

“I do not fear death, for it is an eventuality for any being. Even the Great Ones perish with time. No. What I fear is to leave this life unfinished. I must see my work completed before I am ready to be taken.”

“*I fear it,*” Iskandarr admitted.