

They stood on the outskirts of the town, admiring the ruins it had become. Nearly half of its buildings had been swallowed-up by the ever-expanding pool of black bottomless water that Heskell had invoked almost a year prior. Those buildings that were left standing had been thoroughly destroyed by the intense fighting that had taken place within the walls of the town sometime after Jakob's flight.

"This town was known as Rooskeld."

"*Those waters,*" Iskandarr started, pointing to the lake, "*they are not of this world, are they?*"

"Indeed. My companion invoked the Great Devourer, Nwetrou, and this is the aftermath of such an invocation. It is said that the lakes created by Nwetrou never stop expanding, though they normally don't grow *this* rapidly, so it seems this lake was fed a lot of matter."

"*The Great Devourer, primogenitor of Gluttony,*" Iskandarr stated, recalling Jakob's teachings. "*Why do such all-powerful beings respond to the call of mortals? Are we not like insignificant motes of dust before them?*"

A breath of vapour emerged from Jakob's permanently-masked face, rising into the night air. Some of his constructs were wandering about, exploring the ruins, while the rest remained motionless and would stay *that* way until Jakob tasked them with something.

He motioned to one of the exploring constructs with a gesture and said, "These creations of mine are given life through the Eternal Serpent's benediction. Like you, I wondered what cause a supreme entity such as It would have for letting mortals utilise its awesome power, but it is actually rather simple. The Great Ones were either birthed from the manifestation of certain undeniable elements in the world, such as Sight, Hearing, Smell, Warmth, Cold, Life, Death, and so forth, or they were birthed by the rare ascension of powerful individuals throughout the millennia the cosmos has existed.

"For them to exist, there needs to be mortals who exhibit their powers and utilise their gifts. And for them to thrive, there needs to be mortals like you and I who worship them and call upon their powers. Some of the Great Ones are content to simply exist and thus cannot be called upon, but most wish to exert their influence upon the Mortal Realm and grow their power, for to such long-lived entities, scheming and struggling for power is a game that keeps them occupied.

"And who can say if their positions are the highest possible there is? It is quite possible that even the Watcher, Supreme as He is, seeks some higher position of power that we cannot fathom."

"*The Great Ones rely on us to grow their influence?*" Iskandarr concluded.

"It is a simplification, as their reasons are as manifold and esoteric as their gifts, but in essence, yes. Though, some mortals are relied upon more than others. Mortals like yourself, Iskandarr. They have named you, after all. To receive a name from the Great Ones directly is a boon of untold proportions."

"*You have also been named, Father,*" Iskandarr pointed out.

"Indeed. Though they call me Seeker, which begs the question as to *what exactly* I am meant to seek." Jakob thought back to Nharlla's declaration that held a firm conviction that Jakob would find what he sought, even if an eon would pass. It seemed obvious that Jakob would always be on the search for knowledge, but was that what he was meant to seek? Was he a Seeker of Knowledge or was his appetite and capacity for erudition simply a gift he had gained, with his true purpose yet unveiled? Or maybe he had already found what it was he sought? It seemed unlikely.

"*My name is Sovereign, but what am I meant to rule?*" Iskandarr wondered.

Jakob looked at the mask that hung about his tall progeny's neck and felt the answer quite an obvious one. After all, the Daemons birthed from the union of complementing and conflicting Vices were a sundered and disparate group with no true leader. In fact, the majority of them were solitary pitiful beings that had never even seen another Daemon like themselves. Given the sort of power many of them wielded, it was perhaps an impossible task to imagine a ruler emerging to stand above them. After all, a Daemon like Tchinn was deemed a weaker sort of Daemon and yet could commit extraordinary amounts of damage if wielded well. With a Daemon like Guillaume or Belamouranthyne, the damage that could be inflicted was on a nationwide scale, and if they were directed like the arrows on the string of a bow, then they could not doubt decimate the continent, before their powers waned or a sufficiently-powerful counterforce could emerge. One who wielded their reins would be the ultimate being imaginable and would come very close to rivalling the power of a Great One. But was this what Iskandarr was meant to become?

Jakob reached out and grabbed the mask that hung about Iskandarr's neck. He looked at Jakob's hand, then lifted the simple string up over his head and handed Jakob the powerful object.

With his question obsidian fingers, he tried to pry information about the entity the Mask housed within, but it was like a wall met his reality-piercing nails, preventing him from touching the soul of the Daemon. It seemed Heskell had bound the Daemon within the mask with the type of supreme skill that had always defined his work.

Jakob lifted the mask up to his face and invoked the Entity within, "*Belamouranthyne, my eyes are thine and all they see belongs to thee.*"

Nothing happened.

"I thought so," Jakob said, returning the Elphin Mask to Iskandarr. "But why does she respond to you?"

"*Father, I do not know. What I do know is that my will cannot be denied.*"

"Like a true Sovereign, I suppose."

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The rats had answered the Beckoning Bell en masse. With a few words of power, they were slaved to his mind and his eyes, and moved through his devastated workshops and laboratories according to his whims. He had in the past toyed with the concept of mass enslavement and mind absorption of lesser creatures, but today was the first time he had put it to use.

Controlling such a multitude of different minds was taxing, but he had nothing but time, and over the following few days he learnt to use the power well enough that he could simultaneously command two dozen rats individually, with the rest of the horde slaved to the actions of these select few.

Utilising his command over the vermin, he began to pull the scraps of ruined work and samples towards his inner sanctum, where his true hands could work on them and make some simple servants to speed up the revival of his sewer kingdom. But it was an undertaking that would require more time than he had, and, for all he knew, his mentee thundered towards him with flames in his eyes. He deserved it, for all he had done, but hoped a naïve sort of leniency that the boy might have would see him spared.

But the Fleshcrafter was no blind optimist, so he continued to gather the ruins of his life's work to his inner sanctum, recovering what he could and cannibalising the rest for parts. He was determined to put up a fight if he had to, and he knew the boy well enough to know how to exploit his way of thinking.

He wished that he had not set loose the Wrath Demon he had nurtured for all those years, but he was nothing if not a servant to his Lady and her machinations, though her gifts had dried up as of late. But he knew that she had already gifted him more than most other mortals ever received. Granted, her way of offering power always came with a price or an exaction, his missing body was a testament to that, as were his many other setbacks. However, if not for his diligent offerings to her, he would never have acquired all his vast stores of arcane knowledge and esoteric lore.

While a finger was taken from his left hand, his right hand was handed a fragment of power, such was her gift-giving, always.

But the Fleshcrafter would eventually gain the final bit of power he needed, and then he could at least enact the plans that had been decades in the making. He would reach for the cosmos and they would deign him with an answer. Goddard, the Fleshcrafter who bore many names, would ascend to Their glorious ranks and he would at last be absolved of all the things he had sacrificed and all the crimes he had committed.