

## LXXVII

After weeks of travel, they at last laid eyes upon the imposing walls of the metropolis, from which the nation earned its name: Helmsgarten.

Jakob's entourage of construct servants had expanded after Iskandarr had hunted down and slain a group of guardsmen who had fled the city and its protecting walls. Their bodies had become simple humanoid puppets, for Jakob did not wish to expend too more energy nor time upon remaking their simple frames into something stronger.

When only half a kilometre separated them from the large gate of Westgate, Jakob had Wothram and the other inactive servants abandon the wagon, before hopping onto Invincible's back and heading for the walls with them left to catch up to him and his steed.

Iskandarr for his part had already surged ahead, utilising his unique form of rapid movement that turned his body into a blazing projectile that Jakob could not fathom how he even managed to control. The Sovereign waited for Jakob and his army of servants atop the gatehouse on the wall, but already before Jakob had made it to the massive wide-open doors, Iskandarr had begun releasing his potent lightning upon the district that lay beyond.

Instinctively, Jakob pulled out the spell-tome that held Tchinn, and he clutched it to his breast, while hanging on to Invincible's reins with his left hand, as the steed galloped through the threshold and into the metropolis.

Once Westgate was revealed in full, he scarcely had the time to bring the brunt of his Daemon-spawned magic to bear upon his attackers, as a surging horde of mindless humans rushed for him, their bodies deformed by strange malign growth that shone crimson in the waning evening light.

Hundreds of former citizens came for him, but before he could strike down more than a dozen with the aid of Tchinn's blood manipulation, devastating lightning strikes vapourised them from above, before the caster leapt into their midst like a fallen star, sending powerful tremors through the ground that Jakob felt even as he remained seated upon his mount.

Moments after, his constructs surged past him. The most recently crafted ones wielded the weapons they had carried before their deaths, while the rest utilised the destructive tools Jakob had gifted them with. Rending claws of hardened bone tore the twisted and abominable horde to shreds, powerful limbs peeled flesh and limbs from bodies, and all of it was commanded by Wothram, who moved in the midst of the constructs like the eye in a storm.

The Birthed Sentience that they all shared quickly learnt from the battle and the opponents they fought, and Jakob could see as minute changes were made between every strike, slash, and blow, as the experiences and observations of all those ever-evolving minds fed back into the focal point that existed with Wothram, who in turn immediately learnt from the knowledge he was fed and returned instructions to all the servants, increasing their effectiveness to such a point that the horde of abominations were slain and repelled only minutes after they had joined the fray.

Even Iskandarr looked about him at the destruction wrought by Jakob's creations and quickly decided to return to his side, rather than waste his energy on a task better handled by them.

*"This is not the city you told me of,"* Iskandarr remarked.

Jakob remained seated atop Invincible, but the Sovereign's height was such that they still almost spoke eye-to-eye when he replied, "It seemed a failure of mine continues to haunt me."

*"What should we do?"*

“It is clear that our visit to Grandfather’s laboratory must wait until we have dealt with this.”

When they had pushed their way deep enough into the metropolis to reach the Breadbasket district, Jakob realised the true enormity of what he was dealing with, as they were repeatedly assaulted from all sides by the twisted citizens of the city. There had to be tens of thousands of them, and their entire ire was focused on them as they pushed their way north through the city, heading for where the mind that controlled them dwelled in the deep.

It was obvious that Guillaume was behind the mass possession, but it was not by his power alone, as there was no way for him to unfurl his aura to its fullest extent with the way that Jakob had drawn his ritual and written the contract. Granted, the devious Daemon had managed to twist the contract to allow him to assault Jakob, but he would sooner be banished back to his realm than have his full aura unleashed, such was the specific wording that Jakob had written.

The way that the possessed and twisted puppets moved against them also spoke of an altered mind-state, as normally Guillaume had exhibited a measured and calculated control over his vessels, while this bordered on some animalistic frenzy that co-opted his ability to spread his possessing blood, but lacked his instinctual finesse. Almost as if the Daemon was himself possessed. But what sort of Entity had *that* power?

In a way, Jakob felt he already knew, but it was an answer he would rather not believe possible. For if a Great One like Her was capable of directly interfering in the Mortal Realm to such an extent, it spoke volumes of the power she had amassed.

“*They have not spread beyond the city,*” Iskandarr noted, only moments after collapsing a building onto a mass of the possessed citizens.

“Maybe they are unable to,” Jakob replied. “But it means little to us either way. We must find the One that controls them.”

Thus far, they had only lost two constructs, the ones created from the guardsmen only a day prior, but even his tireless servants would reach their physical limits, as their bodies would not endure the constant attacks forever. Sooner or later their reinforced limbs and bodies would break. Jakob just hoped that they reached the Castle before then.

“Wothram! We move north at haste! Ensure no gaps are left open!”

Silently, the Golem complied and the formation of the constructs changed shape, becoming like a wedge, while Jakob rode forward with Iskandarr running alongside him.

With his spell-tome he turned the puppets into exploding fountains of blood, while Iskandarr utilised his destructive lightning to mass-electrify whole swathes of the oncoming bloodfiends.

As though touching down upon hallowed ground, Jakob and his entourage found a brief respite when they reached the Haven district. At first, a foolish part of him thought that maybe the Eight Saint and his veneration held some sway after all, but then he touched his hand to the limestones beneath them and felt how they had absorbed the indescribable energy of the Watcher’s gaze, back when Jakob had invoked His attention to obtain an Eye that has Witnessed the Divine.

He at once knew that his theory about *who* was possessing Guillaume had to be spot on, though he was loathe to believe it. But if the Flayed Lady’s claw guided the fiends that thronged the city, then she would be careful not to interfere in works of other Great Ones, least of all the one she was directly opposed to. He was sure that he would find a similar sanctuary from the fiends if he went to Market West.

*“The All-Seeing has directed one of his eyes upon this place,”* Iskandarr commented shortly after, coming to the same conclusion somehow. Jakob wondered if the Proudful or Envious parts of the Sovereign were responsible for his otherworldly senses to such things as the power and influence of the Absolutes.

“I invoked the Hymn of Devouring Madness in this place,” he revealed. “It seems the very stones yet recall the power that washed over them.”

*“And from this power a safeguard is created, for the possessed do not cross the water to assault us here.”*

“That is because they are led by the Flayed Lady.”

Iskandarr nodded, *“She yet seeks to destroy us. When her champion failed, she had already prepared this place to trap us.”*

Jakob had a realisation just then. “Perhaps what I seek from Grandfather is of more value than I realised. I can see no other reason as to why she would do this if the goal was to simply defeat us.”

*“Father.”*

The serious tone in Iskandarr’s voice surprised Jakob, but also made him worried about what he would say next.

*“You will seek your mentor and I will destroy the Daemon that lurks in the Castle’s depths.”*

Jakob was about to admonish his reckless plan as nothing but suicidal folly, but then realised that he was perhaps only held back by Jakob’s company, not to mention that he seemingly wielded a power over daemons that made him uniquely-suited for this very task.

“Very well.”

*“Hand me the tome you wield,”* Iskandarr added.

Without really thinking about it, Jakob obliged his progeny.

With the spell-tome holding the Covetous Daemon in his long-fingered and claws hands, Iskandarr spoke thusly:

*“Daemon that dwells in the pages of this tome, heed thy Sovereign and unfurl thy soul. My will cannot be denied. Be released of thy infernal bonds and manifest thyself before me.”*

A vile light of bright frost-blue and murky swamp-green began coiling around the spell-tome, before a *thrum* in the air grew-and-grew until Jakob thought his ears might explode, then came the wrenching sound of a hundred pages all tearing in half at once, before the vile light exploded outward and left behind full-bodied creature, the very creature that had been trapped within Jakob’s spell-tome for who knew how long.

A hiss emerged from the figure, who bore the appearance of a serpent with reptilian arms and legs. The scales of the creature glimmered emerald and gold, and its hetero-chromatic eyes mirrored their hues, while its half-metre tongue tasted the air and it looked around with a mix of disdain and obvious desire.

*“At last,”* Tchinn remarked, *“It has been so long since I possessed a body of my own.”*

Jakob could not believe it. Not only had Iskandarr miraculously unbound the Daemon slaved to the pages of the spell-tome, but he had somehow manifested its True form into existence, rather than just its untethered soul.

Then he felt the aura of the Daemon wash over him, but he had experienced the auras of Demons far greater and so he retained his faculties, though he could not completely shut out the intrusive thoughts.

*“Covetous Tchinn,”* Iskandarr said, *“Aid my Father in his task and I will let you return to your abode. As the Sovereign, my will cannot be denied.”*