



It was finally assembled in full and, as Jakob looked at the prone figure of his new mount, he felt proud in his accomplishment, though Heskell had more than once asked why he needed such a construct. Jakob supposed that to a being like Heskell, who was possessed of bottomless stamina and agility, it seemed weird, but to a human like him it made perfect sense.

“What are you going to name this one?” Ciana asked curiously. Her ethereal wing was twirling around behind her, as though mirroring her interest.

“I was going to have Heskell name it, but he refused.”

“So you’re still thinking?”

“Yes, but I’ll come up with something soon.”

“Sentience born anew, absorb from thy betters,”

“The knowledge once seeded and grown, now is harvested,”

“Imbibe of the fountain of experience.”

The construct walked around aimlessly after the Birthe Sentience rite was finished and the essence of Wothram’s knowledge and experiences had been copied over into it. It would perhaps take a while for it to learn to behave like a proper mount, but nonetheless Jakob took it outside for a test ride.

Ciana watched as Jakob’s new hand-crafted mount tore across the horizon, the young man clinging to it, a wicked grin on his face and the intensity in his eyes replaced with a steel-hard focus on where he was heading.

Given his abilities with most things, it was perhaps no surprise how quickly he had taken to riding, even though he started from scratch. She admired that about him. Through willpower and innate talent he was seemingly capable of achieving anything he set his mind to.

She watched him from where she leant against the outer wall of Hesslik for the better part of two hours, as he pushed his creation to its limits. A real horse, even a thoroughbred Charger, would have begun flagging after the first hour, but his facsimile was stronger and utterly tireless, still managing to go beyond its perceived top-speed when he continued pushing it.

It was an utter thrill to feel the air tear across his body, as the mount thundered across the landscape, moving faster than the birds of prey in the sky, faster even than the arrows of longbowmen who practiced north of Hesslik in an open field.

If not for the fact that preparations were required for the promised day of his Great Undertaking, he would have continued pushing the construct mount to its limits and indulged in the terrific feeling of being unstoppable.

“**It is time,**” Heskell told him, a fierce look in his eyes.

“Has it already been that long?” he wondered out loud, though he was aware of the passage of time.

“Do you think they will still hold the festival in Rooskeld?” Ciana asked naively.

“I doubt there are any people left to celebrate it,” he replied.

Jakob looked at the assembled requirements for the ritual which filled up their cart: the three massive stumps of the First Branch; the four skinned faces they had gathered; the Eye that had witnessed Divinity; the Relic of Virtue in the form of the once-was Saint’s ring; as well as four sacks of shredded silver, which Jakob had no clue how Heskell had managed to get his hands on.

“We still lack nine more faces,” he said.

“We will find those where we’re going to hold the Ritual,” Ciana replied confidently.

“You have found a good place?”

She nodded. “Jon’s Hamlet.”

“That’s close by. Why did you pick this place?”

“It’s the place where I was born. They have taken much from me there, and I wish to repay them.”

Jakob narrowed his eyes. “Now is no time for sentimentality.”

“Place is good.”

He let out a puff of condensate, and said, “Fine, but this *must* go according to plan. It is too important to be muddled by personal conflict and emotions.”

“It will not become a problem,” Ciana assured him.

“Then let’s go.”

With Jakob sitting atop the construct horse pulling the cart, wherein Heskell, Ciana, Wothram, Mayhew, and all their requirements lay, they moved out of the city of Hesslik.

Ciana was absentmindedly playing with her silver badge, perhaps upset that her illustrious journey as an Adventurer might be put on hold indefinitely. Heskell sat in silent contemplation, just like the two constructs, while Jakob carefully manoeuvred the mount through the narrow streets.

As they came out onto the thoroughfare, Jakob caught sight of the morgue he and Harmliig had spent the last many weeks in together. In a way, he would miss the easy comradery the two of them had shared, but if the Watcher willed it, they would cross paths again in the future.

They passed through the partially-reconstructed city gate and then hit the road that led east.

Sirellius looked at the Major’s bandaged face while she was delivering her report of the annihilation of the foul Undying Daemon. He despised the foul creature and its Summoner for what they had done to her, but he was at least glad that she had returned alive.

“Sire,” she continued, handing him a list of hastily-scribbled names. “These are some of the people who believe may still be under the Daemon’s influence.”

“You have done well, Major. It is a sad state of affairs that a single creature could devastate such a number of our best and brightest, but we Royal Guard are nothing if not determined and strong-willed.”

“Yes, Sire!”

“I will see which of these I can track down, though, with any hope, these are Lleman’s problem to deal with.”

“It is believed that the caravaners on the list are within their territory, yes.”

“With any hope, this will distract them from joining in on the war the Pope has just declared on us.”

Major Tress narrowed her remaining eye. “What have I missed?”

“It seems we are blamed for unleashing a Demon upon Octland, as though that is our way of warfare...”

“And it is being used to bring other nations into the conflict?”

“Indeed... Say, did you manage to locate the Summoner. Tell me you at least saw his corpse.”

“Unfortunately, no, Sire. He is believed to have escaped Rooskeld prior to our arrival. There is evidence of his magics within.”

“Evidence?” Sirellius asked, looking back up at where she stood erect, back straight and eyes looking straight ahead.

“Yes, Sire. A pond of black water was discovered to have ruined parts of the township. It bears perfect resemblance to reports out of Heimdale.”

“The Black Lakes of Lilibeth you mean?”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Where did you learn of such a thing? I believe it is above your station to know about it.”

Tress momentarily lost some of her flawless composure, but then admitted truthfully, “Nøgel, the Rose-Gold Adventurer, also known as the Divine Hand, is a friend of my grandfather. He has told me about it in the past, Sire.”

“It seems we share an acquaintance then,” Sirellius answered.

Tress finally locked eyes with him. “Truly?”

“He is a useful man to know. Without him, who knows where we would be?”

“I must confess something,” she told him. “I sent a missive to him about the ails of our fair city.”

Sirellius nodded. “I am aware.”

Tress’ face flushed slightly and she quickly looked down at her feet. “I will accept any punishment you deem fitting. It was not my place to presume we needed outside help!”

“You do not have to be so formal with me, Major. I am the only one privy to your transgression, and were I fully in charge of this nation, I would have done the same. And if not for you, the Summoner would go unpunished for his crimes, but now, with the Divine Hand seeking him, his days are numbered.”

Tress smiled. “I can rest easy knowing I did the right thing.”

“Indeed.”

“But now is no time to rest,” she continued. “I wish to aid our war-effort in whatever role is necessary!”

Sirellius looked at her bandaged face. “Rest for now. We have yet to fully mobilise and the logistics are still being considered, as well as the changes in strategy required by Heimdale and the Pope joining in on the fray. The time when I call upon you will come.”

Tress saluted him and left. When she was gone, Sirellius took the list and went up the stairs to his Scrying Chamber. He would make sure the foul Daemon remained entombed in the bowels of the castle, unable to spread its vile influence any further across their realm.