



Naught but black smoke and fiendish heat lived in the east wing following Ciana's spirited journey through its halls, torching all that she came across.

Heskel followed close behind as they crossed the threshold into the centre hall, where an organised assembly of demon-slaves and imp sentries surrounded a score of Magisters and their students. Before the defence could charge and corner them, as smoke and flames followed eagerly at their backs, the Brute lifted both his palms at the nearly-sixty-strong ensemble.

**“Stay behind me.”**

Ciana obeyed dutifully, having no idea what he was about to do. A few impatient bolts of fire and ice flew past them, though, as a whole, the assembly seemed content to let them surrender and beg for mercy, knowing how many of them were sure to die if they challenged the pair in open combat.

A deep hum emanated from Heskel, and, though she did not understand his alien language, she felt the meaning reverberate in her chest as he sung out-loud the words of his spell:

***“Nwetrou, Dweller of the Deep, I come bearing gifts to the mouth of your cave!”***

***“Nwetrou, Devourer of Suns, I have brought to your event horizon a feast for the ages!”***

***“Nwetrou, Leviathan of Leviathans, I pray you will gorge yourself upon my offering!”***

***“Nwetrou, open thy Devouring Maw!”***

The air froze in Ciana's lungs, and, for the merest of moments, she saw herself and all that surrounded her lifted off the floor, as an instant surge of water flooded the grand hall. When she blinked, she was on the floor again, nothing different than just a second prior. But then she looked up and saw an enormous shadow swim across the floor, cast by some creature that was invisible to her eyes.

A loud *slap* came as Heskel smacked his hands together, and then the shadow manifested into reality, tearing through the veil that separated everything logical from everything antithetical to reason.

When Ciana witnessed the Entity, it birthed a migraine that felt like ice-cold nails hammered through her cranium, and she felt blood drip eagerly from his nostrils, as well as burning tears running down her cheeks.

Legions upon legions of eyes, each with the complexity of a galaxy, studded the side of the Leviathan as it broke through the floor, its shadowy skin shedding brackens and underwater plants that immediately turned to water upon contact with reality. Large fins covered in strange flexible protrusions ran down its underside and a single giant fin ran down the length of its spine. Below the bottom of its maw, which opened around the entire group of Magisters, demons, students, and imps, were hundreds of tentacle-like feelers that looked almost like a beard. Above its top jaw were even more eyes. She was terrified at how many of them looked upon her and Heskel, an unfathomable intelligence scrutinising them.

With a tectonic blow that sent a devastating shockwave across the entire Academy and environs, the Leviathan snapped shut its great maw, before diving back into the floor again and leaving behind nothing except a dark bottom-less pond where before had stood a formidable defence barring their passage.

Ciana took a single step back, but found all the strength in her body drained and the migraine taking hold—

She awoke in the arms of Heskell, who seemed to have travelled far across the Academy grounds since summoning the otherworldly Entity in the centre hall.

“What... happened?”

The Brute came to a halt and set her down on her own two feet, though it took a few minutes for her to regain her balance.

“**Chthonic Hymn,**” he answered.

“You summoned that *thing*?”

Heskell nodded. “**Nwetrou is the Lord of the Depths. By invoking him, an aperture to his realm is born. Svalberg will be swallowed by water.**”

Ciana was not sure she truly understood what he meant, though it seemed that he had acquiesced to her selfish demand of destroying the Academy, though not by turning it to ash, but rather by feeding it to some otherworldly Devourer.

“If it will be flooded, don’t we have to hurry?”

“**The aperture to his depths will be slow to expand. Time is nothing to a Great One.**”

She looked around and realised where they were.

“Are we going to check the crypts next?”

The Brute nodded and they set off down the northern wing.

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Jakob sampled the newest selection of pastries and cakes that Pernille had brought, while carefully sipping the scalding tea she had made over the fireplace.

“*This one* is excellent,” Jakob remarked, lifting the half-eaten cake in the air.

“I thought you might like that one. Unfortunately, only one baker in town knows how to make it, and he only makes it once per week, as it is apparently quite labour intensive. It’s called a *Fragilité*.”

“And the tea?”

“Lemon, blood-orange, and camellia.”

Jakob had never tried such peculiar flavours before. Pernille was truly his guide in the world of acquiring new tastes. Ever since meeting her and having her prepare these afternoon teas and cakes for him every day, he had completely lost the desire to eat corpse-meal ever again.

“Erm, Magister...”

“Yes, Pernille.”

“Would your... *assistant*... like some too?”

Jakob twisted around in his chair and saw Zelesti leant against the doorway to the stairs leading down to the consultation room. Though the construct, into which he had planted the Demon’s soul, possessed an inexpressible face, he could easily read her body language and the reluctant desire she exuded, wanting to be included in their afternoon tea.

“Zelesti. You don’t have a mouth.”

“*I care not.*”

Jakob scratched his stubble. Envy Demons were like petulant children it seemed. Their bothersome personalities certainly explained why Grandfather had opted not to introduce him to such a demon during his training.

“Pernille, would you mind getting another cup?”

“Of course, Magister.”

The Receptionist quickly found another cup, teaspoon, saucer, dessert plate, and pastry fork. After setting them on the knitted tablecloth, she fetched a chair from one of the backrooms on the second floor that they she used for storage.

When she returned with the chair, Zelesti stalked over and took a seat, her lithe and dainty puppet-form undermined by her unhinged mannerisms. After having tea poured in her cup and a slice of gooseberry tart served on her plate, Zelesti stared at Jakob and Pernille for a while, as they themselves indulged in their desserts and beverages.

“More?” Pernille asked, when Jakob had drained his cup. He gave her his cup and she refilled it with a smile.

Meanwhile, Zelesti stared between the two of them, observing their interactions and the ways they moved. Then she eventually lifted the cup to her sculptured lips, pretended to drink, and settled the cup on the saucer.

“Aaaah.”

Next she lifted the tart to her mouth, getting crumbs and gooseberry jam all over her chest and mask.

“*Delicious,*” the demon announced, mimicking their behaviour like a child.

Jakob sighed and scratched his stubble absentmindedly.

“Pernille.”

“Yes, Magister?”

“Would you mind buying me a razor when you go out next?”

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When they reached the stairs leading down into the depths below the Academy, Ciana froze as the terrors of her childhood assailed her once again and she felt her resolution falter. She did not want to venture down those steps, because an irrational fear told her that she would not ever leave if she did.

Heskel’s massive had pushed her lower back forward. It was an impatient and cold-hearted gesture, but in it lay a proud strength that seemed to promise that nothing could harm them.

Ciana took a deep breath and then took the stairs one at a time, while the Brute moved ahead of her with echoing steps that sounds like bellowing drums as they reverberated down into the underworld.

After what felt like an hour, they reached a plateau at the foot of the stairwell and were greeted by a long serpentine hall that seemed to run back down the way they had travelled above ground. Along the way, the crypt was lit by eerie white flames that, despite their peculiar composition, scarcely gave off any light.

“This is different from how I remember it,” she said. During her interment within the crypts, they had been merely a short hall that ended in an oval chamber. She considered that perhaps her memory was flawed, but when she looked at the stones, they seemed to have been laid recently, with the ones underfoot barely scuffed, unlike the ones of the two wings they had crossed, where the marbled stone was worn smooth.

They eventually reached a dead-end in front of which stood two immobile human-like statues. The Brute wasted no time, charging straight for the rightmost one, but before his fist could pulverise its head, the twin statues awoke with a reddish hue suffusing their sculpted bodies like a second skin.

The right statue caught the Brute's fist and slammed its free hand into his head with such force that, when Heskell's face met the stone wall, the stones cracked from the impact. He quickly grabbed the next punch aimed at his mask, and, with a show of his tremendous strength, lifted the statue into the air, before slamming it down on his knee, splitting the dense body in half.

Ciana had only managed to scratch the other statue guardian with her sword and had realised that her skills were no match for a body that could not be cut, so she devoted all of her attention to simply avoiding its devastating attacks.

After breaking the guardian in half, Heskell crushed its head on his heel and, with a series of punches, reduced the one that Ciana was fighting to clumps of inert stone.

She nodded her thanks, before wondering out-loud, "What do we do now?"

Heskell looked around the dead-end, then began sniffing the air. Ciana quickly imitated him and caught the scent on the stagnant air. It seemed to be coming through the walls.

"Can you break down this wall?" she asked, pointing to the dead-end.

He walked right up to the wall and slammed his fists into it, though, aside from an echo that travelled down the length of the serpentine tunnel, nothing seemed to happen. Unperturbed, however, he continued wailing on the wall, until the same reddish light that had been emanating from the statue guardians began to appear in a spider-web pattern all over the stones. For a couple of minutes, Heskell pounded on the wall with tireless single-mindedness, before his efforts bore fruit in an explosion of light and the total disintegration of the stone wall.

As the dead-end wall fell apart, a large octagonal room was revealed, within which a solitary figure was chained to the ground with chains of stone covered in demonic script that glowed with an inner light. In the far end of the room, three Magisters cowed behind an overturned desk.

The trio cast a barrage of spells at them, but Ciana quickly moved across the space, giving the central figure a wide berth, before cutting them apart in a masterful display of swordsmanship.

Behind the upturned desk and dead Magisters, stood a handful of bookcases and shelves, which were brimming with strange-looking tomes, crumbled parchment rolls, and pages so ancient they seemed as though a gentle breeze would break them apart.

Ciana had assumed the Brute would immediately join her to study the texts, as this seemed their best bet at finding what he was looking for. Instead, however, he was standing before the chained figure in the middle of the room.

"What's wrong?" she called.

He did not have to yell for his voice to reach her. "**Elphin.**"

Ciana felt a spike of ice pierce her body at the word. She had not even noticed. She set down the leather-covered tome she had been holding and came over to where he stood.

She was unsure how Heskell had realised the figure was an Elphin, as its horns had been torn off, its hands and hooves were removed, and, most crucially, its wing was missing. An Elphin without its wing was a soulless husk, she had seen it enough times to know that the pitiable creature before them was not long for this world.

It was hard to tell if she was looking at a male or female Elphin, given the young age of the chained figure.

"Why does she smell like—?"

"**A Daemon...**"

"Is that what they smell like?"

Heskell nodded.

The scent was like a mixture of all the demons she had had the misfortune of scenting over her lifetime, but there was also an underlying fragment of something else. Demons generally smelled according to the Vices they exemplified, meaning those of Pride, like Ciana's mother, had a regal and authoritative smell to them, while those of Wrath smelled like blood and ash.

Ciana could distinguish both of these smells, as well as the smells of burnt fat, cloying decay, ozone, lavender and roses, but also *that* peculiar fragment of something utterly alien.

When the creature opened its eyes, the right one held two pupils that moved independently of each other, red and emerald green, and the left eye was milky-white.

"What happened to her?" she asked, having the uneasy feeling that the Elphin before them had once been female.

**"Mass possession."**

"Possession? As in Demons?"

Heskel nodded solemnly. **"Elphin sacred. For this, Nwetrou is too kind a punishment."**

"What should we do with her?"

He shook his head gravely. She understood what that meant.