

Jon's Hamlet was dull village, its few dozen inhabitants all seeming to go through life with no aspirations or enjoyment of the life they had. It was just like Ciana recalled.

What she despised most was that, after all this time, nothing had changed. As if to really underline this, the hanging tree had a fresh new corpse hanging from one of its thick branches. Even in such a place, with such blatant misery, the people still had time to be hateful creatures that hurt and killed any who they deemed easy prey or as something foreign to disturb their meagre peace.

"What a dreadful place," Jakob commented, his eyes travelling over the village centre, many of its people openly staring at him and his retinue, either from doorways or out of windows.

She was glad he shared her sentiment.

"Ready to begin?" he asked her.

She nodded, steely determination taking hold of her. Then she brought the mask up to her face and said:

*"Belamouranthyne, my eyes are thine and all they see belongs to thee."*

Just like every time before, power flowed from the mask and into her face, stinging her as though a thousand hair-thin needles pierced her flesh and spread a bone-aching cold throughout her body, making her muscle tense painfully. But then it faded and she was left with just the overwhelming sense of power that occupied her eyes.

*I have been awaiting you, Ciana Half-spawn. What souls have you come to gift me with today?*

"A proper feast is what I have gathered," she told the Enthralling Daemon, then strode towards the nearest house and kicked the door down, immediately locking eyes with the first man she saw.

"Gift me your face," she told him. With a passing gesture, she annihilated the other unfitting occupants with her destructive vibrations.

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While the Elphin moved through every house in the village, harvesting the skinned faces they needed, Jakob and Heskell, alongside the two bone constructs Wothram and Mayhew, got to work clearing space for the enormous ritual they needed to invoke Nharlla.

A tense ache in Jakob's lungs was the only indicator of the tremendous excitement and apprehension he felt. It was an anxious mix of many different conflicting feelings. One on hand, he felt that he was nearing the most important moment in his life, but on the other hand, he worried that the moment he invoked Nharlla, the veil of reality with burst apart and doom every denizen of their world and cutting his own life short. It was, however, his belief that he would be spared somehow. Though the Great Ones were unknowable in their millennia-spanning schemes, he doubted the Watcher would have brought him to this point, only to cut his life short.

After the ground had been properly prepared, he sat on the edge of their cart, his yet-to-be-named horse construct trotting around somewhat aimlessly. Unlike Wothram and Mayhew, the mount did not seem to enjoy remaining still while having no task to perform. It surprised Jakob, because it had started out as functionally-identical in spirit to Wothram, but its different form and utility had already shaped its Birthed Sentience towards something very different.

Heskell came over, lifting the skinned face of Harland up before Jakob.

“What?”

“**How acquire?**”

“I used Elf’s Lure.”

Heskel tossed the skinned face back into the cart. “**No good.**”

“I know. But it matters not, we will have more than enough faces for Nharlla’s offering.”

With a grunt the Wight left. He seemed very antsy for some reason that Jakob did not fully comprehend.

He had known that making someone skin their own face, while under the Elf’s Lure, would not count as a ‘given willingly’. Though the Euphoric had the uncanny ability to utterly remove someone inhibitions and apprehensions, it was still coercion, or at the very least a trade. It seemed a devious thing to have the addition of ‘given willingly’ required for something that by the very nature of the act would require violence or coercion in any normal setting. But then, it was an esoteric requirement for a reason.

While he continued to watch the dreary village and listened to the sounds of vacuum explosions and struggling, alongside the barely-audible noise of flesh and skin being torn, Heskel started drawing the outline in the ground with a stick he had found.

The ritual diagram, though obscured thanks to being described using Chthonic Sigils, would be a massive thing. It consisted of tiers that had to be made from compacted earth, whereupon the various tolls would be placed in a seemingly-nonsensical pattern, and every ‘line’ would have to be ‘drawn’ using the shredded silver shavings.

It made Jakob uncomfortable that he had to leave the majority of the work to Heskel, and it was even more humbling and unsettling that he could not even check the Tungsten Scroll and help keep the linework true or the placements properly aligned. He wished dearly that he could read the archaic alphabet, but, thus far, he had only been able to memorise six of the countless sigils, and even then, he was unsure how they would be read in a sentence.

To his eyes, it was like trying to decipher text written in flames. The lines constantly shifted and getting too close would scald his skin and singe his hair.

He let out a puff of air.

The scent of Misty Reminiscence was mostly gone now, the scent-ball eroded to the point of being a thin film within the nose of his mask, caused by his constant breathing. He would make another, but at this point it seemed rather meaningless, not to mention, he required a proper setup for it and Jon’s Hamlet was as deprived of technology as it was deprived of humanity.

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Ciana wiped her hands on some linen fabric that had been used in one of the houses as a tablecloth. Her work was finally complete and she had been thorough.

Not a soul remained of the former inhabitants of Jon’s Hamlet. Most had been reduced to obliterated husks or barely-recognisable stains of blood and viscera. Those whom her mask had not worked on she had been merciful with, killing them in an instant before they even knew to fear her. Although, by the end, the remaining villagers had caught on to what was happening and tried to fight back or flee. She had found them all and slain them with her devastating noise that pulped them from the inside out in a single moment.

However, the men, those faceless pitiable souls, she had gathered to her, after they had willingly given her their faces. It was an uncanny sight to behold all the bleeding and grievously-injured men and adolescents who stared at her like she was the only thing in the world that mattered to them. The

power of Belamouranthyne, the Daemon who Enthralled all Men who saw Her, was such a frightening and exhilarating ability. Even if only half the world's population were men, the Elphin Mask was a tool of total dominion, if only put to proper use. But Ciana was sure there was some demerit to it, after all, the Daemon remarked that she was feasting upon the souls of those she enslaved somehow. What exactly *that* implied was yet unknown to her, but it was doubtfully something good.

She had the faceless men trail behind her, holding their faces in their hands as though they were offerings to a shrine, before she came to a halt on the fringe of the large diagram the Brute was busy setting up.

Ciana looked over the outline and already it was enormous and complex to the point that she had trouble looking at it without feeling a stinging pain in the back of her head.

"Jakob. What do you want me to do with these?" she asked, making sure to look down and away, so that her enchanting eyes did not touch his and bring him under her dominion.

The Fleshcrafter was seated on the front of the cart, deep in contemplation.

"Do we need their blood?" she continued.

With a single glance over the assembled faceless crowd of men, he replied, "I admire your forethought, but beyond their skinned faces, we require nothing more of them."

Ciana turned on her adoring followers, who all revelled in her gaze, as though their eyes meeting being the only things they required in the world.

"Leave your faces here, then run to Svalberg and dive into the black lake within its Academy grounds."

In an orderly line, the faceless men left their offerings at her feet, all of them smiling and pleased to do her bidding. Then they started running in a straight line southwest, as though knowing the shortest route to the place, despite many of them clearly never having travelled beyond the village in their lifetimes.

As she watched them run off, she said, "*Belamouranthyne, return my eyes to me for thy offering has been duly given.*"

*You have gifted me with a delicious feast, Ciana Half-spawn. I hope you will call upon me again soon.*

Jakob came up behind her, while she was taking the mask off.

"How many do you think will make it to the academy? It is more than four-hundred kilometres from here."

"Want to take a bet?"

From behind both of them, they heard Heskell grunt: "**Six.**"

They both turned to look at the Brute, but he had already gotten back to work. They shared a brief glance, Ciana finding laughter bubbling up from her stomach despite the grimness of the situation.

"There were seventeen of them," Jakob started, "Three were clearly on the brink of bleeding to death. Eight of them will no doubt succumb due to their old age. The remaining six might make it, given that they seemed hardy enough, but, accounting for trouble they might encounter on the way, I'll say three."

She did not need to consider it that long and then answer: "I think eight will make it."

Jakob chuckled. "We will have to make a stop by Svalberg and see who is right, once we're done here."

"Are we going to Helmsgarten?"

He nodded. "Armed with our gifts from Nharlla, I will finally face Grandfather," he told her confidently.