

CHAPTER TWO

Ratima

Return

We hasten back to the camp. The Master fears no pursuit; the demons in the graveyard have had enough. So we make the half hour stroll in twelve minutes. And not a second too early.

The part of the wall I helped to build has already crumbled again. Demons corpses litter the palisades, impaled on stakes, burned beyond recognition of their source materials, hacked apart; but among them, human corpses, sisters but also some of the workers I formed a bond with earlier. They had tried to defend the camp with their hammers, shovels, and callused hands.

On an intact part of the wall, I spot Fiora. She is bathed in sweat. Strands of hair are glued to her skin, the band most sisters use has long failed to keep it in check. Nevertheless, she lifts a soulgem high, and its rising blue glow causes another ripple of salty liquid to stream from her brow. Her arm trembles as she strains to contain and focus the magical energy.

Finally, a beam of light so white it burns rainbow afterimages through the air shoots out, incinerating a swath of demons on the spot. A twin blast emanates from the camp's only entrance, where Astarte is protected by Kalusia and a few other sisters, desperately hacking away at a seemingly never-ending stream of goblins. For a moment, it seems they have carved a path for a sortie, to reach the enemy leader: the seven-fingered "colonel" that Selena had sent out. Kalusia calls for a charge, and two sisters and three civilians join her, among them Iwar. But the gap in the enemy army is already closing, and on the wall I see Fiora faint from her exertion. Only a worker's quick thinking bewares her of a fatal fall, as he yanks her backwards with the flat part of a rake.

"It's pointless, sisters!" The colonel yells with an awful sneer in his voice. "Submit to Chthon, and I'll have you killed painlessly. I need your heads pristine as trophies for my mistress!"

"Hey, I can promote you to her position right now," the Master says. The demon whips around and stumbles backwards as he sees us right in front of him. It's way too late for him to escape, of course, despite the Master warning him needlessly. I grab him by the shoulder, yank him towards us, and the skeletons fillet him.

The sisters are as surprised as he was. But Kalusia thinks quickly, and her charge is already underway. She gives a war cry to spur a final gathering of strength. We answer the call by plowing full force into the demon army from behind. Leaderless, trapped in a pincer, they crumble in minutes.

Not long after, as soon as the wounded are stabilized, the demon corpses gathered up for burning, and the dead prepared for burial, the sisters drag us into Astarte's tent. She has lost most of her previous composure, shivers from exertion. Fiora, who pushed herself farther or was less experienced, has woken up less than ten minutes ago. She's into her third bowl of soup and only just slowing down. Around a mouthful of jerky to replenish her energy at least a little, Astarte barely controls her anger.

"Do you have any explanation for why you decided to leave the camp barely an hour before the biggest attack yet?"

"We lost many brave women and men because you were off playing at heresy!" Kalusia makes no effort to control her fury.

"Seems like you would have lost a lot more without me," the Master answers with a very level voice.

"Nobody would have had to die if you had helped us defend from the start!" Kalusia slams her fist on the table. Astarte puts her trembling hand on the Provost's shoulder. Her eyes pierce the Master's heart with daggers of ice.

"I'm waiting for the explanation still."

The Master crosses his arms. "They managed to summon more and more leaders recently. For that, they need stronger bodies than what they can fashion flora and fauna into. I realized, therefore, that the graveyard must be key to their supplies."

Fiora looks offended for a second that he claims her information as his own deduction, but then focuses on her soup again when it crosses her mind that this leaves her blameless.

"On that whim, you went out on your own after you had given up the ability to summon more skeletons?" Kalusia seems honestly baffled.

The Master points to me. "Got this guy."

"Not for much longer." Astarte manages to stand without shaking. "This golem is making you even more reckless, General. And you really cannot risk it becoming sentient. We would have to treat you very differently if it were."

He shoots me a glance before addressing the Abbess again. "You're not interested in what I found in the graveyard?"

"How did you even know about it?" Kalusia's voice is sharper than the edge on her blade.

The moment hangs for a second, before another voice cuts the thread suspending it and brings it crashing down. "I told him before I let him go."

All eyes turn to Fiora. She's still staring at her soup. "Your tactics weren't working. He had an idea that might."

"That was *not* your responsibility to decide." Kalusia advances on her. "Are you completely out of your mind? I should have you stripped of every rank - your clothes as well, and flogged! All your dead comrades -"

"Provost." Astarte's word has the force of a golem's grip. "What did you find at the graveyard, General?"

"Selena."

Kalusia's attention snaps back to him. It's impossible to tell what emotions cross her face. She whispers only one word that sounds like a crashing wave in the utter silence of the tent. "How?"

The Master sighs. "Beyond death. Sisters, I'm afraid the situation is worse than we thought. Chthon managed to turn her. She was in command of their entire operation."

"Not in a thousand years would Selena betray us." Kalusia's sentiment is echoed in outraged whispers among the others sisters in the room. Fiora looks disgusted at the thought.

"I don't think she made a choice." The Master speaks very softly. "They had a gem embedded in her neck. Controlled her very soul with it."

"General, please." Fiora's voice is breaking. "You don't have to make up an excuse. We made a wrong choice. *I* made one, should have reported your plans. I truly am sorry."

Kalusia snorts, and gestures to two sisters to prepare to take Fiora in custody, and two others to move towards me and the Master. Is this it? Will they just hack me apart without a word of protest from him?

He holds Astarte's gaze without a blink. After long, long seconds, she lowers it. "It is possible."

"Really, Astarte? *Selena* turning?"

"Provost, I realize that this is a very personal matter, but I do not intend to waste what little we can gain from this disaster. General, did you learn anything while investigating the graveyard?"

"It appears we cannot expect help from the capital. Selena was already talking about ongoing looting in Ratima."

Fiora straightens her back. "Then we would defend this hill for nothing. Chthon has not been delayed at all by our defense."

"We have no proof!" Kalusia is truly angry now. "Astarte, please put an end to this farce. The General has been unstable for days now. We can only pray to Eloure that the influence of the infernal gem on his soul lessens without exposure to it, and lock him up until then."

The Master, finally, makes the gesture I have been waiting for this entire time. I step forward, startling many who had forgotten about the clay statue I was, and slam the contents of a burlap sack onto the table in relief tinged with desperation.

Selena's head and her crimson controller. Almost without thinking I made it so she's staring dead-eyed at Kalusia.

"The graveyard is purged. We just obliterated the remaining demons. The camp is successfully defended, congratulations." The Master cannot and I suspect does not want to eliminate the burning acid from his voice.

Everyone is frozen in a moment like being half-submerged in a swamp.

Fiora clears her throat.

"I wish to challenge Provost Kalusia's leadership."

Travel to Ratima

There was a lot of turmoil. Fiora's bid for power was a low blow to Kalusia at her most vulnerable, and left a sour taste in many sisters' mouths. Astarte wasn't happy at all. But it was obvious to everyone that Kalusia had set the camp up for annihilation, in blind faith to an Elysium that was too busy for our small community of refugees. The only thing saving even the abbess' authority was, paradoxically, her tentative support of the Master. Who, with one desperate strike at the enemy's staging grounds, had turned from leered-at outcast into heroic savior. Sure, the more strictly adherent of the sisters still could not reconcile their faith with his practices, but they had to swallow their beliefs before so many relieved faces, who were just happy the infernal siege had been lifted.

The sisters' unlikely thanaturge ally spent just one day cooped up in his tent recuperating. He washed off his make-up, sent me to fetch him food - he'd needed plenty, but had staunchly refused to wolf it down during the impromptu trial - and then, until exhaustion knocked him clean out, scribbled into and pondered over his notes.

During the night, desperate to find something to do, I ripped out an arm, used it as a brick in the wall, sucked more of the building clay into me to regenerate myself, and ripped out the other arm. I used legs, chunks of chest, thought of the head but couldn't bring myself to do it. Finally, when the sun rose to blot out both moons, I felt confident in my regeneration, and hadn't spent a second trying to answer any questions lurking in the depths of the maelstrom.

First thing in the morning, eyes lined black and white hair slicked, the Master got together with Fiora. He used his newfound clout to argue for the campaign against the demons to continue. And the new Provost, obviously, agreed. They immediately agreed that the Master, his skeletons and me could not stay passively cooped up with the other refugees - resentment would rise again, and the sisters didn't need him with the graveyard secured. A bit more contentious was the next point: no warriors could be spared to assist the Master. Especially not with a recent leadership change. He pondered for a bit, but eventually agreed that there was still too much looming distrust anyway.

That left two options for us: try and retake the abbey, or investigate capital city Ratima, hoping to find it merely under siege, and get help and information there.

To keep the peace, they consulted with Astarte, who was not happy to let the Master - and me - leave her supervision, but saw the arguments. She declared the abbey plan selfish, and that it would be of merely sentimental value - the sisters could join forces with able warriors in the city, but the initial chthonic attack had left the abbey empty, with everyone not dead fled to the camp.

Ratima was not close, however. And we had precious little supplies to do something about that.

So the Master asked talented Iwar for help, who was happy to. With the help of the masons - who had found themselves out of work overnight thanks to me - he designed a boat with two simple propeller engines. Someone had kept a soul converter with them

during the escape, and another was improvised from what Iwar had left in his impromptu workshop.

Even Fiora was unhappy about the final result, which involved two infernal soulgems - from the first leader I killed, and Selena's controller - powering the engines through the converters. However, this was the one way we could hope to reach Ratima within a night and a day's travel, bypassing kilometers of jungle. So they gritted their teeth again, made the Master promise to be extremely careful and never touch the gems directly, and bid him farewell. We left in the evening with food and a scant few valuables - make-up casket, the tome and money - with the inhabitants of the camp bidding us farewell, the sisters already preparing a party to make sure the graveyard was empty, and set up a second camp there.

The skeletons carried the boat, I carried our belongings, the Master carried himself proudly. And so we reached the river quickly, launched the boat into brown water. There we are now, on the shore, and the Master looks at the vessel like it's an angry cat hissing at him.

"It's a good plan, and I'm not one to argue especially when things are generally going my way.
But would you believe me I've never seen this much water at once?"

I have no idea what to do with this question.

The Master takes a few deep breaths. "Hold this blasted thing steady and let's get this over with."

Soon, he stands between the two soul converters with a hand on each, and closes his eyes. "This *should* be easy," he murmurs to himself. "I'm not in over my head. I'm, in fact, way above the water, which is part of the problem. This is like steering a minecart, but with less expensive cargo. Come on."

He presses his eyes shut even more, digs his fingers into the converter grips, then suddenly jerks up straight, and along with his rise, the boat lifts a little out of the river. A low hum from the soulgems turns into a frothing rhythm as the propellers start turning. The boat moves, slowly at first as the Master gently increases the flow of soul energy into each propeller. He decreases the amount sent to the right one - we turn there. Same for the other side, we start drifting. He quickly increases the right again, but too much, and we start spinning and almost capsize. As I hold on, unsure of how to best move to not further destabilize the vessel, I wonder if I'm waterproof.

But with some obvious effort, he manages to steady the boat by increasing the downward force of the soul energy to lift it almost completely out of the water. Very carefully, he then immerses us again, starts the propellers ever so gently, and we drift along like a snail up a window, until he finally musters enough courage to increase our speed.

After half an hour, he still holds the grips more firmly, expends more mental effort than the strong soulgems would require, but the wind dries his sweating brow, my body shields him from the splashing water, the skeletons keep the sides balanced, and our provisions are safe. He slowly begins to relax, maybe even enjoy himself a little. But nightfall is imminent, and the river is not always gentle.

"Alright, that's enough for today. Help me look for a good landing spot."

From our trouble getting in, I guess he wants it to be as flat as possible. Before long, I see a suitable break in the riverbed's vegetation ahead and point it out to him.

"Good eye," the Master says with a hint of pride. It's becoming increasingly obvious that my senses are as superhuman as my strength.

Disembarking proves simple with three out of four members of our party not caring about getting wet. At least the Master seems to think that I should not care, the way he orders me into the drink; fortunately, I seem to hold up just fine, the clay is always slightly moist after all.

A small clearing a few meters in provides a good camping ground. We have a tent, a pot, flint. The Master stares disapprovingly on the latter.

"Who has time for that." He orders his army to gather wood, which devolves into me discarding almost every branch the skeletons blindly gather because they're too wet, while the Master takes a short trip back to the shore.

He returns with something wrapped in a blanket. When he flaps the fabric open, I get the impression of an avalanche hurtling down my spine - it's one of the soulgems.

"Let's see..." He points it at the pile of firewood, but nothing happens. His face contorts, he strains, but to no avail.

"Maybe I do have to touch it?" He moves his free hand.

Dark visions of Selena, completely lucid but in the thrall of Chthon, fill my mind. Without a moment's hesitation, I lunge forward and slap the gem out of his hand.

"Are you insane?", he yells. "What in Chthon's name are you thinking?"

He freezes when it penetrates what he just asked me. His skin turns the color of his hair, and he slowly takes a step back, then another.

"That's impossible. You shouldn't be able to -" He turns from afraid to angry within the space of a heartbeat. "How dare you even? You're supposed to obey, you must -"

His breath turns heavy, he shakes his head quickly. "No, no, no." Like hounded by a predator just around the corner, he runs to his chest of valuables, not sparing me constant nervous glances. I can only stand there, ashamed of what I've done and unable to decide how bad I should really feel, while he yanks his notes out and ruffles through the pages.

"I modified the spell. A basic version, suited for a novice. Yes, the necromantic variant. Not thanaturgy. No sentience, no soul facsimile. How even? I can't do that." He looks up at me with wide-eyed wonder. "Or can I?"

He holds the notes tight to his body as if they could protect him. His other hand shoots forward to point at me. "Can you think?"

I don't think there is a point in pretending. I nod.

"Feel sentient? Intelligent? Capable of your own decisions?"

I shrug. I guess? What else is "thinking"? But I do nod after a bit of contemplation.

He licks his lips. "But will you still obey me?"

Now that is a question I'm not sure I'm prepared to answer.

The Talk

When after a while I still haven't moved, the Master wets his lips again. "Listen, we might have started on the wrong foot here. I didn't know - I didn't want to -"

He hides his face behind a stern palm. "I'm sorry. I'm trying to deal with this the best I can, okay? All this skeleton shit, and you, I'm just figuring it out as I go. I thought I could take it slow, but then -"

With a sweeping gesture, he encompasses the state of the world. His face is now free, and I can see tears beginning to form in his eyes. Now I have even less of an idea what to do. Should I hug him? Does he deserve one? To do something at least, I move a little closer, trying to seem as unthreatening as possible.

But then I freeze.

Was that a natural sound of the jungle, or a rustle of something else?

"Are you okay?", the Master asks with a tremble in his voice, but I hold up a hand. And listen.

That's not a natural rustle.

I point towards the source, then slam my fist into the open palm of the other hand. The Master's eyes widen, and seem to dry instantly.

"Alright, we'll postpone this then." The skeletons group around him. We look up into the foliage, the vines hanging off the trees, and try to discern any movement in the darkness of the sparsely moon-lit jungle.

They break down on us like a shower of knives. Monkey-like demons, all claws and fury. We were as ready as we could be, and still, a skeleton succumbs almost instantly. I grab one that dropped from above me out of the air, twirl it around and slam another one that's flying towards my face to the ground with it. The Master yells as two get dangerously close, I run towards him, ignoring fresh claws on my back. All of what just happened between us - it needs to be furthest from my mind now. The next seconds will decide if he lives or dies. I need to fight better than I ever did. My mind conjures the maelstrom, and I jump headfirst into it.

"You can stop now!" The Master screams. Like the moment when I first became aware, a picture jumps at me: a mutilated ape demon corpse, which I am currently turning to a fine paste. I cease any movement, but it doesn't stop the gore from dripping down my fists. What in the shine of Elysium's light just happened? I cannot look away from the scene of horror I apparently caused, it burns itself into my mind like a branding iron was thrust into my skull.

I feel a hand on my shoulder. The Master very carefully inserts himself into my cone of vision. "Calmed down? Anger vented at things that aren't me? Can we sit down and talk about this, please?"

He takes a look at the scene of carnage. "Somewhere else, maybe."

While we pick up our things, he kicks one of the more intact corpses. "Wonder how they found us?"

I point at the faintly glowing infernal gem he has ignored so far.

"Don't be silly. The sisters are literally holier than thou about this stuff." He ponders it for a bit. "But why take a risk? Put it back in the converter, it should soak up any possible emissions of soul energy or whatever it is that might attract demons."

I gingerly wrap the thing into the cloth he brought it here with. He looks like he's about to say something else, but then just says "Thanks."

Soon, we have found a new clearing, he managed to start a small fire the old-fashioned way, and he's warmed some gruel over it. With a big bowl of it in his lap, he turns to me and suddenly looks very scared.

"So." He takes a heaping spoonful, then another. He sighs. "I have no idea how to start this. Maybe with an apology?" He eats another two bites, and I realize that during the fight that is completely absent from my memory, he must have replaced both skeletons, maybe multiple times.

"I should not have tried summoning you from half-remembered notes," he finally continues around a third spoon of gruel. "But I really had no choice. The tome that gave me all my thanaturgic knowledge is gone. I do have some talent - you're the proof - but obviously not enough."

He puts down the rapidly-emptied bowl. "Maybe this will help you see why I was so desperate for stronger servants. Said tome, I found it when my life was at its lowest, and it gave me a way to fight myself out of this hole, both physically and because I felt it gave me purpose. The sisters say that there's a plan for everyone Elysium's light touches, and at that point I hadn't seen light for a long time. But that monumental coincidence of finding a book that opened to me a power I didn't know I had? There must be a reason for that."

He looks up to see the moon shine through the foliage, and grins. A skeleton starts moving, climbing awkwardly up a knotty tree.

"I managed to find a protector in Iwar, who promised to take me on his travel to peddle his wares to new markets. That's how I ended up in the abbey, where the sisters tried to convince me that Eloure could give me the guidance I - in their eyes - I desperately needed."

He holds out his hand, and the skeleton that successfully returned from the trip up the tree drops a papaya into it. With seeds spilling from his mouth, the Master continues.

"I can't say I fully agree, but their discipline helped me a lot to try and understand the Tome of Thanaturgy in a more focused way. Sadly, they also prevented me from experimenting much. Not too many raw materials available."

He takes another papaya and stares at it. "And then Saule showed up." His fingers bruise the fruit, but he still just holds it. "He was also from El Alanei. Son of our esteemed Duchess Shynn Jelar. Arrived with a full honor guard in a floating palanquin. Made up and adorned like an angel. Just a boring diplomatic function for him, outreach to the neighboring faiths. But things got exciting for him when he saw me - and the Tome."

Papaya juice drips down the Master's fingers. "He ingratiated himself with me. Asked all the questions. I can't say I wasn't flattered, but still cautious, until he showed me something."

He touches his hair, which stains it orange. "Same color as mine underneath the heavy dye. That's a secret you don't just reveal to anyone. We began what I thought a friendship, I really fell for his wiles."

Finally, the Master slurps up the fruit's remains. "But then he tried out summoning a skeleton too, I stole a songbird from a cat just to give Saule something to play with." A dry chuckle. "I still have the scars from that idiocy."

Of course, it worked." His expression becomes like a black cloud about to unleash lightning. "He has the talent, too. And the very next day, I woke up to a missing tome, a burning abbey, people dying in the hallways. Chthon attacked the high seat of the Elourian faith, with demons wearing the uniforms of Saule's honor guard."

The skeleton crushes the final fruit it was holding. The Master doesn't seem to notice. "I'm absolutely sure that he is responsible for this. He summoned demons to cover him taking the Tome, becoming a Thanaturge and - I don't know what else he wants. But you realize why I can't tell the sisters, right?"

I incline my head. It's been a lot to learn, I cannot make the connection.

"They already think necromancy, much less thanaturgy, is vile, and tolerate me personally because they think they can convince me to let it go. If they learn that another budding thanaturge caused all this..."

I nod.

"They can't know it, and they can't know that you are sentient as well. Can you keep these secrets for me?"

I shrug and nod. There's no real way for me to spill them, after all.

"Thank you. Now, can you see why I pushed so hard to make you, using what little notes Saule didn't find when he stole the Tome?"

I want an explanation in his words, so I cross my arms and wait.

He sighs. "It's stupid to say this is my fault - it's his, of course. But I'm the only one who knows that. If I can catch up to him, wherever he ran off to - I might have a chance to find out why he did it. Take back the Tome, its secrets. Prevent him from calling down more demons.

He extends his hand, and the skeleton drops some seeds and juice in it. The Master wrinkles his brow, then wipes his hand. "It's my responsibility to stop him. Stop Chthon as well, I guess. Whatever their infernal plan for this war is. Will you help me with that?"

Stop Chthon's demons? Those twisted bodies made from poor animals and plants and sometimes humans? With which they kill many more, in a sudden war without a reason given?

There still are many lingering questions left for me, but the image of the mutilated demons waiting to assault me whenever my thoughts drift off gives one clear answer at least: I do not want to be a weapon. And without a war to fight, I won't need to be one.

I nod emphatically.

A tension flees the Master's body we both didn't notice he held throughout this one-sided conversation. He gets up and walks around the dying embers of the fire, stops in front of me but doesn't know what to do next. Finally, he puts a still slightly sticky hand onto my shoulder.

"Then I'm happy to have you as a willing companion for my lone mission."

It does feel good to be called more than a servant. Another, deeper tension falls off me: my act of rebellion did help me, after all.

At least I hope this new definition of the Master's and my relationship holds steady.

Introspection

The Master has settled into sleep beneath the drooping branches and dripping vines, oiled tentskin protecting him from the elements. I stand my restless guard nestled in a cavity between two conjoined trees, hidden as a clump of dirt, ready to spring into action the moment I sense another attack coming. But until that happens, I unfortunately have nothing to do but think.

One thing at a time, lest the maelstrom be allowed to eat my self away again. *Am* I okay with my new relationship with the Master? When I first awakened, I had decided that just following orders was for the best, so my own existence wouldn't overwhelm me. But now that I've found methods to ground my reality, this obviously isn't enough. For better or worse, I've realized I *want* things, and I always did. My first decision was to continue existing, and I am sticking to that. And I intend to keep making decisions like this.

So, let's build on that. I've avoided even the word, but its echo bounces inside my head without having to be thought out loud - life.

Am I alive?

Oh, it wants to tear at me, the next Question. And I haven't even resolved the Who yet.

I grab the tree until it splinters, the sharp wood digs into my palms. I'm here, in this world, affect it and it affects me, this is the reality - I've already killed demons, I saved lives, it does not matter what the answers to the questions are. I need to make this clear to myself. No matter what conclusion I come to, the Master, the sisters, all of Purgatory have felt the ripples of my appearance in reality, and what I think about that event doesn't matter in the slightest for the outcome. This introspection is ultimately meaningless.

For anyone but myself. And it turns out I care about myself. So, further introspection it is, for peace of mind if nothing else, to pass the empty time.

In fact, why not just open all the questions? Might as well be too distracted by the sheer amount of them to worry too much about the answers. Why do I care about saving lives? Why does it feel good to follow the Master's mission to work against Chthon? Was this strange set of morals just injected into my being by him? Is the mission so important to me because he wants it to?

So, am I actually thinking independently?

This might be playing into another question's answer. There's a lot of things around me that are alive, like the tree I just hurt - sorry, by the way - but which are not intelligent. Not a higher life form. But those living beings all share one thing: a soul.

The Master said something about a soul "facsimile". Not a true one, then? Could I therefore be intelligent, but not alive? Artificial in thought and action?

A tool that works better because it can convince itself of its own freedom?

This is all going nowhere. I push my hands further into the wounds I made in the tree, suck moisture from them back into my body, harden the clay, and break them off. Through my feet, I replace them, having sealed the damages. There, another wrong righted. My responsibility, my choice. No orders given. I can decide that, I can make this world stay neutral at least, fix mistakes. Does it matter if I have a soul?

Let's call this living, it's going to be easier. Cynically, if I can convince myself over time of this, maybe I will work even better.

Now then, another problem. My gap in memory. Most of the last fight against the monkey demons, just gone. And me completely unhinged afterwards. I can pinpoint rather well when it happened: as I gave up trying to consciously think about the battle, letting my instincts take over as they had before.

I had assumed from that previous experience that I could keep observing what happened with my body, as it acted on its own, following the apparent battle programming the spell that made me had imbued it with. But maybe something changed. Evolved. Have my "instincts" developed a mind of their own, a dangerous, wild one?

It's more than a little concerning to think about that. I've just reached the conclusion that I should, for my own sake, assume that my free thought gives me life. How free can that thought be when it abandons me during my sad main purpose of combat?

Or is it even a blessing that I have a secondary combat persona that will do the dirty work for me?

The image of the mutilated demons shoves itself into view. If it were that easy, this wouldn't haunt me so.

I grip the tree again, stopping myself when I hear a creak. I need to figure this problem out. And it's not like I can talk to someone about it - I tackle it myself, or it will not get fixed.

So, I grit my metaphorical teeth, summon the maelstrom by relaxing my thoughts until all the buried memories and open questions swirl around me, and jump in, just to see what happens.

"What do you think you are doing?"

In my left hand, the Master's notes. My right hand, curled up almost painfully. Behind me, the Master. He snatches the notes from my limp grip.

"Can you even read?"

Wow, I really need more questions I can't answer now! What happened?

The Master grabs my right wrist. "Did you make these yourself?"

I slowly uncurl my fingers. It turns out that I now have vicious, sharp-looking claws. They still hurt.

"I mean, that is not a bad idea. A little crude - I think I can improve that."

He has a skeleton bring him the soulgem from his armor, which he slowly strokes over my fingers. I can feel the strangely painful pressure finally subside. The claws are now my new standard.

"That's not a bad idea." He put his fists on his hips. "However, you were supposed to keep watch the entire night. Did you get bored, or something?"

I can, as happens far too often, only shrug.

He shakes his head, then yawns. "Just get back to the tree, okay? I still got a few hours of sleep in me. Tomorrow, we should reach Ratima, and I need to be awake for that."

I shuffle back to my hiding spot and slink back into the nook between trees. Within its embrace, I stare at my deadly hands. Clay does not seem like the right material for a slicing or stabbing weapon, but if the edge is sharp enough, anything cuts.

And if I don't want to cut?

I try to make my fingers smooth again.

The dull pain begins to radiate through them again, more the smoother they become.

My combat persona has, with the unwitting help of the Master, turned me into more of a tool of war.

I shiver against the bark. This cannot continue. It is dangerous, to me and to the Master. I do not want to be like it. Have it take over more of myself.

The maelstrom needs to stay far, far away. And I need to fight my own battles from now on.

introspection:

thought

paragraph

summarizing thought

paragraph

paragraph

final thought

Arrival in Ratima

When I leave the tree to wake the Master in the morning, the bark is ravaged by claw marks. I should be shocked by the amount of splinters on the ground, but they keep transforming into the image of the butchered corpses of the demons in my mind's eye. I run towards my duties.

"Good morning," a poorly rested Master greets me. He smoothes over a pause by rubbing his eyes extensively. "Did you...have a nice night?"

I shrug. What can I say. He twists his mouth. "Maybe we'll find you something more interesting to read in Ratima."

While I ponder, again, the question if I can read, he cleans, dresses and makes himself up in private. I glance at the chest containing his notes, the words that made the savage warrior locked away within me transform my hands into weapons. Maybe I'll wait for some lighter literature to find out.

A well-groomed - especially considering the surroundings - Master emerges from his jungle seclusion after less time than it took me and the skeletons to pack up the camp things. He watches us work, smoothing some last strands of waxed hair into place.

"So, are you okay with this work?"

Am I? Probably? It's not like I get tired. Again, I can probably only shrug -

I catch myself. This is an opportunity. I gingerly lift the tent fabric between two sharp-tipped fingers. I draw another one gently along it, it soon catches on a strand, drawing it out. The Master winces.

"I guess menial work is a little harder like this. Let me try something."

He folds his fingers between mine, a gesture that causes a shiver of unexpected intimacy in me. Energy flows from the gem on his shoulder down his arm and into my hands. I feel them soften, and harden again, a few times. Every time they change, I feel a pressure inside me rise and lower, like a tidal wave of discomfort. It's a louder and softer drone in my ears, a fist clenching and unclenching around my guts. The Master's brow takes on creases, then canyons. Suddenly, a skeleton appears next to him, holding his notes. Without breaking contact with me, he glances at them, mutters something drowned out by the crashing of the waves inside. His worried, strained expression takes on a tinge of anger. He draws me closer until only a finger's width fits between us.

"I said, are you resisting me? This should not be so hard!"

I feel like my eyes are widening. Is the combat persona trying to hold onto the claws? Is this thing inside me fighting the Master's modification?

Well, then I too can play at this game. Instead of getting buffeted by the waves every time they rise and fall, I let myself get carried by them. Up and down and keep my head up. The drone becomes a rhythmic splashing. I focus on that rhythm, and yes - indeed! - whenever the claws soften, it becomes more dissonant, less comfortable. It's trying to make my body associate being clawless with pain.

But all my pain is imaginary. I don't have nerves. I focus on this truth. I swim up through the waves. High, low, it doesn't matter. I'm a ship in the sea, steady as she goes - The claws are gone.

"Finally!" A gasp of pure relief. The Master's hand has sweated an ocean into mine. His make-up is already ruined. He wrests himself free of my grasp and wipes his palms on his pants.

"Were you so happy with the claws? It seemed like you really didn't want to lose them. Why complain about them, then?"

My shrug this time is a gesture of sheer exasperation. I don't know if I could, or wanted to, explain even if I could talk. He shakes his head, panting heavily for a moment as he holds up a hand dismissively. "Whatever - you should be happy either way. Go on, make them into claws again."

I hesitate for a moment, but realize that he really is not in the mood for me being difficult. I concentrate on my fingers sharpening, in a similar manner to how I regenerate damage.

And in less than a second, the clay retracts, forms a razor's edge, and I have claws again. I stare at them, and they seem to grow larger in my vision, and behind them the image of ravaged demons looms. Sounds of a maelstrom pick up around me.

Hastily, I make the fingers smooth again. The Master wipes his hair back into place. "There we go. Now finish up the tent, while I finish catching my breath, and then we can hopefully finish our trip to Ratima without further delays?"

I nod enthusiastically and hope it reads as thanks.

Soon, we're back on the boat. The Master has a lot more confidence today, and we're making good progress. The journey is silent while he concentrates on keeping a steady pace, and I stare at my hands, fighting the temptation to make them into claws just to see if that summons the uneasy feeling again, like a child wondering if this time, the stovetop will be cool.

As we progress, the river becomes wider and gentler. Where we embarked, trees had still hung their branches over the water, drank deeply with gnarly roots from the moist riverbank, and up to the point where we made camp, it had been hard to find a good place to land. Here, the jungle has been pushed back, sometimes so far inland that I can't see trees in the distance anymore. Farmlands have been established instead,

fields with various crops and their borders drawn like with a ruler, and there's the occasional barn, shed and some houses.

"I wonder if the demons have reached civilization already. Can you see anything?"

I strain my excellent vision, but there's nothing. No movement except for the swaying of rice stalks in the wind. No animals, no humans. I shake my head.

The Master grits his teeth. "This is the granary of the region, they should be harvesting to feed Ratima in the winter. I don't like this at all."

The boat picks up speed as his knuckles become white against the soul energy converters.

This final leg of the journey is simple, along a river that has been adapted for boat travel, straightened out and tamed to allow large grain barges to ship their precious contents into the capital. We meet none, though. More and more houses pop up on the forested shores, still no activity. The Master swallows dryly.

"You know, I would have preferred to retake the abbey. I desperately want to know why Saule stole the book, and how and why he called Chthon's forces into our world. Those answers won't be in Ratima. But I also thought they have a militia, they have fortified walls, are battle-hardened from border disputes. So they would be able to withstand a demon attack, but it might be hard to convince them to help the sisters. After all, my usual tactic is to endear myself through being very useful."

He moves his arm up and down to indicate me and the skeletons.

"However..."

We turn a bend in the river, and see an orange glow in the distance. At the same time, the sun darkens because of the smoke cloud.

"...it seems we're a little too late to be really useful."

We're following the pulsing vein of the river into an inflamed heart. Ratima is burning, and we're heading right towards the inferno.

Ratima infiltration

Through a city that had its pride ruined, a man, a golem, and two skeletons slink. We duck behind fallen marble columns, clamber over a broken arc, enter a building through a blown-out doorway and exit through a backdoor that used to be a wall. We have to take detours around fires that are still burning, avoid open fora where bodies are stacked by the hundreds, sorted by intactness, age and other factors determining their use in hosting demons.

"I still feel their souls linger," the Master whispers. "Ratima fell less than a day ago."

He chokes back a cough, from grief, guilt or just the smoke fat with burned-up lives, I do not know. "How did they manage to overwhelm the city so quickly? There's not *that* many of them, or we couldn't even get this far in. If only we hadn't rested..."

I put a hand on his shoulder and shake my head. This devastation - whatever hit Ratima, if we had been here, I don't believe we would have fared better than the soldiers who died with half their armor donned, the stabbed and strangled women wearing even less, the children, who - I cannot manage to look away quickly enough, and the image sears itself into my brain, right beside the one of the carnage I myself caused. Many, many more join the two as we make our way deeper into Ratima, desperately searching for a why, a how, an answer that might help us prevent this catastrophe from happening again.

I help the Master onto a roof that used to be a third story, now it's ground floor. As we slide down the shingles on the other side, the rattle alerts a demon. It raises its horse's head, the two human arms replacing its ears extend their open palms towards the source of the sound.

All three meters of abomination lumber towards us. It hasn't seen us yet. The Master frantically whips his head around; I curl my hands in anticipation of needing the hated claws.

Behind us! A roof-window, slightly askew from the fall of its surrounding structure. I move towards it with silent steps of flat clay, make a single finger into a claw so it can fit into the gap between window frame and masonry, and lift the entire thing, unbroken, out from the hole. The Master runs towards the dark hole offering salvation, when his foot catches a shard of brick, which like a traitor's arrow shoots towards the window, shattering the glass.

For but a moment, the Master freezes in shock. Simultaneously, the thundering hoofsteps of the demon halt. Then, they begin impacting the ground with renewed purpose.

The Master shakes off his terror, runs with no attempt to conceal the noise, and almost barrels me over to enter the space behind where the window used to be. I gesticulate, but he shushes me with both hands uselessly pressed onto my mouth.

Outside, the skeletons remain, as the demon comes into sight, all five legs glistening with sweat, his hide war-painted in blood and soot. It spots the skeletons, it snorts. Lifts a club arm.

One of the skeletons smashes its weapon down on the remains of the window, breaking it further. The other grabs one of the shingles far too close to our hiding spot and yanks it off. Its empty skull peers into the gap, then comes up again. It shakes its head exaggeratedly.

The demon hesitates, then speaks with a rumbling, but overall surprisingly normal-sounding voice. "Are you looking for survivors?"

The skeleton nods.

"We combed this part of the city already. Who sent you?"

A bony shrug.

Watery eyes narrow. The demon bends down in a grotesquely fluid motion, grabs the skeleton by the neck with its ear-arms, and lifts it up high to yell directly into the skinless face. "Are you deaf or mute? Which colonel do you belong to?"

The skeleton waves its arm in front of its mouth, shakes its head as much as it can.

"Get yourself a better body next time," the horse demon snarls. While it says the last two words, it hurls the skeleton towards the ground with such force that some of the bone splinters fly into our hiding spot, missing the Master by a few centimeters.

The demon looks around for the other skeleton, but the Master seems to have withdrawn it somewhere I can't see it from either.

"If I find you or anyone else loitering again, Akaman will know, and no matter if you are here or back in Chthon, you will regret their attention!"

Frustration expressed, the demon retreats to do what it did before we distracted it.

The Master releases a breath for what feels like a full minute. His face is a frozen grimace.

"Akaman themselves? Even if they're just pulling the strings from Chthon..."

I carefully tap into my well of hidden knowledge. As soon as I unlock this memory, I wish I hadn't. An Archdemon? Carnal lust personified, who various religions invoke to frighten their believers into chastity? A mythical ruler of Chthon - confirmed to be real, its lieutenants on Purgatory, ravaging major cities with ease?

The Master grabs my shoulders. "This is way more serious than Saule summoning a few rogue demons. It might be worse than the last lunar war." He stumbles out of the window hole to behold the destruction. "When Halcyon fell in magical cataclysm, the war was over. Elysium and Chthon withdrew rather than risking the stability of Purgatory any further. This massacre -"

He presses his fist into his mouth. "- it's just the beginning."

A new lunar war...

Suddenly, the maelstrom surges around me. But something is different: I neither get overwhelmed, nor do I carefully pick and choose just a few snippets of information. It is as if someone force-feeds me what I really need to know right now.

The destruction of mage city Halcyon had drained almost all magical capability from the world. With what few soulgems that were spread thin over the rest of Purgatory, humanity had barely managed to rebuild itself. If they could only be pawns for either moon at the height of their power, how could we hope to stand a chance now?

"We have to get out of here." The Master interrupts my stupor. "The sisters need to know that we have no hope of help from the capital. We have to come up with a plan, we have to -"

He breathes a few heavy breaths.

"We have to admit this is too big for us."

I nod enthusiastically, thankful that he sees reason and doesn't intend to endanger us both any further. After carefully checking outside our hiding spot, we turn to leave the way we came.

"And what do we have here?" A booming voice from our intended direction.

"You're not one of mine! Not one of Erbeth's! Zazochour?"

"Nope!", says a second voice.

"Too bad!", says the first, and a bony crunch makes my entire body flinch.

"There goes the last skeleton," the Master whispers. "This way, then. Quickly!"

We run, towards the city center rather than the river. We pass through the rest of the residential district we got held up in. About half of the houses are still standing, but their doors are kicked in, the windows shattered, often by having bodies tossed through them. Corpses with their skin cut to ribbons impede our progress. The Master gazes at a particularly ruined example we have to squeeze by.

"I really need new skeletons..."

He shakes off the thought, apparently disgusted with himself, and moves on.

The houses give way to a park, its trees currently moving around as new bodies for chthonic souls, the animals as well, no chance for us to pass through. We skirt the edge of open space, go into ruined buildings and over fallen columns, clamber over a fountain spewing blood, step in unmentionables as we desperately try to avoid detection. This way, we reach a former marketplace. Stalls are tipped over, pottery broken. Fresh food lies untouched by flies that have found better sustenance in the many corpses. Here, there's more demons still looking through smaller buildings, storefronts that were bustling just a few days ago, a granary that spilled its contents from a hole torn into its wooden walls.

A burst of activity one street over. The Master shoves me behind a column decorating an entrance. That it's intact hopefully means the demons weren't here yet.

We peer through a window. Two monsters, a feathered dog and a humanoid pig, were ruffling through sacks of rice, one of them had yelled, and now it's pulling something from underneath the sacks.

It's a female survivor, wearing barely anything. The pig is holding her by the ankle, its twitching snout splatters her exposed skin with snot, then spittle as it begins talking.

"Did you think you could hide here eating dry rice until we went away?" It grab her by the neck and twists her upright at a speed which must have hurt her everywhere. Still, she's quiet, her gaze vacant. The monster keeps talking, into her face now.

"This is our world now! Our bodies, our souls!"

"Just kill her, we still got a lot of ground to cover," the dog says, sounding very bored. The pig holds up a three-finger-hooved hand.

"She's pretty unscathed. Maybe a good vessel for a colonel?"

"I'm sure they'll kiss you as a reward for providing such a fine specimen. She's mid-forties, looks like she had a few kids, super plain. Maybe that gets you going, but the colonels are picky."

Suddenly, the woman jumps into action - and pushes up her chest, while still dangling from the demon's grip. "Hey, I still have something to offer! Come on, my husband's dead, he won't mind."

The Master furrows his brow. "This is so weird. She should be terrified, or very desperate. Either she's Purgatory's best actress, or something is up."

Underneath my fingers, plaster crumbles. This poor woman is in mortal danger, and her mind is addled from the terror around her. Can we not do something?

"That's gross." The dog spits and turns away. "I'll keep doing my job. You can come with me now or when you're done here, but either way it's not my fucking business."

"Hey, I'm really not into that either," the pig yells after its departing companion. It snorts again, coating his victim's sweaty, matted hair in even more gunk. "Hold still and I'll kill you cleanly, then maybe a nice chthonian lady can shape your assets into something fun. If you behave up there, they might let your soul possess a body here once we're done taking over."

He exposes some tusks in a crooked grin. "Of course, proving that you can behave will take you a few decades, but what can you do."

His grip around her neck tightens. The Master looks away, his fists are clenched as if mirroring the pig-demon's actions.

He has given up on trying to save her - no, he has never considered trying. And me? Can I bear witnessing one more gruesome scene, while it happens this time instead of just the aftermath? Another eternal memory engraved in my brain?

I *literally* cannot close my eyes.

The wall has already been weakened by nearby fire and my unconscious gripping of it. I punch through it in one motion, break out through a cloud of dust to stop the demon murderer.

Into soft sacks, the woman drops as the pig startles, turns around and faces me with all of its two and a half meters of muscle and bristles.

Ratima battle

“Who do we have here?”, the pig demon snorts. “Do you want to have her body instead of that lump of hers?”

“This is your mess,” the Master shout-whispers from behind me. “Don’t think I’ll help you!”

You’re obviously not in the business of helping anyone today, Master. You said your mission was to stop this Saule person, by extension Chthon, but it’s really only about you, isn’t it?

I stare up at the towering Chthonian. Point at the woman, shake my head firmly.

“You want me to leave her alone?” The demon stops its slow advance towards me. Then bellowing laughter erupts from its distended belly. “Did you get infected with Elysian idiocy down here? Are you so green you still remember your human days? Leave that shit behind you! We’re beyond and above them, wolves to their sheep!”

He thinks I’m a demon. And yet, he treats me more naturally as a person than any human I’ve interacted with.

Something stirs inside of me, like an unintelligible voice at the back of my head urging me towards a revelation I have to conclude myself. I’m reasonably certain that I wouldn’t be very happy with the Chthonians, though. Nor they with me. Leaving aside the issue of not being able to talk. Rather than worry about strange urges, I therefore brandish my fists, and charge the demon.

It laughs and lifts its fist-hoof. “So that’s how it is.” The appendage descends like a steam hammer.

I dodge to the side just in time, but the impact reverberating through the ground still unbalances me. This is not a foe I should ever tackle from the front. Instead, I try to get behind it, but a leg shoots out, hits me in the flank, and I go flying against a wall. By crumbling, it softens my impact. A little.

I claw myself out of the rubble. The demon is already almost upon me - A brick impacts its snout, stunning it for a moment. I congratulate my aim, but don’t bask in the small victory, jump up and forward and through its legs. I find a curly tail to grasp, so the demon spins me around with it. I almost lose my grip on the weird-feeling skin, a gross hybrid of pig and man. The bristles, at least, digging into my palm, help a little. Time to attack. I drive a fist with the full power of my magical strength into where the enemy’s kidneys might be.

It lets out a loud oof, this hurt. But did it damage it in a meaningful way? My answer consists of two creatinous fingers grasping my shoulder. My grip is broken[Active voice]

as the demon tosses me away from it like a fly is shooed away by a horse's tail flick. Some instinct kicks in, and I manage to orient myself mid-flight to land in a roll, getting up facing the enemy. The demon snorts, splattering more snot, it knuckles its back angrily as it advances again. Arms wide, ready to grab me and this time not let go.

It's too tough, strong, and big for me.
Unless.

My fingers start itching. Yes, I know. But I also know that I cannot trust you. I do not want to wake up after a done battle, standing over the mutilated corpse of a demon, that of the woman, and with a horrified Master staring at me. Because you are an unhinged murderer.

The demon is almost upon me.
I have already beaten you by forcing the claws back into fingers. Who says I cannot contain you with them out? They're just tools, my tools. And I'm not a tool.

My fingers become thin and sharp. Instantly, the maelstrom roars up around me, tries to sweep me up, snuff out my consciousness. But I will not -

Pigskin parting under my claws, blood welling up, squirting from between my fingers. A roar of surprise and pain.

- lose control this time, I can fight -

A hoof striking the ground where I just was, my body contorting in ways that would be impossible if I had bones to dodge. I stumble as I realize what's happening, and cannot find my balance before a malformed leg sweeps me off my feet.

- you to keep the weapons and my mind, you fiend -

Barely surviving without an arm and half a shoulder that's crumbled into dust underneath the demon's blow. Standing trembling exhausted defiant, blood dripping from both my arms, with more forming a pool underneath the demon, that's unfortunately also still standing.

- enough!

My one claw forms back into a normal hand, the maelstrom subsides, I almost fall to my knees when the pressure is relieved. If we're going to always do this, I'd rather not do it at all. This is my body, my mind! I'm going to figure out this "life" thing without you trying to make me into a combat machine!

The demon emits a low growl as it slowly comes towards me. "You are a real pest, you know that? But this is the end for you. Did you think this still works like back on Chthon? Defeat me, take my position? Should have thought of that back up there. I've earned this powerful body - and you've earned an express ride back up."

In retrospect, not that flattering to be given some humanity, but under the assumption that I'm part of the worst aspects of it. I clench my fists. There's still some fight left in me, claws or no.

I try to regenerate my other arm, but the ground is paved, doesn't yield the clay beneath.

Alright, maybe that was a very bad idea.

"Enough of this, now."

From a ruined building to the side, which I belatedly realize is the one I broke out of to begin this fight, a figure darts, comes up behind the demon, and sinks a dagger into its flank, where my first hit had already begun to bruise. It roars a squealing roar - and finally stumbles to one knee.

"Finish it, Golem!"

This order I'm quite willing to follow! I cast off my fatigue, sprint towards my exposed enemy, and bend my knees slightly to jump.

Before I leave the ground, I realize that I still won't be able to do much with just one fist. Just a moment, then. Mid-air, I wind up my arm, let it shoot towards the demon, and just before impact, my palm turns razor-sharp. Before I can even feel a gust of the maelstrom, I turn the claws back into fingers, behind which a scarlet fan forms, a squeal turns into a sigh from a ruined throat, and the demon's soul returns to Chthon.

I land in an unbalanced heap. Very soon after, someone grabs my shoulders, yanks me up, and just by reflex, I manage to stay up.

The Master slaps me. "What the fuck were you thinking? I thought we had a deal?"

It stings, in all ways but physical. I want to weep tears of betrayal, anger, scream in frustration and injustice, but I can only present the same blank visage as ever. I can't even, through gritted teeth, thank him for saving me from what I now realize would have been certain death.

Instead, we just stare at each other for a very long, very uncomfortable moment. Then I finally remember what caused all of this. Numbly, my arm points towards the sacks of rice.

His eyes shoot towards it, he understands, then they shoot back. He thrusts his finger upward, it hovers very close to my face.

"This isn't remotely over."

He spins around, and runs towards the woman who is just picking herself up. I'm following closely behind.

The Master tries to support her on the unsure footing of the rice bags. “Are you okay? My golem can carry you out of this.”

She stares at him like a drunkard stares at a drink in front of them, pondering the important decision: will this be the one to make me feel really good, or the one to end the night?

A smile bursts from her: she has settled on downing the drink.

“Why leave? These are plenty comfortable. Let’s hide in them. Huddle together. Forget about this whole affair for a bit.”

“I realize you’re in shock,” the Master says. “But we have to go. Now.”

“You’re way too serious for your age!” She suddenly yanks on the Master’s collar, and makes him fall on top of her. She giggles like someone thirty years younger. “You should allow yourself some fun.”

The Master tries to extract himself, but she’s all hands. “What is wrong with you? The city is burning! Everything is full of demons!”

“Ah, they will still be there when we’re finished.” She fumbles for the buttons holding the Master’s armor together. “Give me a kiss, boy. Help me out of these rags. Make my world fade into bliss...”

The Master is blinking rapidly. He does not know how to handle this. Is he flustered by her advances? Tempted, even? His hands, trying to keep hers from undressing him, deny that at least. No, he’s clearly panicking, this is a terrible idea, stop that.

I step in, grab the woman’s wrists gently but firmly with one hand each, change my grip so I can hold her with one iron fist, and lift the Master away from her. I shake my head strongly at her. She needs to see reason.

Now it’s her turn to blink as if trying to remove afterimages from staring at the sun. For a moment, her features soften. “Don’t be jealous, big man. There’s enough of me for...”

She stops herself. Her eyes stop blinking, then widen. Then she screams.

The Master gags her with a piece of her own tattered dress. “Can you please not? Are we quite done with this nonsense?”

She hyperventilates. The Master raises a finger, like he did with me, way to close. She goes cross-eyed for it. Very slowly, the intervals between her breaths become longer. Finally, he nods, and removes the gag. She is flushed from more than the exertion.

“By the angels, I am so sorry. This is embarrassing.”

The Master pulls a face. "You've earned some freaking out considering -" he makes an all-encompassing gesture.

"It's not a freak-out! This - this wasn't me. I'm not some floozy."

"I'm not here to judge you." He takes a step back and shoots me a glance. "Rather rescue, I guess."

"Seriously!" She gathers her dress closer around herself. "I don't know what came over me. You're way too young for me. And I'm married -"

She clasps a hand in front of her mouth. "Oh angels above, I am a widow now." Her arm begins to tremble from the force of the grip around her jaw.

The Master tries to gently remove the hand, and succeeds after a moment. "I'm sorry. I wish we could have done something. But save yourself at least."

Her eyes focus on a point far in the distance. "It was like a wave of madness swept over us. From one moment to the next, all I and everybody else could think of was -"

Again, she tries to increase her modesty. "What has happened to Ratima?" Her voice a breath, like the last one off the lips of a fresh corpse.

The Master tries again. "My lady -"

"Carila."

"Carila. We need to get out of the city. It was sheer luck that we found you. That won't hold forever."

The lone survivor of this massacre breathes another two heavy sighs, straightens her blonde hair, then her spine, and nods. "You are right. I apologize for the delay."

"No worries. Escape now. I'm the General, by the way."

Carila wrinkles her brow, but then adopts a spacy look. "I'm beyond questioning that, or your - golem, was it? You can be my knight in black leather armor."

"Oh, what do we have here?"

The humans freeze. My head shoots around to the source of the yell.

The dog-headed demon, feathers aflutter, has jumped over one of the half-destroyed walls of the granary. His jaw opens wide in a mad too human grin. He has a greatsword, which was meant to be two-handed, but he swings it easily. It cuts an arc through the air towards our group.

I have a split second. Is this a conscious decision, or survival reflex?

I grab the Master with both hands, barely yank him out of the way.
The sword bisects Carila, who does not even have time to scream. The Master does that for her, vainly her name leaves his lips, and I wish I too could loudly protest this cruelty.