



Thirteen Faces Given Willingly, their expressions permanently locked in the blissful moment they were harvested, adorned a pillar of dirt such that not a single part of the dirt beneath was exposed, apart from where the holes in the eyes and the mouths of the faces revealed it.

The Relic of Virtuousness, that tiny unimpressive silver-coated wedding band, lay atop a pile of stacked flat stones that stood over a metre tall and was comprised of seventeen individual rocks. Jakob had no clue if the stones themselves had any significance or if their involvement in the ritual was meaningless.

An Eye that had Witnessed Divinity lay in the centre of a bowl created by two clay hands joined together. Even now it still sparkled, almost a year after it had been plucked from the corpse of a woman who had, in her final moment, seen the Watcher manifest in the sky. The iris was comprised of a miniature galaxy and the surrounding parts of the eye were like the black of space with its uncountable twinkling stars. Though Heskel ridiculed him for it, he still held firm that it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. The other eye he had harvested still remained in his private possession, though he had no idea what to do with it, other than look at it from time to time, when the urge to be closer to the Watcher compelled him to pull it from its pocket on his demon-spun robes.

The three pieces of *the First Branch of a Thousand-Year-Old Tree* stood stacked atop one another, in a way that showed the manifold rings in the core of the wood, no matter what side you viewed the stack from. Again, Jakob had to wonder if it was by the Ritual's design or by Heskel's fancy.

Jakob's plan for the *Sincere Childhood Dream* toll was that Guillaume would be its catalyst, given that he had openly stated how he adored the Great Ones and wished to witness one descend to the Mortal Plane. Like with all the tolls, he had no assurances that they would fit the descriptions, so all he could do was trust that the Watcher had guided him well.

He looked to Ciana, who had taken off her bone armour at some point and now just wore simple clothes she had bought some days back. She looked back at him with a strange expression on her face, then she looked away to where Heskel was standing.

"Can we begin?" Jakob asked the Wight. In the distant horizon, the sun was preparing for its journey across the sky.

Heskel grunted affirmative.

"What do I do?"

"Witness is all you are required to do."

Jakob frowned beneath his mask, a puff of condensate shooting into the air. After his and Ciana's hours of scouring the village, they had not found anything that he could use to make a temporary laboratory, so he had spent all the time simply observing as Heskel worked. It bothered him greatly to have so small a role in this final crucial step.

Ciana came over next to Jakob and put a hand on his shoulder. "Kneel with me," she told him. He was unsure why she suddenly was the one who knew what to do, but did not think much of it. After all, she and Heskel spoke frequently when Jakob was not around, so perhaps he had told her what to do already. If Jakob had had the capacity for it, he might have felt jealous, but he did not. Instead, he just felt insignificant in so significant a ritual. Perhaps it was the greatest ritual that would ever take place in this world. Who knew how the future would be shaped by this very moment?

As Jakob and Ciana knelt in the dirt, Heskell walked into the centre of the ritual circle, where an empty tier of raised earth stood, just like all the other places that they had put the tolls.

“What are you doing?” Jakob asked him.

“I am the final toll.”

Jakob became suddenly aware that Ciana’s hand was still on his shoulder, as well as the force she was exerting to keep him kneeling.

“Don’t be irrational!”

“Ciana! Let go of me! This is wrong!”

“Heskell, don’t you do this! Don’t do this!!”

Heskell did not reply. Instead, he reached behind the back of his head and undid the clasps of the mask. When he took it off and cast it aside, Jakob was petrified by what he saw.

Ever since meeting Heskell in that dark and damp ritual chamber at the age of seven, Jakob had wondered what sort of face hid behind the timid hand-crafted mask. The Wight had never, in all the years they had been together, taken it off in front of Jakob, but he had also never dared to ask him remove it for fear of what might hide behind it. But now he saw the Wight’s face.

It was uncomfortably normal, adorning such an unnatural body as what Heskell had. It was untouched by the scar-like stitch-patterns that permeated every part of his large frame and it had such a human expression of sadness adorning it that it made Jakob’s lungs seize-up and hurt as though stung by frozen needles. Worst of all, Jakob had the uncanny feeling that this was Heskell’s original face, from before he was turned into an undying, inexhaustible, and omnipotent Wight by Grandfather.

A single tear trailed down the Wight’s face and Jakob screamed something so loud that it made his own ears ring. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as Heskell pivoted his face up towards the sky, the single tear falling from his square chin and hitting the earth below him.

The world skipped a moment and every living breathing creature that inhabited it felt the moment that they had missed. They felt the way that the world around them seemed to have changed in an instant, assured in the fact that what was lost could never be returned to them.

Those attuned to the world beyond felt the missed moment the worst, some of them losing control of the powers they had been gifted and in the process losing themselves as well. The mages whose magic was borrowed from demons were also not left unharmed, as their own magic became volatile in their hands and catastrophically malfunctioned.

Even those entities summoned from beyond the world felt their souls shorn in half, leaving them stranded in the realm they were visiting or instantaneously vaporising their souls to feed the ones who watched the missing moment and its aftermath from the dark of the star-specked cosmos.

In his internment below the metropolis, the Old Spider felt certain that he had been upstaged by his erstwhile Apprentice and now awaited his final moments with a satisfied grin.

Somewhere between the metropolis and the insignificant village where the stolen moment was taken from, a pawn of the Betrayer felt his Benefactor’s wrath at what had transpired and his body was flayed and regenerated over-and-over as punishment for failing to prevent the ritual that had changed the world and all those within it.

Jakob saw how the ritual site instantly changed through blurred eyes full of frustrated tears. He saw how the maskless Heskell took a step down from what had become a crown of gelatinous quivering flesh and protruding bone.

Then he blinked and the vision changed. Trees adorned the ritual site, their leaves a brilliant gold and the Wight had become a fair maiden the sight of whom struck Jakob with painful familiarity, though he had no clue who she was.

He blinked again and there stood slime-caked and fungi-infested stone pillars. The figure had become a spider with the body of an old horrible man whose long hair obscured most of his face and whose lower body was gone.

Another blink and the scene had become the throne-room of a castle, with the kingly figure of a Lich dragging a massive sword behind him.

He blinked in rapid succession, each new brief glance revealing something new, before eventually he broke through and the scene had returned to normal, with the figure returning to the shape of Hesel, but its body like an oily mass of shadow-given-form and unblinking eyes staring at him from all over its form.

Then he blinked again and the ritual site became like the bottom of a lake, with water plants dangling up towards the heavens and the figure before him become like a humanoid shark.

Another blink and the site returned to normal, but this time the figure was a four-metre-tall porcelain doll with triple-jointed arms and a single eye at the centre of its tiny head.

The doll put its hand on Jakob's head and he instinctively blinked again, transforming the surroundings into some rocky lifeless surface with the cosmos just beyond the horizon of the landscape and the figure before him like a coiled form comprised of a thousand strands of spun silver.

Still that hand was on his face and Jakob felt its scalding touch.

"Grant me Knowledge!" he screamed, unsure if it would even comprehend me. "We summoned you to this world! Grant us our wishes!" he argued, though he doubted the incomprehensible Entity even understood him.

"NHARLLA! GRANT ME ALL THE KNOWLEDGE I SEEK!!"

*You have done well, Seeker.
I see the Watcher's Mark on you.
You are one of His Chosen.*

May you find what you seek, even if a million years must pass before your journey finds its end.

Jakob felt his body be filled. The cup of his soul ran over as he was bombarded with all that he had desired and more. But instead of bursting at the seams, his cup grew to take in all that it was fed, becoming bottomless.

The vision of the world around him had changed again to that of a dark forest with hovering purple-glowing wisps in the air and the figure, which had moved on from him to touch Ciana, was now like a blue lizard with four arms and two legs.

Petrified by the endless barrage of knowledge, Jakob could barely move from where he knelt. It became too much to bear all at once and he felt his consciousness slipping, as though slumber was claiming him.

He blinked again and the dark forest became a floating island in a sky of amber-gold clouds and the figure was now a massive black slug, one of which tendrils was touching the forehead of Ciana as she told it her desire.

"Make me unbeatable in battle! Make it so no one can ever be my equal in combat! Make me undefeatable!"

In that moment, Jakob knew that he had been wrong about one of the esoteric tolls. It had not been drawn from Guillaume after all.