

Iskandarr visibly grew from day-to-day. Jakob at first thought that it was a by-product of the Elphin's mother's milk, but then realised that it was an intrinsic part of the boy's unique anatomy. He was born of two of the strongest physical entities imaginable, with Jakob's blood serving as the frame upon which their combined powers intermixed.

At day two the boy weighed around four kilograms, and by the fourth day it was double that. A wild mane of silver-white hair began to sprout from his crown on the third day, and by the fifth it reached his shoulders. His crying was incessant the first couple of days, but then it was replaced by an eerie silence, as Iskandarr observed the new world around him.

Jakob did not like to admit it, but he was apprehensive around the boy, because he feared what he was possible of, which, given the significance of his title, was no doubt awe-striking power. But, as he observed his unnaturally-fast growth each day, he struggled to figure out what made him unique apart from his metabolism and physique.

The patrons of the tavern, as well as its proprietor, took to the boy quite fast, which hinted of some ability to warp people's perception of him, especially considering their lack of concern at his astonishing day-to-day changes.

Almost exactly a week after Iskandarr's birth, Ciana and Jakob were outside with him. Judging by his appearance, he seemed to be around the age of three, which to Jakob indicated that he would reach full maturity before the end of the following month.

The boy was walking behind the Elphin, occasionally jumping to attempt to grab her ephemeral wing. He wore an oversized shirt and nothing else, his long mane of hair flowing behind him as he followed her.

Without warning, he ran ahead, shedding the awkwardness that a child of his apparent age should have. He found a stick amidst the autumn trees that had shed almost every leaf and as he lifted it in the air triumphantly, he announced to Ciana:

*"Look, mother! I'm a warrior just like you!"*

Ciana froze and Jakob came up next to her and put a hand on her shoulder. He knew how she was feeling. He somehow understood to flurry of emotions that passed through her, as well as the underlying fear that made shivers run down her body.

She shrugged off his hand and ran towards Iskandarr, picking him up in her arms and twirling him around, while her power over sound and vibration made all the dead leaves rise and spiral around them like a cyclone.

Jakob watched from where he leant against a tree, while Ciana and Iskandarr laughed. He felt content as he observed their joy, but a part of him knew that this moment was transient and fleeting. He knew that, come the end of the following month, they would return to Helmsgarten and confront Grandfather in his lair.

Perhaps it was a by-product of his newfound knowledge, but he felt in his breast that a storm of emotions waged war on each other. There were pride and success fighting with worry and fear, and there was joy and contentment fighting with sorrow and grief.

But most of all, Jakob could not quell the one thought that raced through his mind, repeating itself despite his attempts to quell it: *What would Heskell have said if he was here?*

He had never thought he was capable of sadness, but he understood that he mourned the loss of his life-long companion and father-figure.

Jakob was torn from his thoughts by the touch of a small hand touching his right hand, where the demon-skin glove made from the Greed Demon Purl's body had become part of his body.

He looked down and his gaze met the two glowing eyes of the Sovereign.

*"You will bring him back, Father."*

A clump suddenly formed in Jakob's throat and thought he wanted to ask the boy what he meant, he felt unable to use his voice. Instead he simply patted the boy on his head.

Ciana came over, concern on her face. "Are you okay?" she asked Jakob.

He nodded curtly.

"It's just... I've never seen that expression on your face before."

Jakob was in the basement, studying the obsidian sliver left behind by Nharlla's summoning within Jon's Hamlet. One of the abilities he had gained from the Great One's gift was the ability to understand things that he touched, as well as understand how they may be used to further his own knowledge. As he held the sliver, he understood how he could use it, and as such he spoke a simple hymn with his right hand over the seam between his arm and the prosthetic he had made after the loss of his left forearm.

The prosthetic let go of his flesh and settled on the worktable with a hollow *clunk*. He pulled out the tongue he had taken from man who had written the name of the Pride Lord in his own blood before his death. Then he took the obsidian sliver and arranged it with the tongue and prosthetic in a triangular pattern, before speaking a hymn that must surely have been the true version of the Amalgam Hymn:

*"Nharlla, the Everchanging One, I bid thee heed my words,"*

*"Unite these pieces born of separate wholes,"*

*"Conjoin these errant strays into a single form,"*

*"Make these changeable fragments unchangeable in union,"*

*"Until its purpose has been served,"*

*"Form this lasting bond."*

Unlike with the Amalgam Hymn, the three pieces combined to form a new union, over which form Jakob himself had no control, but which was the form that would best serve the purpose he had in mind. It was strange to him that the Disfigured One, Nharlla, who could never be observed wearing the same visage twice, was somehow capable of combining things into their true form, but then it also seemed true that a Great One wielded both the power that defined them and its opposite. For example, the Watcher wielded the power of sight, in its many variations of physicality and metaphysicality, but he also wielded the power of blindness, such as what Jakob invoked to in Sigil-form to prevent anyone from observing him.

He lifted up the newly-formed forearm and carefully moved the obsidian prosthetic closer to the nub of his stump. As his skin, bones, and exposed flesh met reflective star-specked stone, a numbing cold shot through his entire body, while the stone itself seemed to dig into his stump, forming a permanent bond and connecting his nerve endings such that he felt what the four-fingered prosthetic touched. But beyond simple sense-of-touch and sense-of-temperature were abstract senses, like the physical flow of auras and their boundaries, as well as the way souls fit within their vessels. The senses were not connected to his eyes, but he still somehow could perceive them visually.

With the newfound curiosity born of his obsidian forearm, he walked over to where Mayhew stood. The construct stood stock-still as it had not been given instructions, and, when Jakob ran his reflective left hand over the body he had given it, he could feel how the tendrils of Mayhew's Birthed Sentience permeated its body. With an experimentative tug on the metaphysical tendril that connected its upper-body with its legs, he made the construct collapse, only for the tendril to reorient itself back into the construct's body, allowing it to use its legs again.

"Fascinating," Jakob muttered to himself, a breath of vapour escaping from his mouth.

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Ciana was sitting with Iskandarr on his lap in the eatery of the tavern. She felt the boy ought to observe the people and their ways, because she knew he would one day rule them. The voice of Nharlla had told her as much when he had given her his gift.

*"They do not perceive me as I am,"* Iskandarr told her.

She was surprised to find that he was now fluent in Chthonic, as, the last few times he had spoken it had been in the lilting tongue of Demons.

"You were born of a union of True Demons and Jakob's blood, so you have powers that alter the minds of those around you."

*"Have I altered you and Father as well?"*

Ciana had to think for a moment before she answered, but then she confidently said, "We are stronger of mind than most. We view you as you truly are."

Iskandarr seemed placated by the response as he fell silent and went back to observing the guests who dined, drank, and talked around them. She still felt slightly unnerved by the boy's intensity, but, given his progenitors, it was a given. And more than anything, she felt the unshakeable desire to protect him. With the gift granted to her by Nharlla, she knew that it was in her power to keep him and Jakob safe.

Of all the gifts she had been given, by the Brute, by the Fleshcrafter, by the Great Ones, and now by the young Sovereign, she felt that the most important gift was a simple one that she had always sought in her life: a purpose.

Iskandarr hopped down from her lap and walked over towards the door that led outside. Ciana quickly followed behind him. As they went outside, the boy took her hand and pointed into the horizon.

*"The Betrayer's Chosen is near."*