



Once they had worked the skin off their bones in Modai doing menial labour, but, in their old age, they had managed to afford a small roadside inn for weary travellers moving west towards Octland and Helmsgarten.

His wife had berated him for the decision however, as, not long after they finished building the place, war had broken out between the new King in Helmsgarten and all of its neighbours, of which their country of Heimdale was included.

“Surely no one will travel west now,” she had said in her all-knowing tone that was rarely proven wrong.

Though he was not one to gloat, he had grinned at her, when their inn became a regular stopover for many of the smugglers and mercenaries, who made their way to the war taking place on the border of Octland. Such customers paid well and were less trouble than their reputations would suggest.

His wife had been dead for a few years now, and still the war seemed no closer to its end than when she had been alive. He indulged himself a small grin as he thought fondly about her and how she had conceded the point to him in the end. If not for their inn, they could not have afforded to pay for their daughter’s admission to the Academy in Modai.

The bell by the door jingled cheerfully as two figures entered, drawing the Innkeeper from his thoughts.

“Welcome to Mortensen’s Roadside Inn,” he announced in his gruff voice. It had always been his wife who handled the greetings, while he had just been the chef. Now he did both, and it was slowly wearing him down to his bones. Still, he was content with his lot in life.

“Good morrow,” said the man, his voice muffled.

The Innkeeper felt his heart skip a beat as he saw the man’s face, or rather, the thing that covered it. It was like a mask hewn from two skeletal hands, and, as he spoke, something like a misty breath emerged from its sides where two strange pumps were affixed to the backs of the hands. The vapour breath carried with it a tangy and musky aroma that told the Innkeeper that it was a Euphoric of some manner.

He steeled himself. This was far from the first time he had dealt with this sort, though there were less of them now with Helmsgarten’s borders closed, but a few from Lleman still snuck across to Heimdale and came his way.

“Rare to see a Magister here,” he told the man. “Are you heading to the Academy?” Many of the Magisters he had met prior had been going that way.

“On the contrary, we are travelling west.”

“To Octland?” he asked, surprised. “That way is nothing but death, so I hear.”

The Magister shrugged, the threadbare brown robes on his body shifting slightly, while the sound of glass flasks clinked from the deep pockets on its sides.

“And is this your child?” he then asked, looking at the diminutive figure next to the Magister. The small figure was utterly hidden away beneath oversized red robes.

“Something like that,” replied the man evasively. As he spoke, the Innkeeper noticed a large burn-scar on the side of his face, where the mask did not obscure his features.

He nodded in response, knowing that prying into customers’ backgrounds was bad for business. “Would you like one room with two beds?” he asked.

“One bed will suffice. We’re just staying the night.”

He nodded again.

“That’ll be sixty Crowns,” he told them. It was more than twice what most inns would charge you in Modai for similar accommodation, but his inn was the only one around for fifty kilometres either way along the main road. Thus far, no one had complained about the cost. They knew they had no alternatives.

The Magister placed a single large coin on the counter in front of the Innkeeper. His eyes widened, before he quickly reached down to grab an available key with a string attached to it and a wooden card with the room number.

After handing the Magister the key to room twelve, the Innkeeper took the golden coin into his thick fingers, before saying, “Thank you for the patronage!”

“Don’t worry about it,” replied the man, already leaving to find his room on the first floor.

“Would you like a meal brought to your room?” It was the least he could do, he thought to himself, after all, he had just been given a golden coin worth a thousand Crowns.

The Magister did not reply and simply vanished up the stairwell, while his child-sized companion slowly ambled after him, but kept its stare locked on the Innkeeper. Though the child’s hood was full of darkness, he could feel its gaze bore into his skin, unsettling him more than the repulsive mask of the Magister.

Moments later, this figure too had vanished up the stairs.

The Innkeeper took a moment to gaze at the large coin between his fingers. He could finally take a vacation to visit his daughter and her family. It had been so long since he had last been able to afford it. And with this much money on hand, he could even buy something for his grandson. Boys his age always wanted a wooden sword or a staff like those the Mages at the Academy used. The Innkeeper would make sure he got the very best one to play with.

As he considered just what this single coin enabled him to accomplish, he was filled with a great sense of gratitude.

“I should bring them some lunch,” he said to himself. After all, a child of that size needed food to grow up healthy, and if they had walked all this way, they were sure to be thirsty as well.

After piling a tray high with the best cuts of meat he had in the kitchen larder, as well as some bread he had baked the day before, a bit of fruit plucked from the garden, and some sweet mead, he headed up the stairwell to the first floor.

As he neared the door where he had once drawn the numbers ‘12’ in white chalk, he heard voices from within, as well as the sound of clinking bottles.

“**I HUNGER,**” said a very deep voice, making the floor and walls shake.

“You just ate two hours ago,” the Magister’s voice replied.

“**STILL HUNGER.**”

Although the sound terrified him, the Innkeeper knew that now was the time for him to save the day, so he knocked twice on the door, before opening it and saying, “I brought you some food, because I thought—”

The words died in his mouth and the tray tumbled from his hands, spilling sweet mead on the floorboards, along with the piled meats, bread, and fruits. In front of him stood a shadow in the shape of a human child, its very body like darkness made physical, with red-rimmed abyssal eyes dotting its shoulders, arms, and head in such a multitude that it made his mind ache with primordial dread.

The shadowy figure had shed the overly-big red robes on the floor, and stared at him with such intensity that he felt as though the very deep voice he had heard must have originated from its unnatural form.

“Good timing,” said the Magister suddenly, and the Innkeeper looked up to where he sat by a small desk on a rickety stool next to the bed, two flasks in his right hand, each filled with colourful liquid.

He swallowed hard as the shadowy child took a step towards him.

“You may want to close the door and go,” the Magister advised.

He did not need to be told twice and quickly shut the door.

A moment later, something like the sound of tearing cotton fabric cut through the air, before the scraping of sharp nails on the floorboards followed, capped off by loud chewing sounds.

His mind did him no favours in imagining what was going on behind the door. Perhaps it was a good thing that there were no other customers besides the Magister today.

“I should prepare another tray,” he mumbled to himself. “Better safe than sorry.”

He quickly went down the stairwell and returned to the kitchen larder.

They were assembled a thousand strong before the invading force. Their armour was a brilliant silver metal and white cloth, with every last man stainless as per the demands of their Ruler. They were purity manifested, their blades held before them in parade excellence, and their tempers schooled into calm acceptance.

“As our Lord decrees, we will wipe the filth that stains our lands!”

Every last one of the thousand men voiced their agreement in a wordless shout.

“As our Lord decrees, we will spread his excellence beyond our borders!”

Once again they shouted in unison.

“Men of Octland, ready your blades!”

“Fathers, brothers, and sons, prepare to repel the sickness that hounds our lands!”

“Today we strike a decisive blow against the Daemon King and his foul spawn!”

Their voices combined into one sound that surely served to undermine the will of their foe.

Even from where they stood, they could see the distant army of Helmsgarten, with its slave-bound soldiers, each denoted as such by the crimson bonds they wore about their necks, leashed to an infamous Covetous Daemon that served their hideous King.

“March!” came the order, accompanied by several bright flares of their Lord’s gifted magic.

The soldiers of Octland took comfort in the presence of many high-ranking Chosen among their neat rows of a thousand strong. These were the wielders of the purifying powers and those who had undertaken the Glass Forest ritual, within the most holy lands of their nation; lands which they now sought to defend against the invading scourge.

While the marching silver-and-white soldiers were in high spirits and routinely shouted in one voice, when prompted by their leader, the blood slaves they moved towards were agitated and disorderly, as though the one that held their leash had not the slightest idea on how to lead an army.

A ripple of disorder suddenly flowed down their neat rows of a thousand men, and it took a while for those further down their marching square to see what the front had witnessed. At the head of the slave-bound army of Helmsgarten strode a single figure in abyss-black armour, which was said to have been forged from the body of one of its foul Daemon servants.

“Our Great Foe shows himself to us! Truly our Lord’s benediction is upon us!”

The ripple of disorder spread and became a potent wave through their ranks, for there was not a single man who had not heard nor seen the destruction wielded by the monster that stood at the head of the invading force.

“Do not turn back! To turn your back on your foe is to turn your back on your Lord!”

The leading voice had taken on a tone of frustration and dread upon witnessing the disorder that gripped the army.

Then, as one, they heard the words of their Great Foe.

“Spark of Creation.”

Above, the sky turned from afternoon amber to a hateful grey, before something like slow-falling rain descended upon their disorderly row of soldiers. But it was not rain, as made clear by its incandescent green glow.

The voice was still yelling orders, but most of the men had turned and made a chaotic retreat from what was coming, while only the pious few attempted to retain their Lord’s favour by facing down their vile foe.

The first of countless slow-falling green particles touched the upturned earth below their metal-clad boots, and then the sky opened up to a deafening roar as a spear of awesome energy followed the path of the rain in a single instant. The boom knocked many to their backs, while cauterising and obliterating those who stood nearest to the strike.

Then another strike followed.

And another.

At last came the sound of thousands of boots upon the soil, as the invading force pursued their retreating army, cutting down those immobilised by the Daemon King’s incandescent lightning, and tearing through the lucky few who remained standing.

At the back of the slave-army leashed to the command of Tchinn, a Covetous Daemon of Envy and Greed, knelt the King before his tent. His slit mouth released a snarl of frustration, while the backlash of his sky-splitting magic rolled across his body in waves, black lines spreading like a sickness from his one green-glowing eye and down the left side of his face.

Tchinn came to the side of his Sovereign, surrounded by two-dozen blood slaves. “*Sovereign,*” he said, “*We are nearing the city of the Eight Saint’s adherents, but I question the worth of overextending ourselves yet again.*”

“*It will work this time,*” commented Iskandarr. “*Bring me the ones most touched by their Saint, I require sustenance.*”

Tchinn looked towards where their army was hunting down the last of the silver-clad footmen, then raised one of his reptilian claws as though to encompass them, before relaying the command.

Seen up close, there was no sense to the way his blood slaves moved, but from afar it was like watching thousands of droplets converge to take on a united shape. To the eyes of mortal men, it was a pattern that could not be perceived, but to Daemons it was not so different from the Sigils of the Great Ones they adulated in worship and song.

From one of their tents came a wizened old man, supported on the shoulder of the one female servant he was allowed to keep for himself. After all, to the free denizens of Helmsgarten, slaves were a currency and a sign of stature. Tchinn held the leash of many thousands, as did his counterpart, the alluring Belamouranthyne, but the man who approached them now was a mere human, so he was allowed just one. Tchinn could not comprehend the motives of his Sovereign for letting this one live, but it was not his place to question.

“Sovereign,” began Sirellius, advisor to the former Royal Family, “I will once again advocate for a slower push into enemy territory. As I reported earlier, Octland has its capital well-guarded. Our army would be crushed against their shields and blades.”

Iskandarr stood up, towering over Tchinn and nearly doubling the height of the old advisor. “*You know that my power carries an envious spark within it. Serenity is crumbling at the seams from the aftermath of those who carried the spark into its embrace. This time their walls will fall before our might.*”

The old man lowered his head, “It will be as you proclaim, my Sovereign.”

Tchinn knew that the advisor was uncertain however, for he could feel the blood that sloshed around within his body. He was likewise uncertain, but dared not voice his true feelings, for his Sovereign was a man quick to anger. Already, their war had stretched on for too long and on too

many fronts, leaving more than a decade behind them since the start of their war, as the sands in the hourglass continued to fall uncaringly.

For a Daemon like Tchinn, the passing of time was no great adversary, but his Sovereign was birthed of human and Demon blood, making his lifespan an uncertainty. Compounding his reckless nature was the fact that the powers he wielded were slowly undoing him from within, this Tchinn could sense acutely. Every blast of his jealous lightning shaved off more of his essence, and, despite feeding on the souls of potent magic-wielders, this essence could never be returned in full to Iskandarr.

The Daemon had sought a way to alleviate his Sovereign’s plight, since realising that his jealous lightning consumed his soul like what was seen in so many human magic-wielders. A part of him was disappointed that the man he served was beholden to such mortal constraints, but he knew there was a reason why he felt compelled to follow him, despite his many shortcomings.

If not for their longwinded conflict with the nations of Octland, Lleman, and Heimdale, Tchinn might have discovered a means to alleviate the Sovereign’s sickness or at the very least make it manageable, removing the need for the repeated consumption of potent souls that he required after every powerful spell he cast.

While he was forced to command his army of slaves, he was unable to seek a cure however, and the sands in the hourglass continued to fall uncaringly.