

"Interesting," the woman said, wandering around the room. Brave of her, or stupid. It's a rare person that wanders around my laboratory. "Did you make all of these?"

"Most," I said, not looking away from the rune I was cutting into a length of steel. "Some I acquire from other makers."

"Is their work as good as yours?" she asked.

"Seldom. But occasionally I encounter specialty work or novelty items that I want to examine."

"Specialty work," she said, seeming to fixate on that. "That might be what I'm looking for. I have very specific needs."

I examined the rune. It seemed to be properly inscribed, so I loosened the vice and moved the steel down before tightening it again. Then I picked up the small jeweler's chisel and started on the next rune. "It's possible," I said. "If you have a specific item in mind, I do occasionally work on commission. Prices may vary."

"Price won't be an issue," she said dismissively, continuing her slow circuit of the room. Then she paused, standing before one of the shelves. "Ah," she said, sounding satisfied. "Maybe I won't need to commission you after all. This might be exactly what I need."

"The dagger isn't for sale," I said, still not looking away from my work. Her questions had given me an idea of what she was looking for, and I'd anticipated that she would be interested in that particular item.

"I'm prepared to pay a great deal," she said. "Money, power...you could name your price."

"The dagger isn't for sale," I repeated, looking up for the first time since we entered the laboratory. "And your prices just doubled. I dislike having to repeat myself."

The smile on her face faltered. "Listen," she said, trying to sound seductive. "I'm sure we can make a deal. Vishnu himself owes me a favor, you know. I might even be persuaded to trade that debt."

I met her eyes. They were dark, and made darker by the tattoos around them, which drew in what little light there was in the room. "The dagger isn't for sale," I repeated again. "And I will not be selling anything to you, regardless of price. Leave now."

"I don't think you understand what I'm offering," she said.

"No. You don't understand what you're dealing with. I'm probably the single greatest craftsman of magical items in the world at this time. I could produce one object per month for the European clans and live a life of wealth and luxury. And you're trying to bargain with me like a common merchant." I looked back to my work, tapping the chisel delicately. Each line had to be incised to precisely the correct depth, for this work. "You may consider this a revocation of your invitation to come inside," I added. "If you are still in this building in one minute, I will kill you."

She stared at me, then stormed upstairs. A moment later, I felt her cross the threshold, and the front door closed again. A minor effort on my part, almost thoughtless, was enough to lock the door behind her.

I cut the next three runes into the piece of steel, then removed it from the vise with some satisfaction. The geometric structure was established, the mnemonic was done, and I'd started work on the trigger mechanism. Another half-hour's work would be sufficient to finish the piece.

I set it down and walked over to the shelf, looking at the dagger. As always, I could feel the magic burning in it, a quietly dangerous power barely restrained by the structure it had been forced into. It was not unlike standing beside a sleeping tiger, knowing that at any moment the tiger might wake up.

My fingers hovered over the metal for a moment, barely a centimeter from the blade, then fell back to my side. I returned to my worktable and picked up the piece of steel once again.

I watched from the house as the carriage stopped outside. It was a fine carriage, elegant black wood pulled by two black horses. The man it had brought was a match for the carriage, dressed all in fancy black clothes.

I didn't trust it. This was a new thing, and I'd learned that new things weren't to be trusted. Looking like that, the man had to be a nobleman of some sort, and there was no good reason for a nobleman to come to this village.

My father had been outside talking to the nobleman for about five minutes when he came back inside. He looked at me with an odd expression, then said, "Come." When I hesitated, nervous, he grabbed me by the collar and dragged me outside.

The nobleman glanced at me and nodded. "Yes," he said. "That's the one." He drew a leather pouch out of his clothing and tossed it to the dirt by my father's feet. It landed with the heavy *clink* of metal. "That should be enough," the nobleman said, with what sounded like disgust in his voice.

My father shoved me away and bent to pick up the pouch. I staggered, almost falling. The nobleman put a hand on my shoulder, steadying me. I knew I should be grateful, but I didn't like being touched. I jerked my arm away, trying to get away from the nobleman, but nothing happened. It looked casual, but his grip on my shoulder was like iron.

"Come on, boy," he said, walking towards the carriage. "It's time we were going."

"I don't understand," I said, hating myself for saying it. "What's going on?"

"Your father sold you," he said, not unkindly. "You're going to live with me now." We reached the carriage and he lifted me up into it with the same casual, unnatural strength. He was slender in build, but he had to be as strong as the village blacksmith to throw me around like that. He climbed up

beside me and clucked to the horses, which began to walk away. They didn't seem to be moving that rapidly, or working that hard, but the road passed us by quickly. In only a couple of minutes the village was receding behind us, and the fields weren't far from the same.

"Where are we going?" I said at last. I hated asking questions—it felt like admitting defeat, and my father's response had usually been a fist in any case—but I hated not knowing more.

The nobleman seemed to think about it for a moment. "Don't worry about that, boy," he said. "We'll get there when we get there."

"My name's Karl, not boy," I snapped. I knew it was foolish, but being called that rankled.

"No," the nobleman said. "Karl lived in that rathole back there. He had nothing to look forward to but a short, squalid life in that village, working a field. Do you understand?"

I stared at the back of the horse's head. I'd *known* that was my fate, but that didn't mean I had to like hearing it.

The nobleman reached out and slapped the back of my head. It wasn't a hard slap, more humiliating than painful. "I said, do you understand?"

"Yes," I said, sounding sullen even to myself. "I understand."

"Good. Now, I want you to pay attention, because I'm only going to say this once. As of right now, Karl is dead. He died the moment you got in this carriage. You're someone entirely different, and you're going to become something that fool could never have imagined."

"So what's my name now?" I asked. I thought he sounded ridiculous, and I wanted to catch him off guard so that he would see that too.

I didn't get what I expected. "You haven't earned a name yet," he said.

"Well then, what's *your* name?" I challenged. I was starting to feel scared, realizing how far over my head I was in, and being scared had always made me confrontational.

"You haven't earned that, either. But for now you can call me Maker."

I blinked, becoming aware that I was in my bed. Not a child. Not on my way to live with the man I would later come to regard as an embodiment of the devil himself, and later still realize was just an old, desperate, and terribly bored man.

A dream, then. Just one more reason I so seldom slept. Maker's training had given me a memory so sharp I could cut myself and not even realize it. I pushed myself up to a seated position, feeling the sweat drying on my skin. I didn't bother with blankets, even when I did sleep. They weren't necessary.

Even after so long, I still found it odd that I could feel the effects of the nightmare—sweating, increased heart rate, all the effects of sympathetic nervous stimulation—and yet I felt...nothing. There was no emotional reaction, no fear, no regret. A side effect of long-term practice of logical, analytic modes of thought. The emotion was still there, but so disconnected as to lose all meaning.

Getting up, I turned on the light with a thought and dressed, my thoughts still distracted by the memory of my youth, and then left my bedroom behind. It was a small room, barely more than a closet, and disused. I usually slept for around four hours each week, but it wasn't uncommon for me to lose track and go months without.

As I walked down to the laboratory, I found myself thinking idly about the other children Maker had taken in. I wondered whether any of them were still alive. It wasn't impossible. No one had survived the fire I started at the end, but some of those who had left before then might still be around.

I'd never bothered trying to track them down. I'd worked with those people for years, in a couple of cases decades, and yet I'd never tried to find them afterward. I'd thought of them as friends, but in the end I just didn't care enough to look for them. Maker had been right about that, just like everything else, damn him.

I took a deep breath and sat down at the laboratory workbench. I might not be feeling the emotions that dream stirred up, but that didn't mean they weren't affecting me. Clearly I wasn't yet calm, or I wouldn't have felt that remote spike of hatred at the thought of my long-dead master.

That was unacceptable. The delicacy of making demanded a very specific mindset, and I wasn't in it. I pulled a notebook down off the shelf and flipped through it until I found a blank page, dug through the drawer until I found a pen, and started writing out an integral.

Strange, that it would calm the emotions that memory had stirred up, when this very thing had been what I spent so much of my time on back then. Calculus had been young in those days, almost as young as I was, but Maker had seized on the new mathematics almost before they were published. It was hard to design a truly intricate piece of magic without them. Computers that could do the brute work of the calculations had been a godsend in my line of work.

Half an hour later, I was finally feeling dispassionate enough to return to what I had been doing before I went to sleep. I put the last layer down on the piece of steel, stabilizing it for long-term storage, and set it aside. It was a boring spell, one that I'd made probably a hundred times before, but someone would buy it.

After that I finished an interesting force field that an African mage had commissioned, followed by a focus designed to facilitate sympathetic magic. Not my strongest suit, but it wasn't terribly complex work.

Finally, just when I was starting to wonder whether I'd been wrong, I felt someone start interfering with my wards. It was skilled work; rather than actually try to disable them, which would have been quite resource-intensive, they interfered with just the portions of the magic that worked to

identify targets. Without that, the wards treated everyone as though they were invited, allowing them in without difficulty.

I could have triggered them manually easily enough, but I didn't. Better to let them inside. I would prefer to avoid making this a public issue if I could. For much the same reason, I unlocked the door for them. No sense forcing them to damage it to get in.

I counted five people entering the room. One of them was the same woman from before. Three of the others were armed for war, carrying a wide variety of magical armaments. The last was a man of perhaps twenty years, barely more than a child, who hung back towards the rear of the group and seemed uncomfortable. A glance was enough to confirm that he'd been the one to bypass the wards.

I was guessing he was a specialist, whose only talent was exactly that. Most mages looked down on such people as hopelessly limited in the application of their skills, which was a reasonable criticism. What too many people failed to recognize was that what they lacked in versatility, they made up for in focus. When you only needed to practice one thing, you could get *very* good at it.

He was smart, too. Smart enough that once they were in, and the others were preoccupied with proceeding inside, he turned and bolted like a scared rabbit.

One of the men reached the trapdoor, and found it unlocked. He paused, saying something in what I presumed was Indian. I'd never been good with languages, although Maker had insisted that I learn to read and write in Latin, Greek, and Arabic.

The man sounded worried, likely suspecting a trap, but the woman who was in charge laughed and brushed by him. She threw the trapdoor open easily and descended the ladder into my laboratory.

"Good evening," I said. "You are aware that you are trespassing in my home, while I'm present in it?"

"I tried to wait for you to leave," she said lightly, smiling. "But you didn't come out."

Of course not. Except for the occasional Conclave meeting, I hadn't left this building in half a decade. "I suppose you're here for the dagger," I said. "You know, it's really quite amusing. You threw your life away for a trinket, and it wouldn't even do what you want it to."

"Oh?" she said, raising one eyebrow. "And you know what I want?"

"Of course I do," I snapped. "You couldn't have made it more obvious that you were trying to live forever. I suppose you saw that it was based on principles of vampirism?"

"Of course," she said. "I've spent some time studying vampires. It wasn't hard to recognize the patterns."

"Yes. But it's flawed. It takes too much. A vampire only draws life from its victims, but that dagger also takes thoughts, and emotions. If you were to use it, it would only be a few years before your

core personality was buried in the noise from the people you'd killed. You would, for all practical intents and purposes, be dead."

"Oh," she said, sounding surprised. "And...you use this thing?"

I snorted. "I'm not that stupid. There are many ways to escape the ravages of time. Had you treated me with respect, I might have sold you one that actually works."

"I will have what I want," she said quietly. "I know you're a skilled fighter, old man. But I brought friends. I *will* get what I'm looking for."

"Hm," I said. "Allow me to provide my succinct retort. *Marchosias*."

They looked at me in confusion. Then one of them happened to glance down and saw that the concrete under him was smoking slightly. He jumped aside, and a moment later a beast clawed its way out through the floor. He looked like a wolf, albeit an exceedingly large one, except that he had wings, and his tail was covered in scales. Also, rather than saliva, his jaws dripped oily violet flames. They ran down his jaw without harming the fur and dripped on the floor, which smoked and hissed. Otherwise, though, he looked like a wolf.

"Maker," he said, quite intelligibly. "You called?"

"Yes. Kill these fools, and I'll consider your debt repaid."

"Gladly," he said, and immediately he rounded on the nearest mage and lunged for him. The man managed to get a barrier up in time to keep those jaws away from his flesh, but *Marchosias* promptly started tearing at it, and anyone could see that the mage wouldn't be able to keep him out for long.

"That's a demon," the woman said, staring. "You summoned a *demon*?"

"Obviously," I said dryly, reaching into another drawer. "Although I dislike that term for its ambiguity. Obviously *Marchosias* isn't one of those disembodied, spiritual entities that most people call demons."

As I was saying that, said demon ripped through the barrier and rushed upon the mage. His victim lashed out at the demon with fire, which almost made me laugh. When the creature tearing into you literally drools fire, how foolish do you have to be to think you could burn it?

"You're mad," the woman said, seeming more interested in me than in the fact that one of her compatriots was being shredded by *Marchosias* less than ten feet away.

"Not so much that, as that *Marchosias* and I have an excellent working relationship. And I'm not really in the mood to fight you myself. Speaking of which, catch!" I drew my hand back out of the drawer and tossed a sphere of metal roughly the size of my head at her.

She knew better than to catch it, but she didn't want to let it touch her, either. So she swatted it out of the air with a burst of force.

Which, naturally, was exactly what I had expected. The sphere reacted to the touch of magic, unfolding long metallic legs. It landed easily and began advancing upon her, looking something like a freakishly large spider made of metal.

The woman looked at the spider, which had extended metal fangs the size of knives and was continuing to approach her. Then she looked at Marchosias, who had finished with the first mage and was currently disemboweling the second.

Then she threw her head back and screamed, "Vishnu!" She invested the word with magic, enough to make sure that he *heard* her.

Nothing happened.

"Your patron can't hear you through these wards," I said mildly as the spider reached her and started biting at her thigh. Its teeth slid aside on the magically-reinforced robe she was wearing, but we both knew there was only so much damage that it could sustain—and Marchosias wouldn't be slowed by it at all. "Did you think this was the first time I did something I'd rather the gods not know about?"

She stared in shock as I returned my attention to my work. It was difficult to concentrate through the noise, but I was practiced at concentrating through distractions.

And, a short time later, the laboratory was silent again.