

Minx

The voices of the old gods came on bitter winds in these wilds, a frozen tide sweeping down from the realms beyond distant mountains. Minx waited in the clearing, heavy cloak pulled close as she listened, sensing the currents as snowflakes fluttered around her. Shrunken down to a lean and wiry frame, her body had yet to grow used to this cold. The vicious chill had held her in its stranglehold for some days now, settled in her bones and radiating outwards to consume her entire being.

The touch of the Moon Goddess was not for the weak.

She felt the gaze of the Winter Queen before she saw sign of her, Skatha's dark presence a creeping shadow at the edge of her vision. For a moment Minx didn't move, chin proud as she paid fealty to the Champion and her divine mistress. Supplication meant death amongst these harsh peoples, their culture unaccepting of any sign of submission. To do so was to become prey and be torn limb from limb.

Eventually the long moment passed, and Skatha came into view. She prowled as she walked, resting on the ball of each bare foot, more akin to a midnight devil than a young woman. The Winter Queen's furred cloak whipped on the winds to reveal pale flesh underneath, her long hair as untamed and feral as her expression.

Minx felt a curious mixture of sorrow and admiration for the girl. She knew Skatha to be but a vessel for the indomitable presence of the Goddess, her fate to be utterly consumed, discarded as a frozen and lifeless husk once the winter ascension had passed.

It was a miserable fate, but a proud one. Worthy of remembrance long after bones grew cold.

She steeled herself and boldly returned the Champion's stare, their eyes meeting.

A gasp was torn from Minx's lips, the timeless depths contained within more potent a communion with the gods than she had ever experienced before. Her last resistance to the bitter winter was swept away in an instance as the will of the Goddess flooded in like an unstoppable blizzard.

She felt her eyes roll back in her head as a vision assailed her, a fleeting glimpse of a kingdom under the heel of the Moon Goddess, illuminated by her ghostly avatar in the skies. Harsh winds buffeted the landscape and drifts of snow covered all, sapping colour until only dark shades of blue and grey remained. Horrified, she looked around. Carcasses lay in every direction, prey stripped to brittle white bone.

Skatha watched through the aether, eyes that were not her own glowing with a baleful light.

Minx felt judgement weigh upon her soul, every deed considered and weighed, past and future. If she failed this challenge it was likely her bones would rest with those surrounding her. She fought the incomprehensible tide as best she could, her struggles insignificant against the might of such a primordial creature.

The vision shuddered abruptly as another portent broke through, a magnificent falcon swooping towards her, sharp talons outstretched. A golden glow appeared on the horizon in the bird's wake,

painting the harsh blue in amber. Skatha shied away as the first rays of dawn banished the bitter ice and snow, darkness forced to retreat before the encroaching warmth. It enveloped Minx, chasing the rampant frost into oblivion and allowing her to breathe once more.

Through an umber shade she saw the clearing as it was in summer, bright light filtering through the trees to bless the world. The Winter Queen had been replaced by a long spear, haft freshly cut and steel tip unblemished by age. Minx reached trembling fingers to touch it, and a word seared through her mind, emblazoned like the afterimage of the sun.

Scion.

Her eyes returned to the mortal world. Skatha had fled, the only vestige of her hostile presence the biting cold wind.

The weight of ages slipped from Minx's shoulders as she felt acceptance. She offered a weary and near imperceptible nod before quietly withdrawing, to resume her journey to the Oracle of the Moon Goddess once more.

Hemlocke

The scent of incense hung in the humid air, smoky clouds obscuring the ceiling and staining the marbled surfaces shadowy grey. The heat in Scalpel's chambers had grown oppressive since the start of the ritual, both women stripped to thin cloth yet still wearing a layer of sweat over their skin. The ritual chalk Hemlocke had generously daubed over her face and chest had long since dried and flaked away to nothingness, crushed to dust underfoot.

Unfortunate souls surrounded them on all sides, hideous spirits stripped of their human likeness and trapped in this cage of cold stone. They appeared as skeletal wraiths with hollow skulls for faces, crawling and writhing, their forms twisted and convoluted as they silently danced in tormented agony. Above them the aether circled like the current of an awaiting storm.

Hemlocke had been unfamiliar with the blood rites of the Spirit Weavers, but the practice came naturally to one with as close an affinity to the primordial world as she. Communing with the dead was simplicity itself when compared to the intricacies of the Old Ones, the messages of mortals far less cryptic.

Alone amongst the Morticians, Hemlocke had once been unafraid to call Spirit Weaving by the true name for such an art, immediately recognising the practice as little more than enslavement. Yet, as with all things, power corrupted. It had not been long before she herself had fallen, lured by the dark powers at her fingertips. At night, her forsaken masters sent wild and unexpected nightmares to torment her, foreboding dreams her punishment for abandoning the covenant she had once sworn to the Old Ones.

It didn't matter. She had learned to endure. Practising the back arts had allowed her to steal the sacred essence of the gods themselves, turned to her own wicked devices.

Ritual sickle in hand, Hemlocke slowly drew a stripe through her soft flesh, intoning strange and foreign words of power. The souls nearby immediately rushed to the wound, tumbling over each other in their lust for the rich warmth.

The blood seer chuckled to feel them helplessly trapped within her aura.

Angered, they swirled around her in a cascading tide of spiritual energy, struggling against their captivity. Hemlocke inhaled deeply, feeling her veins pulse powerfully as she violently wrenched the remaining life from them, subjugating them to her will.

The practice was extremely dangerous. Even in this controlled environment, she could feel them scratching at her like rats. The resistance of the spirits drew her blood in tiny rents, drops which were consumed in an instant to aid their struggle. It was little wonder that so many Spirit Weavers had been destroyed by this trial. The slightest lapse of concentration promised only death, the practitioner ravaged by the vengeful dead and left a desiccated husk.

Hemlocke brought her hands together in a clap, stamping her foot and ending the rite. At once, the storm lessened, the remaining souls scattering to the shadows in the corners of the room in what little

relief they could still feel. Gorged with power, Hemlocke leered at them. They would be hers in time, their doom inescapable. Grinning widely, she looked to Scalpel, heady and drunk.

Obulus stood opposite instead, in the place of the Spirit Weaver.

His image distorted in the heat, and she recalled his horrific transformation in her last vision, the creeping darkness which had threatened to overcome her. Fear chased any exultation from her body suddenly, a frozen chill wresting her by the neck and driving her to her knees.

Hemlocke was ashamed to admit it was weakness alone which had forced her into this existence. Discarded and broken in the ditch she had chosen to side with the ferryman, in spite of the promise of the gods. She stood now as a mere puppet in the schemes of the devil himself, as weak and helpless as the spirits at her beck and call.

Suddenly sober, she nodded her head in penitence, before collapsing to the ground.

Servant to the ancient and primordial lords no longer, instead Hemlocke had been enslaved just as she did the lost souls at her command, her new master a darker entity than she had ever known before.