

XXXXVIII

The light burnt and flayed him, then rebuilt his vessel and soul, over-and-over, as he continued falling endlessly into a world of uniform purity.

That weaker part of him had woken up, as though rekindled by the Eight Saint's awful light.

Even though Raleigh had ascended to Knighthood, he was but a lowly insect before the almighty Saint of Purity, whose Vice was hated by the Seven that came before him.

Two suns sat unmoving in the realm of the Eight, undoubtedly the golden eyes of the Saint himself. The towering square mountains ranged a field of golden grass, upon which moved formless sprites of powerful souls, seemingly content to living in some form of harmony or unity and not warring for hegemony as with every other Realm of Vice.

Every time he was about to reach the ground of the Realm, the voice rang out in his head, before he was tossed back up into the air by enormous creatures of light and flayed in the light that was anathema to his soul and vessel.

REPENT.

But Raleigh would never kneel before such a Saint who allowed for harmony and hive-minded peace, doling out power to those that had not proven themselves worthy through combat nor cunning. He longed to return to the fold of the Wrathful Saint, but he had made an oath to Morrligt.

Even if he must spend hundreds of years tortured by the Saint of Purity within this despicable realm, he would endure it, biding his time until he could amass enough power to break free of the veil that kept him confined here.

He could tell the Saint sensed his plan, as, before he had even begun to fall downwards again, a rapidly-moving serpent of light had grasped him violently in its maw and begun wrenching him apart, only for his limbs to return moments later and his battered soul to become restored to full.

REPENT.

But he would not.

Even after a thousand years of being boiled alive by the cleansing light every moment, he would never submit. Even after being torn to shreds and restored to full, on-and-on-again, he would never capitulate. Even after having his entire soul and vessel twisted and crushed and ruined, he would never bend the knee for the Saint.

For a flame of hatred and wrath would not be blown out even amid a gale-force wind. Blessed by Morrligt as he were, his flame burnt with the intensity of a star, and, try as he might, the Eight Saint could never attain the strength to extinguish his anger.

With a voice like thunder and lightning, he roared into the face of those two suns that observed him. He reaffirmed his oath to his primogenitor, even as an explosion of light reduced him to nothingness and returned him to full a second later.

Raleigh would return to the Mundane Realm and fulfil his destiny.

Nøgel walked out of the sewer entrance in the Slums, holding the swaddling cloth around the *thing* that the Fleshcrafter had given him. This too, the whispers of the Keening murmured, was all part of the greater plan. His place was not to question, and so he followed the path laid out before him.

It had begun to wriggle by the time he had reconvened with Sirellius near Westgate.

“What are you holding there?”

“**Best you do not know,**” he replied.

Sirellius nodded slowly. It was obvious that he knew it was something the Fleshcrafter had gifted Nøgel. “And the abomination? Is it dealt with?”

“**I am a man of my word,**” Nøgel replied. “**I have additionally secured assurances from the Underking that his attack on the metropolis will not repeat, although, I also took it upon myself to eradicate a significant portion of his creatures.**”

“Excellent. Last thing I need to worry about is having our city overrun while we are waging a war on Octland.”

Nøgel shrugged. “**I have done my part,**” he replied vaguely.

“Where do you plan to go next? Helmsgarten would be more than willing to hire you to aid in our war. My King may be foolhardy, but I’d rather see him rule than Archduke Octavio and his intolerant policies.”

“**You are aware that the Guild strictly prohibits the use of Adventurers for national affairs.**”

“You would be made a General in our Royal Guard,” Sirellius insisted.

Nøgel put a hand on his old friend’s shoulder.

“**I will be taking my leave now, Sirellius. I pray we meet again.**”

The Old Advisor’s posture slackened and he let out an audible sigh. “Why don’t you ever stay in one place? You have already reached the peak of what the Guild can offer you. What else is there for you to seek?”

“**I seek Divinity,**” he replied, then hopped on the horse and took off. The *thing* in the swaddle-cloth began writhing, pointing him towards his target far away.

Ciana though it was convenient that all three of them had no need of torchlight to find their way through the narrow passageways of the cave.

They had already slain a good dozen randomly-assorted animals, who all had shards of something like glass or crystal lodged in their eyes, and were driven utterly mad.

After crawling through a particularly narrow gap, Jakob dusted himself off and gave her one of two elixirs he had dug out of his apron. He himself quickly drank the solution, but she wavered, wondering what exactly was in it.

He looked up at her with those intense eyes and said, “Fret not, Ciana. It is no foul thing I have given you. It is a potion that should slow the progress of bloodborne and airborne contagions.”

Not wanting to show distrust for him, she quickly swallowed it, savouring the bitter earthy taste of it, before rinsing her mouth with water from a waterskin she had brought.

“**Matters not,**” Heskell commented, scenting a shard he had pulverised between his thumb and index finger. “**Demon curse.**”

Jakob scratched the skin around his mask, before saying, “We are on the right track then.”

Heskell grunted in acknowledgement.

Ciana walked over to the brute and sniffed his fingers. The scent was like carbonised fat and a subtle note of some kind of fruity sweetness, bordering on too sweet.

“It’s a Gluttony Demon, I think.”

Jakob nodded, convinced. "This behaviour is not too unlike some of their kind, although they often eat everything in their territory."

"So it's something else?"

"Perhaps, or, if this truly is one of Grandfather's old laboratories, then it may be one of his experiments to alter demon behaviour."

"You can do *that*?"

"Given enough time, knowledge, and patience, anything can be rewritten and reshaped, even paragons of single-mindedness like Demons."

For what felt like hours, they crawled through man-made tunnels that were all almost completely collapsed. It seemed strange, how whatever demon-thing lurked in the depths of the cave system had managed to corrupt so many animals to protect itself and spread to other wildlife. But perhaps the first one to be corrupted was a small rodent scenting something deep within.

After yet another belly-crawl for the three of them to bypass a collapsed section, they were suddenly treated to an open hall of stone, where ancient signs showed tools had been used to excavate the bedrock. Further, in the room stood four figures, leaned over a central stone slab, upon which lay some hideously-malformed creature.

Each of the figures were in the late stages of decomposition, more bone than flesh, and their limbs held together mostly by ligaments and muscular tissue.

"Ciana, tear them down, but don't annihilate them!" Jakob ordered her as soon as he emerged behind her and saw the room.

She moved with swift steps and flung her right hand diagonally through the air, drawing her Vibrating Edge and slicing the head off of the frontmost figure, before spinning and beheading the other three.

As their spasming long-dead bodies fell to the floor of the ruined laboratory, Jakob came up next to her, holding his creepy spell-tome, the vein-like tendrils of which had latched onto his ungloved fingers.

Heskel went ahead of them, the first to approach the slab that the four dead puppets had been working on. He grunted something that seemed to suggest disgust, which, to her was quite poignant, given that the Brute had thus far shown no apprehension towards the work that he and Jakob undertook.

"Fascinating," Jakob muttered, his mask making the single word sound foreboding.

"What is it?" Ciana asked, not wanting to get too close.

"To me, it looks like an attempt to bond a Demon's soul with the body of a chimera. But it has been left unattended for too long, and the natural decay of the Demon's aura has ruined the vessel."

There came a loud *splat* as Heskel smashed his fist into the half-liquid pinkish-purple clump of flesh. His strike was so powerful it made the floor shake and sent a large fissure down the solid block of stone that the slab was made from.

She thought Jakob would protest the Brute's hasty decision, but he seemed indifferent.

"Check the body for badges," he told her, assuming the lead. Given the situation, she did not argue back and began rifling through the month-old corpses, quickly locating Iron tags on three of them and an embroidered handkerchief on the fourth. These would do as proof of them having found the deceased.

"What will we tell the Guild about this place?"

Neither Jakob nor Heskell replied, both of them busy looking through overturned cabinets, broken shelves, dusty bookcases, and so on.

In the end, they had properly collapsed the tunnel leading to the laboratorium and first gone to Siltsoil Village to hand over the handkerchief to their mayor, the man who had posted the quest. He had grumbled about there being no certainties that the mad animals would not return, but she had just shrugged off the comment.

Afterwards, they had ridden back to Hekkenfelt, arriving just before the sun had fully set. They had handed over the three Iron Badges of the deceased Adventurers, and were given the reward money, which Ciana eagerly took. Additionally, they had been assured that the following day they could pick up their new Bronze Badges.

They had cleared what should ostensibly have been a challenging quest in half a day, but that seemed of little import to Jakob, who had been disappointed at the abandoned lair of his Mentor not containing anything aside from some flimsy parchment scrolls about chimera-crafting experiments.

Ciana lay in her bed in the tavern where they had their rooms, flipping one of the gold coins they had earned. As it spun in the air above her, catching the pale-blue light of the waxing moon. The coin was worth five-hundred Crowns, the equivalent to a few thousand Novarins. One coin alone would have been something she in the past would have killed to obtain, but now she had gained it so easily.

In a way she enjoyed being an Adventurer, and it was the perfect cover for someone like her, Heskell, or Jakob, as many Adventurers were outcasts who lived off of doing odd-jobs and dangerous tasks the commonfolk found either beneath them or were frightened to attempt.

I should have done this decades ago... she mused in regret.

The following day, she found Jakob in the butcher's shed he was borrowing for his work. He had apparently worked all night on an alteration to his prosthetic, which now allowed him to use the hollow core to fling out a long spear of manipulated blood, allowing him to strike a target at a range of about ten metres.

After he had finished his demonstration for her, she asked, "What next? Should we look through some more quest fliers?"

He shook his head. "We are leaving Hekkenfelt."

"I see. When?"

"Today. Make sure you have all your possessions, Heskell has already found us a horse for our carriage."

As they leaving Hekkenfelt, one of the secretaries of the Guild Branch came out to wave farewell to Jakob, though he was oblivious to it, which Ciana found amusing. In many ways, he was like a child, but the darkness of the subjects he studied was perhaps to blame for his lack of social development.

They had only just left the outskirts of the town, when she scented *something* regal in the air, so potent that it made her entire body quake with tremors.

Jakob, who was sitting next to her asked, "Are you freezing?"

"No. I just thought I smelled something like a demon." *Something like my mother*, she thought but did not say.

"Truly?" he asked, sniffing the air as well.

Heskel, who had overheard the conversation slowed down their carriage and also began scenting the air, but finding nothing out of the ordinary.

“It must’ve just been my mind playing tricks,” she commented. “So, which way are we going?”

“Northeast, to a city bordering the vineyards of Libou. I don’t know what it’s called.”

“Why there?”

“One of the texts we found mentions a catacomb beneath the city, where Grandfather once plied his trade, using the bones and flesh of the deceased for his constructs.”

“Oh, I think I know the place!”

“Indeed?”

“It’s called Hesslik, if I remember correctly.” What she did not mention, was that not far from Libou and Hesslik lay the village where she had been born.