

## XXVI

Carmine regarded his Knights, as they were arranged around him in the tunnel. The air was ripe with offensive smells, though none of them seemed perturbed by such mundane things. Their minds were as one and focused taut like a bow, whose arrow indicated their target.

He nodded once to his Second, Smythe, and they began to intone the beseeching words of the ritual.

Eight voices combined into a heavenly chorus, with Carmine, as the Knight-Lord, leading them with his powerful and angelic tenor through the verses in their mother-tongue, Octef.

*“O Saint, purest of all.”*

*“Olemn, holiest one.”*

*“Give us guidance.”*

*“We are Thy swords.”*

From the centre of the isotoxal octagram, a single shard of light manifested, like a featureless eel swimming through the air. The sprite circled the confines of the octagram drawn in fine powdered silver, before flitting down the tunnelway.

The group immediately followed, with Carmine leading the fore, so that every member could see his exposed back, where naught by chainmail mesh covered his body. Aside from his helmet, which sported additional backwards-facing horns, his armour-plate was identical to theirs, but his strength was such that they together would not be able to best him in combat. His Knights knew this, and the flaunting of Carmine’s exposed chainmail was an invitation for any of them to challenge his authority, though he knew they would not.

Unlike the adherents of other Saints, the Knights of Saint Olemn were an unshakeable bastion, who in the four-century-long history of their order had never once surrendered, retreated, nor deserted. The same could not be said for the local Holy Corps however, as they had called upon Archduke Octavio and his Elite Knights, instead of seeking the heart of darkness within the depths of their city themselves.

Even now, seven other squads of Knights, each led by a Knight-Lord, were pursuing different leads to unveil the perpetrator of the Haven Defilement. The honour of going after the Underking had been awarded to Carmine’s unit, while the rest of his brethren sought out the new King, searched for a nest of mutants in the eastern districts, investigated the Market West district, and many other tasks of great importance.

Archduke Octavio himself remained in Haven, like an avatar of Saint Olemn, come to appease the unrest and treat the wounded-and-injured with his magic.

Carmine was unsure if he deserved his current task, given that he only recently had received his promotion to Knight-Lord and attained the power that came with the rank. To his eyes, there were many other Knights more experienced and talented, and yet he had been elevated above them, for no reason that he himself could ascertain. His brethren had congratulated him though, sulking and complaining never being their way.

Suddenly, the light eel went left where the tunnel network met a T-junction, and Carmine kicked off from the ground, catching his plated heel on the curving wall and running down its slope, ensuring his momentum did not suffer. It was hard to see in the pitch-darkness of the sewers, and they were left with no choice but to stay within the reach of the guiding light, lest darkness consumed them.

Some hours later, the light eel came to an abrupt halt, and Carmine skated across the damp-and-slick tunnel stones, where moss, fungal growths, and decades-old effluvia were in great abundance. Some moments later, his Knights arrived as well.

They were all changed from the Glass Forest Ritual that each of them had undergone upon their admittance into Archduke Octavio's Elite Corps and, as such, running for hours was no more strenuous to their bodies than it was for the Octland Eagle to soar across the open skies.

Before the Glass Forest, Carmine had worn a great mane of crimson hair, like his father, and his skin had been an olive tan. Now he was white-haired and pale. Every pigment in his body had become uniformly white, as he drank from the stagnant and ice-cold pond at the heart of the forest, over the eight days the Ritual demanded. Even his irises had turned white, and, as he rose through the ranks of the Elite Corps, a glow had begun to grow from within them, as though a portal to the Heavenly Realm of his Benevolent Lord had opened within.

Like most in the Order, he had begun as a Man-at-Arms, and, with every achievement and triumph, his inner strength had grown, as well as his rank. Knowledge that he had never attained through reading nor lectures were finding their way into his mind, as though gifted to him alongside the blossoming glow in his eyes.

*"Smythe."*

*"Yes, my Lord."*

Carmine paused at the honorific, remembering a time not too long ago, when they had been equals and spoken as brothers between one another.

*"There is a force here that obscures our guiding light."*

*"I feel it, my Lord."*

*"Pick a man to summon a Lanternlight, we proceed into the dark with but our Faith as guide."*

Yet more hours passed, as Carmine and his Knights bored into the depths. Even though they were without a guiding sprite, they were possessed of supernatural intuition and thus continued to find the paths that led them to the place they sought.

When they reached the deepest they could go, as no tunnels led further into the bedrock of the mountain across which Helmsgarten draped its walls and districts, the air had become so oppressive and awful that a Knight was chosen to perform a continuous Purification ritual, so that they might breathe without fear of corruption reaching their lungs.

They scoured the floor of the sewers, its endless labyrinthine halls appearing as though hewn from the mountainous rock itself, though by whose hands he had no guess, as the work was the project of a thousand's years excavation.

Within these depths, two of their number occupied with Lanternlight and Purification rituals, they came upon their first opposition.

*"Smythe, with me!"*

As they ran, side-by-side towards their foe, they both chanted:

*"Light of Purity, imbue my blade. Let glow Thy Benevolent Beacon. I am the bringer of Thy Salvation! I am Thy sword!"*

From crossguard to the blade-tip, a light grew outwards, extending the length and widening the cutting edge of their swords.

The monster swung one of its six triple-jointed arms at them, but Smythe easily deflected the blow with his sword, allowing Carmine to continue unimpeded. A tug of precognition made him

pause abruptly, just as a second arm carved through the air with a bone claw, missing his chestplate by a handspan. Then he shot forward again, another precognitive tremor allowing him to perfectly deflect and sever a third arm, before finishing off the creature with a single slash to its bulbous body.

The Bearer of the Lanternlight had halted his ritual and likewise imbued his sword with the holy light of their Lord, but the Knight performing the Purification was still carefully reciting the litany. His group had naturally split into twos facing each cardinal direction of the hall, ensuring an omnidirectional offense, which allowed each of them to worry only about what stood before them, knowing their brethren would protect their backs.

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The Fleshcrafter regarded the tumorous growth on the wall, through which he could see what any of his servants saw. Next to him was a stone the size of a clenched fist, which was riddled with glowing-red sigils.

*“Raleigh.”*

The stone remained still, though he knew he had its attention.

*“How would you like to feast on the Knights of Serenity?”*

Glowing fissures formed across the surface of the stone, while it rumbled from within, as though overtaken by miniscule earthquakes.

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Carmine had reached the lair of evil within the sewer depths, though only Smythe remained by his side now, the rest of his Knights consumed beneath an unending tide of monsters, chimera, and demonspawn.

Smythe had lost his right arm and was forced to wield his blade in his left, though gratefully-little of his silver blood had spilled from him, before Carmine could seal the stump closed.

It was a terrible thing, Carmine reflected, to see such skilled Knights be rendered down to their constituent parts by creatures who were by themselves no worse than rats. It brought to mind the gruesome stories of children who died after falling into the great ant-hives near the southern border of Octland.

If retreat and self-preservation had been their way, they might have escaped with their lives, but the men of Archduke Octavio’s Elite Corps were known for their strict adherence to their given tasks, and they would see it fulfilled, even if it cost them their lives in the process.

After following a narrow passageway, the pair came to a large area filled with machinery, tools, slabs upon which corpses of many types lay, vats overflowing with murky fluid and pulsating with inner life, and countless scuttling half-human creatures tending to everything.

*“We have found it, brother,”* Carmine remarked.

*“Yes, my Lord.”*

*“We may die in these depths, but we will be reunited by His side,”* he told his second.

Like himself, Smythe seemed eager to fulfil their given task, as well as the prospect of Divine Deliverance from their mortal coil, if they died worthwhile deaths.

Without looking back at the ceaseless cacophony of scratching claws on stone and the lumbering-and-scurrying steps of the swarm that chased them, they charged forward, their blades of light carving through any obstacle in their way.

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The Fleshcrafter lifted the knight up before him, admiring the specimen. A flicker of life was still within him, even after being subjected the Flaying Hymn, which brought excitement to his black heart. It had been a long while since he last had been able to work with *so pure* a subject, as his sewer demesne was antithetical to untainted life.

*“Long has it been, since an Outrider of the Eight Saint crossed my path.”*

The man lifted one of his skinned arms, putting his slender fingers on the Fleshcrafter’s hand.

*“What is your name? I will remember it well.”*

*“Knight-Lord Carmine.”* Despite it all, the flayed man yet had strength in his voice.

The Fleshcrafter laughed mockingly. *“No Knight-Lord are you, though a fine vessel you will be.”*

With two of his arms he seized the top and bottom jaws of Carmine’s face, wrenching them open. If skin had still remained on the Knight-Lord’s body, it would have torn along the cheeks, but given his lack thereof, the jaws opened wide on their hinges. With a fourth hand, the Fleshcrafter picked up the trembling stone of petrified flesh that held Raleigh’s spirit within.

Then, in one powerful thrust, he rammed his arm down Carmine’s open mouth, burying the stone in his stomach, before withdrawing the bony limb that was now slick with blood and bile.

With paternal care, he set down the skinned body and then watched the transformation take hold, as Raleigh’s soul battled with the embers of Carmine’s. This time, he would not limit the vessel containing the Wrath Demon, thus allowing it to transform itself with its devastating aura and utilise the full range of its might.

*“I hope this pleases you, Raleigh.”*

A wet-and-angry gurgling voice replied, *“You understand my desires well, Fleshcrafter.”*

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The carriage stopped for the final time, after passing through the southern gate of Rooskeld. The walls of the city were modest when compared to those of Helmsgarten, but still stood four metres tall.

The four of them disembarked amidst a roar of caravaners yelling out their routes and the murmur of newly-arrived travellers who spoke excitedly while they stretched their travel-worn limbs.

*“...where do you plan...to go now...”*

*“I think we will find a place for a laboratory first, then we can see about this tree.”*

*“...an ever diligent...student of the flesh...you are...”*

*“Heskel and I must ply our trade, lest our hands forget the motions. We also have need of a way to construct more servants, if the tenacity of the Crown and these warriors of the Church is true.”*

Heskel nodded. **“See if apothecary needed.”**

*“Indeed. If we can repeat the guile of Market North within this city, then we shall be spared much trouble.”*

*“...I will search...for new vessels...so my eyes can be yours...”* Guillaume announced, then left with Sig in tow, the reanimated servant now following his commands, after Jakob had given him the reins to control her.

As he watched her leave, the sight, for reasons he could not understand, made his chest hurt. Her abyss-black eyes were locked on the back of the Daemon, as though he was the only thing in her world that mattered now.