



Jakob sniffed the flask that Harland had brought with him. There was a faint scent of something familiar lingering along the glass rim.

“Why were you taking this?”

The Gold-Ranker hesitated.

“If you don’t tell me why, I cannot help you.”

Desperation seemed to seize the man and he grabbed Jakob by the wrist of his prosthetic hand. His shabby exterior belied the strength with which he held him firm.

“Wothram,” Jakob said, and, a moment later, Harland was tossed against the far wall by the golem who had been standing behind him the entire time.

“Tell me why,” Jakob demanded. “Tell me why you sought me out rather than leave this Gods-forsaken swine-hovel.”

Harland got to his feet slowly, his breathing laboured after having been forcefully interrupted by the collision with the wooden beam in the centre of the workshop wall.

“I need to remain here,” he answered vaguely. “It is paramount.”

“And that’s why you’ve been consuming *this* foul stuff?” Jakob replied, lifting the flask in the air, before slamming it into the workstation top and sending shards everywhere.

Harland let out a horrified scream, like he just watched his child murdered before him. Jakob found it repugnant that a supposed Gold-Ranker would be the slave to something like *this*. He had allowed Veks his euphorics, because the Thief had seemed to be able to handle them with his elevated metabolism, but Jakob abhorred those whose lives revolved around getting their next fix.

A rational part of his mind then kicked-in however, and he considered what good he could accomplish by having a euphorics-fiend on his leash. Though it was arguably a worse idea than trying to make a deal with a Daemon like Guillaume. Even the Undying Daemon’s betrayal had not been too unexpected, but those whose lives revolved around euphorics were always just one step from total chaos and they tended to build up a tolerance fast, needing more-and-more exotic highs to not devolve into utter madness.

However, it was said that Nharlla was the Primogenitor of Euphorics manifesting in nature, given the Great One’s ability to warp reality and manipulate the minds of any he wished.

Perhaps I am being tested. Is this man one of Nharlla’s chosen?

It seemed an absurd thought, but clearly Harland had some unique talents that elevated him above the rabble of Silver-Ranked Adventurers.

The man was weeping into his hands in despair, when Jakob made up his mind.

“Tell me everything I wish to know about why you’re here, about why you cannot leave. Then I’ll give you your fix. I will brew a concoction so potent that you will feel nothing but bliss when you savour it.”

The broken man looked up at him, the Bone Golem nearby and ready to apprehend him if Jakob uttered the word. Using the dirty sleeve of his once-white shirt, Harland wiped his face and nodded.

“I’ll tell you... everything.”

Nøgel ground his teeth in frustration, as he hurried along the cardinal avenue heading north. Octavio had proven to be the intractable fool he always was, but he had not expected him to outright disavow himself from the Pope of the Eight Saint's Church.

Nøgel's loyalty to the Church was firmly rooted in his loyalty to the Pope, strenuous at it were at the best of times, but this meant that he now faced the very real possibility of fighting against the Principality of Octland, which seemed very counterproductive to the furtherance of the Pope's creed. But, ultimately, Nøgel found that he did not care. It was to be yet another stain on the Church's history, but it would be one amongst many, and the disillusionment with their faith would lead to seeking faithful finding the words of his True Benefactor. So, in a way, Octavio's folly would be to the benefit of the Keening and its Master, the Flayed Lady, for they would reap the souls of those seeking absolution of their mortal wrongdoings and grant them the eternal gift of joining the fold of the Flayed Ones, whose anguished screams in turn fuelled the Keening and its voice of destruction that Nøgel bore in his corpse-glove.

Some hours later, after he had left the city of Serenity, the Rose-Gold Adventurer saw smoke in the distance and scented the foul stench of burnt-and-carbonised fat and flesh.

He dropped from the back of the horse which had heeded his Beckoning Bell, and ran the last few kilometres to the destroyed farmstead.

Nøgel had only just gotten within sight of the ruin, when scalding wind stung his face and the Entity to which his corpse-glove belonged resonated a warning to him.

Then came the laughter: maniacal, unhinged, cruel, joyous... inhuman.

Their name was Raleigh. Once they had been two, but now their souls were one. At times, the weaker part screamed in frustrated despair, but his voice was quickly silenced.

His crystallised epidermis was covered in dried and burnt-to-a-crisp blood, and the air around his manifold claws of hardened blood carapace was alive with the newly-released power. A scalding and flensing wind. A solar flare made to manifest. The Gift given to him as a descendant of the all-powerful Morrlight, who burnt planets with his brutal strength and cosmos-shaking solar winds.

These people were innocent!

These people were born to feed those stronger than themselves! Do you not feel how much we have grown in our meteoric journey through these lands!?

The weaker voice was about to respond, but then a sharp rumbling turned Raleigh's arm to a crumbled ruin of protruding bones and mangled epidermis.

He at once turned to the source, a lone figure holding aloft a foul-smelling hand.

With a brutal roar, Raleigh sent a flare of scalding wind at the challenger, momentarily halting the aural onslaught that came from the sigils on that unsettling hand and its palm.

"YOU BEAR A FOUL STENCH!"

"I am transcendent, blessed by the almighty Keening One. Your meagre powers are no match for mine."

Raleigh laughed as his right arm healed and became an over-long three-clawed hand that he used to launch himself forward at the figure.

His crystallised epidermis claw rent the air, but the Keening's servant easily side-stepped and swung its foul hand down, taking with it half of Raleigh's body. But a True Demon of his strength

was not so easily slain, and before the foul man could strike his exposed heart core, he used his overlong clawed hand to launch himself into the air, where, as he flew upwards, he sent a barrage of concentrated blasts of superheated air at the figure, catching him on the side of his face and in the torso, sending him tumbling, unable to immediately retort with his foul sounds and vibrations.

As Raleigh started falling back towards the ground again, spike-tipped tendrils launched from his severed torso and grabbed hold of his lost parts, dragging them to him and instantly repairing his body and making it whole once they connected.

With a loud *crash* of his enormous weight, Raleigh left a crater where he landed, but no sooner had he turned to face his opponent, when he found himself launched backwards by a wall of vibrating air that even his own mastery of the element could not halt.

He flew like a tumbling comet through the dusk-lit sky, his internals mangled and pulverised into such miniscule fragments that even his supernatural recovery seemed at a loss on how to piece them all back together.

“NEXT WE MEET I WILL KILL YOU!!!” he screamed with all his might, but he was already so many kilometres from where their battle had taken place that he doubted the foul man would hear him.

Deep within himself, *that* weaker part he had absorbed seemed to take joy in their defeat.