

Jakob had called Wothram and Mayhew back down into the basement so that they could clear away the ruined top-layer of the stone floor, such that Jakob had a clean surface to work on. He made sure to inspect the ground floor of the tavern to see if Kalameytas' hideous aura had affected anything there, but it seemed to have been confined to the basement and bottom-three steps of the staircase that led down to it.

Once the Joining Ritual was completed, he would need to make a new door to replace the one that had become a pile of rancid slush already descended upon by a swarm of tiny flies. Fortunately, the Sigils on the walls did not require a functional door to keep prying eyes out nor suppress any sounds from within.

For some reason, he felt that something was wrong with this whole affair involving the Sovereign. It felt warped and wrong, or as if some important piece of information was missing. Certainly, he was sure that without his quick thinking he would have died to the Envy Lord's aura, but it was quite possibly one of the Watcher's esoteric trials to ensure he was the correct one to carry out this important task.

He took a deep breath and a vapour cloud emerged from his face where the crimson scent-mask gifted to him by Grandfather was now permanently grafted onto the skin. Something he found peculiar was that, since his encounter with Nharlla more than a week prior, he had not had the urge to eat, sleep, nor drink. It was as if the only nourishment he needed was the knowledge he gleaned from his surroundings.

With his mind cleared and assured that the tavern would not collapse down around him thanks to Kalameytas, he went back into the basement. The Envy Demon stood within one of three interjoined ellipses, while Jøkull was busy carving the remaining bits of the Joining Ritual, such as the copious lines of Sigils that snaked around outside the linework. Disregarding the Sigils, it was a very simple drawing that Jakob recognised from his gifted knowledge as a Rite of Harmonious Unity. In the same moment he recognised the Rite, he also realised why everything felt *wrong*. But he kept the revelation to himself, as he instinctively knew that revealing it to the two willing Demon Lords would ruin all the careful work that had led to this moment.

As he finished the final Sigil, Jøkull stepped inside one of the ellipses as well, which left one vacant for the missing piece.

“You have the final piece,” Jøkull told him confidently. ***“Complete the ritual and sing the hymn, so that our ascension be complete.”***

Ciana looked at him and seemed to have figured out what Jakob already knew: the Demons were mistaken about their roles in this.

Jakob strode over to the vacant spot and bowed to carve the Seeker Sigil into the area within the third ellipse, then he manipulated his right hand to release a glob of his own blood onto the Sigil he had drawn. He took a quick step back and got to enjoy the moment when both Demon Lords realised that something was wrong, then he said the simple phrase to ignite the Ritual:

“Let a harmonious and united whole be born of these three parts!”

Ciana and Jakob, as well as the heavy Wothram and the tall Mayhew, were tossed against the walls of the basement as the ritual began and combined the three parts to create a whole. A wind like the storms they had witnessed through the portal to Jøkull's realm buffeted the room, flying the top

layer of the skin on Jakob's face and arms. As it died out, a chilling cold washed over the room, and Jakob heard Ciana yelp in pain as the flesh laid bare by the brutal wind began to freeze over. Then that too faded and a single sound cut through the dead-still air:

A baby's wailing.

It was a monumental challenge to crawl towards the product of the unholy union of Jakob's blood and the two Demon Lords, but he persevered, even as his skinned hand and legs stung painfully. His muscles were drained of their power and his body seemed on the cusp of faltering. Ciana was knocked out cold, but Jakob knew she would be fine, after all, her gift from Nharlla had made her undefeatable in more ways than one would naturally assume.

The place where the Pride Lord had drawn the ritual had caved in under the immense powers that were condensed into a single form, so that, when Jakob finally came close enough to see its result, it lay in a small crater in the floor.

Jakob was stunned by the figure he saw within that crater left behind, for it was a human child. If not for the slate-grey back-swept horns that grew from the baby boy's brow and the glowing heterochromia of one frost-blue eye and one mustard-green eye, he would have looked like a normal baby.

Somehow, he found the strength to stand and reached down into the small crater to lift out the child, before lifting him into the air and proclaiming to the dead-still basement:

"The Sovereign has been born!"

He felt the change in the world and so too did his Benefactor, who once again punished him for failing to divert the course of fate. But Nøgel knew that forceful measures did not work to redirect the river of what-was-meant-to-be, though small changes in the River of Fate now could lead to profoundly-different outcomes in a couple of decades, and thus he assured his Lady, whose persistent whispers flogged him and flooded his mind with images of all the worst things he could imagine.

The ghost sensation of his skin peeling from flesh and bone still rang through his body, but he continued his journey towards the tavern where he would find the Apprentice and the creature he had just given birth to.

With his new arm, the magic of which belonged to the Lady herself, he had a sense for so many things he had never before notice, and it was with this sense that he knew there was still time to carry out the task he had been given.

"**The Child will die,**" he said, mostly to himself, though he was sure the Lady heard him as well.

Nøgel continued his journey. It was not far now and then he would kill the Pretender and the Fleshcrafter's Apprentice, along with the foul spawn they had brought into existence.

Jakob held the child awkwardly. Even with his boundless stores of knowledge, he had no idea how to stop the baby from crying his eyes out. The supple and soft skin was stained red from the effort of boy's hysterics, but no matter how Jakob held him or swayed his arms back-and-forth, the crying would not cease.

Ciana had regained her consciousness by then and came over and took the child from his hands, before sitting back down on the ruined floor. It was clear that her body was as feeble as Jakob's, but she carried it well.

She made a few shushing noises with her mouth, which Jakob found peculiar.

"He won't stop."

"He's just hungry," she assured him, then pulled up the hem of her shirt and began breastfeeding the baby. For some reason, the sight made Jakob tumble down onto his ass. As he sat there in front of her, he noticed how her wing, the part of an Elphin's soul that did not fit within their bodies, swished around in the air. He watched as it moved in a strange dance of sorts behind her and knew she was content. In a way, she had found that which she had always sought, even if her desire for it had been sacrificed to Nharlla.

While Ciana fed the child, Jakob just watched, spell-bound by the beauty of the moment that the Watcher and its Vassals had granted them.

"What will we name him?" she asked gently.

"His name will be *Iskandarr*," Jakob told her. "He is the Sovereign, so his name must befit his stature."