

XXXXIX

Nøgel had only just entered the town, when the *thing* in his swaddling cloth started squirming violently. However, hunting down the Fleshcrafter's Apprentice was secondary, after all, he was still making the rounds, visiting those of his contracts who had sent him urgent letters. Last on the list was Harland, and his discovery was certainly something Nøgel was curious about.

He started off by visiting his house, which lay at the far end of the main street. One of the secretaries of the Guild were audibly crying from within the Guild Hall, while it seemed everyone else were in low spirits. But who could blame them? This town was a dump, with nothing happening aside from a few lootings now-and-then and the occasional cattle going missing to forest predators.

After knocking on the house door a few times, one of Harland's neighbours came out of the next house over and told him the news:

"Man's dead, ser. Killed himself, he did. Right down in the Guild Hall. Horrible thing it was. They say he tore off and ate his own face before doing it, too."

Nøgel was not a man to grieve the loss of associates, but something seemed *so incredibly wrong* that he felt himself gripped by an ominous sense of dread. He dropped the reins of his horse and sprinted all the way back up the main street to the Guild Hall, where he stormed through the perpetually-open door and strode over to the Receptionist who was crying, slamming his hands down on the countertop.

"I need to know what happened to Harland!"

"What do you think *this* is?" she asked her second.

"Public records mention nothing about this, ma'am."

Tress stared at the fifteen-metre-wide pond of abyss-black water. She had no knowledge of any Daemon capable of manifesting such geographical changes with such rapidity.

"Ma'am, if I may..."

"Yes? Speak your mind, Arn."

"As you know, I hail from the east of Heimdale, where the land borders the Haunted Wilds."

Tress nodded, urging him to continue.

"I have seen such waters before, when I travelled through Lilibeth towards the capital."

She drew some old rumours from the depths of her mind, "...The great lakes..."

"Exactly. Having seen them up close, I can tell you they are the same, with the only difference being size. But, it is said by those long-lived enough to notice the slow passing of change, that even the Great Lakes were not so great half a century prior. They were described to be akin to ponds..."

"We need to inform the Diviner of this," she decided. "Have someone prepare my horse, I'll return to Helmsgarten with news of our victory, as well as the lists we have compiled of missing civilians and caravanners."

"Shall I accompany you?"

Tress put a hand on Arn's shoulder. "You will take over here in my absence."

He was taken aback for a moment, but then replied, "I will do my utmost to match your brilliant leadership, such that the men shall not waver in body or soul."

She nodded to him with a loose smile. She had known he would rise to the task, but it was still reaffirming to witness it. After the sordid matters were dealt with, she would entreat with Sirellius for Arn's promotion. Given the great loss of men, not to mention the coming war, the Royal Guard needed all the capable leaders they could gather.

As she pushed past many of her exhausted cohort, who all seemed to naturally gravitate towards the black pond, there was a sudden commotion up ahead, but before she could even draw her sword, the man nearest to her was sliced open by a nimble and lithe bone-white doll. It took her a few seconds to realise she was this new attacker's intended target, but when she felt those scornful bright-green eyes lock on her, the hairs on her neck stood up stiff.

Tress took a single step back, as the man before her keeled over and the doll tumbled through the air acrobatically, one of its blades catching the skin on her forehead and dragging its way down through her left eye and towards her mouth with scalpel-sharp efficiency.

Then a missile of condensed ice caught the bone doll in the midsection and sent it flying for a few metres, before a group of incensed Guardsmen pulverised its body with spell and blade.

With her knees on the soft earth of the ruined district and her hands clasped to her ruined face, Tress gritted her teeth against the pain. It hurt so much that she wanted to vomit and cry, but, she was a leader, and such was beneath her stature.

"Medic!" shouted Arn as he came to her side, but with one hand of her bloodred hands, she indicated the few Guardsmen that lay in the path before her that the attacker had followed.

"Save those you can," she ordered him, returning her hand to her face.

Darkly, she found it amusing that one of the great many challenges to her rise up the ranks had been her perceived beauty and the 'benefits' they blessed her with, in the eyes of her superiors. What would they say now when they saw her face?

It had taken them two weeks to reach Hesslik, during which time they had mostly just sat in silence on the back of the carriage. The few times they stopped every day to feed and water their mount, Ciana had trained with her power, wanting to keep it honed for whenever it was needed.

During their journey, she had once again found it unsettling how the Fleshcrafter sat unmoving, staring blankly ahead, so deep in thought and contemplation that he may as well have been a statue. But she supposed that anyone who practised his craft had a lot to think about. Certainly, mental fortitude was a prerequisite for enduring the toils on the mind that seemed necessary to invoke Entities beyond comprehension.

They rolled into the wall-off city of Hesslik sometime past noon. Ciana was toying with her iron badge, but, before she could dismount, Jakob took the badge from her and handed her an identical one out of bronze.

"Heskel got these for us before we left," he told her.

Ciana could not help keep the grin from her face. Though it was a token of an institution she had long abhorred, the bronze badge represented her acceptance into the social strata of civilisation, even if Adventurers did not rank high in the grand scheme of things.

"I had one of these back in Helmsgarten," Jakob told her. "But it was taken from me."

She was about to ask "*By whom?*", but then he hopped off the cart and immediately went to the eastern sector of the city. She wanted to follow him, but instead spent the next hour aiding Heskel

and Wothram find a place to stow their cart and its precious cargo of severed lumps of an ancient tree's first branch.

After she and Heskell had gone to the Adventurers' Guild to register their team, they picked up Wothram and the horse-drawn carriage they had hidden in an abandoned shed, before following the way Jakob had went.

They passed down cobbled streets, where a recent rainfall had shifted the stones in the soft clay-like dirt, making it a bumpy ride.

Ciana sat behind the reins, while Heskell walked ahead of their horse-and-carriage, scenting the air for traces of the Fleshcrafter.

After about half an hour, the Brute caught the scent of his Master and took them down a narrow alley, where, more-than-once, the sides of their cart scraped against the brickwork of the houses they passed. At the end of the alleyway lay a four-story house that was quite narrow in width, such that it could sit between the other two-stories, spanning no more than four metres in its façade. In the doorway stood Jakob, waiting on them.

After offloading their cart and taking their horse to a nearby stable for safekeeping, they went through the house, the owner of which had apparently passed away some weeks prior. In terms of which part of the city they were in, it was, Jakob said, like an upper residential district. Ciana did not have much to compare it to, but he seemed to think it was similar to the metropolis of Helmsgarten, where he had spent most of his life.

"Most importantly," he continued. "There is a way to go through the basement and reach the catacombs that half the city lies atop of."

"Before that," she started. "What is our plan? Should we continue to blend in?"

"I can handle the exploration of the underside of Hesslik," he replied. "You and Heskell may do as you see fit."

"Then I will see if there are any interesting quests available in the Guild," she told him.

"You want to continue to rise through their ranks?"

"Preferably. I find it to be rather fun."

A puff of spent vapour left his mask, then he nodded.

"We must bide our time, as seasons change, and the prerequisites for our ritual draw near. Keep an eye out for any who seek Heskell or me."

"I will."

"Also," he continued, scratching the skin around his mask. "I would like to learn how to ride a horse."

Ciana was caught so off-guard that she could not help but laugh.

"I'll teach you."