



It had been a while since he had tread these unholy halls of filth, but he knew the path well to its deepest place. However, he was no fool, so he held his corpse-glove at constant readiness.

As she traversed the many layers into the deep, he scented the familiar stench that had never seemed to leave his nostrils completely since his last venture here, some two decades past give-or-take.

For reasons he did not comprehend, but also did not question, he had been tasked back then with amiably settling the war between the Fleshcrafter and the Crown, which had for months consumed the backstreets of the city, with the majority of the citizenry being none-the-wiser to the demons and chimera that walked amongst them. It was a testament to King Ubrik's cunning that such a conflict now existed only as rumours, having been purged from the minds that had witnessed it and the journals that had recorded it.

While delving ever deeper, he considered it fortuitous that he had not been forced to meet and bow before the new Majesty of Helmsgarten. According to Sirellius, King Patrych was no fan of the Adventurers' Guild and considered all of its members weak and lazy. He doubted that the brief time they spent practicing swordsmanship together when he was a child held any sway over his opinion of Nøgel, but it did not matter, unless the Keening believed so. He was a tool and relationships were only a means to an end, he had learnt this lesson well. His Benefactor had tested him often when he first gained his Divine powers, with Its most favoured lessons being taught by having Nøgel ruin the lives of those closest to him through setting off chain-events that cascaded and utterly decimated them.

He took a right down a tunnel after obliterating a pack of rat-wolves lying in wait for him. He would soon find what he was seeking.

The Fleshcrafter nudged the growth on a moisture-slick wall of his sanctum, seeing the silhouette of a figure wandering further down towards his home through the eyes of one of his deceased wolf patrols in the middle stratum of his demesne.

With one of his manifold multi-jointed limbs he caressed the newest spawn from his chimera vats, a six-legged bear-porcupine hybrid with a large snout and hideously-destructive claws.

"Soon, we will have guests."

Things had calmed down a lot after the Serenity Knights had left the metropolis and the Royal Guard had seized their forays into the sewers in their weak attempts to bring him to justice, whatever feeble sense of it they felt deserving of exacting.

For a moment, he had thought things may become exciting again, when a void abomination had sought him out, following his adorable apprentice's destructive use of the Madness Hymn within Haven. But the creature had only found his lair to croak an ominous phrase, before succumbing to the fabric of reality dissolving its incoherent soul:

"The Sovereign unborn comes. Tremble at the foot of your Scion."

After what felt like quite a while, Nøgel reached the bottom of the sewers, where ancient hand-worked stone tunnels were replaced with rough unhewn mountain rock. The smell here was almost enough to knock him unconscious, but his constitution was stronger than most and as such his body filtered out the airborne toxins before they travel to his brain and disable his faculties.

A veritable greeting party stood in his way, but with a simple swipe of his corpse-glove through the air, they were reduced to mush and fragmented bone. Just like his first time here, the welcoming committee was followed by a ceaseless horde of constructs and hybrids of all sizes, but his power was uniquely suited to fighting outnumbered. There were certainly many sorcerers and spellcasters whose powers could be utilised to similar effect, but they were held back by their need to repeatedly recite the incantations of their magic, while Nøgel had no such need, wielding his granted power over sound and vibration with but a single uttered phrase:

“O Keening One, render thy aural onslaught!”

Though confined to the sewer depths, the Underking was not a man who sat idly by, as attested to by his ability to keep flinging hordes of monsters at Nøgel’s annihilating hand. Eventually, however, the rushing hordes dissipated and were not replenished.

He had, just like the first time here, earned the right to approach the Fleshcrafter’s laboratory, having proven himself a force that could not be ignored nor overcome by thoughtlessly attempting to drown him in a hill of death. A creature like the Underking respected true power, such as what Nøgel wielded.

After he left behind the rolling hills of carcasses littering the mountain rock underfoot, he found himself before an industrious workshop of nightmares, and from within, he heard a familiar voice call out to him. He walked through the laboratory to reach the sanctum, passing by crowded vats pulsing with inner life and sloshing with viscous and nourishing fluids, as well as slabs upon which lay dissected animals, hybrids, and humans.

When he came to a tall aperture leading to a small chamber, he spotted the Underking within, who had changed significantly since their first meeting.

He felt as though he was crossing into some sacred place as he stepped over the threshold.

“Hello again, Keening’s Chosen.”

“And salutations to you, Fleshcrafter. I have come to have a chat once again.”

He could feel it. His weaker self could feel it too. They were *so very close* now. Only a few more souls to be devoured and ascendancy was theirs.

Raleigh found it amusing that the illustrious Serenity and its guard corps were incomparable to the Royals of Helmsgarten, who, at the very least, had given him *some* trouble in the past.

“YOU ARE WEAK!” he scolded the two units of eight that were arrayed before him, after a previous eight-man group had fallen to him earlier. ***“BRING ALL YOUR SWORDS TO BEAR! IT MATTERS NOT!”***

He launched himself forward, as the voice of the weaker part became increasingly silent, perhaps grown numb to the massacre of his erstwhile brethren. With rending claws of hardened bone and spikes of crystallised blood firing out of his epidermis shell, Raleigh reduced one of the groups to two men in an instant, before spearing the survivors on the additional pair of arms he had sprouted. The other unit were in the midst of chanting some confining spell, when their turn came, and moments

after, they too lay at his feet, torn apart. The mesh of their chainmail and the plate of their silvery armour had become like paper to him, and though it stung to absorb their lifeblood, he lapped it all up nonetheless.

Ascension would be his.

“Send in the Earl and his guard,” Octavio told his adjutant. *“This Demon has feasted long enough on the scraps of our city and we have a war to win.”*

The adjutant stormed from the room with these new orders, while the Archduke returned to his careful study of the map of the regions that he could expect to see the heaviest of fighting with the Helmsgarten army. He knew their ilk well enough to know that the honourable face-to-face battle his Knights excelled at would not come to fruition. Helmsgarten were fond of sabotage, subterfuge, and long-range bombardment. In short, they were cowards.

An hour later, his adjutant returned, the young boy looking quite out of his depth, despair and dread distorted his otherwise-handsome features.

“The Earl has been slain, milord.”

Octavio did not like being interrupted, but he supposed that, sometimes, it was his place as a ruler and leader of the faithful to deliver Divine judgment himself.

The latest unit had done it, they had given him the final drops of power he craved, and, as Raleigh underwent the transformation of soul and corpus, the weaker voice in his mind screamed in agony, at least absorbed fully into his mind.

Like a tarantula moulting from its body, so too did the Wrath Demon shed his epidermis to emerge born anew, a *Knight of Devastation* born through the heat of battle. The conflagration of his newfound power shook the foundations of nearby limestone buildings and scorched their fanciful façades into blackened ruin.

From the shoulder-blades of his vessel grew a pair of appendages like scorpion stingers, while his head and torso fused together, forming a long V-shaped mouth that ran from the chins of the head to the navel of the stomach.

Raleigh lifted his hand and the nearby bodies drained of blood and mass, feeding his form and covering it in a rapidly-forming charred epidermis that was so hot it would scald the hairs off of anyone within a five-metre radius. A sympathetic storm was brewing above him, as though answering his ascension with a congratulatory whirlpool of scalding wind.

The Wrathful Knight let the sounds of his devastation fuel him, as panicked wails and pained screams flooded the world around him.

But then the metallic scrape of armour drew his gaze down towards the end of the wide avenue he stood in the middle of, and scattered around which lay piles of dead and mountains of debris.

“YOUR FOUL STENCH STINGS MY NOSE!”

“Thou stand before thy adjudicator and exterminator!”

Raleigh grinned, his unnatural mouth gushing forth a deluge of blood as it opened along his body. This one seemed even stronger than the last contender. Once its soul was fed to him, he would seek out the Keening's Servant and eat him too. The world was his to rule and none could stand in his way.