

Jakob sat in the morgue, his two Birthed Sentience servants doing his work while he contemplated the decision he had made the previous day. Seeing Pernille stir to life had both brought a sense of accomplishment and joy to him, but it had also imbued him with the dreadful realisation that not all dead are meant to be given a second chance.

Upon realising her circumstances, Pernille had fainted, and Bastian had carried her to a private carriage, a few of his closest staff following him on horseback, as they rode off into the night, going who-knew-where to live out the remainder of their lives together, never to ever be apart again.

Seeing Jakob sitting on his stool staring at the floor in contemplating, Harmlig had asked him, "Why did you do it? Who was she to you?"

Or perhaps Jakob had only imagined he was asked the question, for when he looked over, the Magister was engrossed in his work and seemed to not spare him a single glance.

"It was a momentary lapse in judgement," Jakob confided in him. Harmlig, for his part, did not move from where he stared at the many samples of the typhoid parasite he had collected through the lenses of his contraption. "I wished to repay a gift given to me in the past, and I believed it was the best way to do it."

"But you regret it now?"

"Perhaps I regret the means by which I did it. It was hasty and thoughtless."

"What exactly does the ritual do? I am no occultist, and the words you spoke were meaningless to me."

Jakob let out a sigh of spent air, which quickly lifted towards the ceiling and mixed with the fog of Harmlig's vented vapours, though the scents they cast into the air were obscured totally by the scent of putrefaction and death that the basement was forever stained to bear, even if the epidemic came to an end and bodies no longer piled high along the back of the expansive room.

"When two hearts are twinned together by the Eternal Serpent, they are fused together in mind, heart, and soul. Their thoughts are forever shared. Their hearts beat to the same rhythm. Their bodies are like twin vessels for one unusual soul to occupy."

"Forgive me if this is a dumb question, but would that not mean that they share the same life energy?"

"They do. If one falls ill, they both fall ill. If one dies, they both die."

"But it seems a small price to pay, to see your beloved brought back from the dead."

"Perhaps, though they have now become slaves to each other. They can never stray far from the other, lest the bond forcefully snaps and they both are sent to the abyss of the beyond. They may also harbour no ill will towards the other, for it too will violate the sanctity of the rite. Further, given that one was dead and the other nearing his final decade of life, even well-off as he is, they must share a quite limited time together, before death takes them both."

"Even then. They will at least share their final moments and never be apart."

Jakob let out another sigh. He had not felt this way before. Regret was antithetical to his being, but then, he had also never before made a rash decision of this nature. It went against the core of his very being to act based on emotions. It had been beaten out of him by Grandfather all those many years ago, so why had it now resurfaced?

"Hopefully, it will be a life they both do not regret living."

Harmlig looked up from his contraption to take in the expression on Jakob's face. He looked as though he was about to make a comment, but then he did not, and instead just watched the Fleshcrafter for some time.

The Fleshcrafter smelled of a charnel house when he came to see her. Hessel had somehow managed to carry her all the way back to Hesslik without ruining the hasty needlework he had patched her up with. For whatever reason, he had not used his esoteric magic to make her whole, and, now, as she lay on a bed on the third floor of the house they were squatting in, she realised that Jakob likewise did not intend to mend her using his magics.

"This will hurt," he told her, his voice almost comforting, "but please do not scream. Bear this pain and remember what I told you: *Power is meant to be used*. Hessel says you have forsaken your gift for some fleeting vanity or fancy. This wound is your punishment for your carelessness. The Great Ones do not favour those who do not utilise the gifts they have given."

Jakob lifted his unsettling glove over her exposed chest and bade Hessel put pressure on the wound, as he undid the stitched on her skin with a thin blade protruding from the index finger of his glove.

"*Purll, I need a longer blade*," he said in the lilting tongue of Ciana's mother, and then the blade on his glove doubled in length. When he began cutting deeper into her tissue, she gritted her teeth against the pain, but still could not help the tears that welled forth in the corners of her eyes.

Power is meant to be used, she scolded herself.

This was her punishment for her hubris.

The Fleshcrafter continued speaking to his demon-possessed glove while he worked and she felt the blade within her flesh alter and shift according to the commands he gave it.

Ciana stared a hole in the ceiling, feeling herself become distant from the reality of the situation, not even noticing when the Brute eased off the pressure and fetched string for the Fleshcrafter to seal up the ruined tissue within her body. Nor did she notice when Jakob masterfully spliced the severed halves of her axillary artery back together, before removing the clamps the Brute had placed on them within the ruins of the Highwayman Hideout to prevent her from bleeding to death. Even after the procedure was over and her shoulder was stitched back together neatly, she just lay there, her mind faraway, thinking of her last lover and the time they danced around in the moonlight in a clearing of the Heartblack Forest.

Surprisingly, Jakob took quite well to the lessons Ciana gave him, and after only a few tries, he was staying steadily seated in the saddle of their horse. After only a few days, he was galloping down the roads that ran around city of Hesslik, the Wight and Elphin running alongside him.

When he sat in the saddle and held the reins, he felt a sense of invincibility that he had never felt before, not even when completing a time-consuming and complex construct such as Stelji or Loke. The speed was exhilarating to him and every moment that he did not spend in the basement with Magister Harmlig was dedicated to taking the horse for a ride, though many such rides were cut short by the draft horse running out of stamina and coming to an abrupt halt, almost throwing him off each time it happened.

After returning to the animal to the stable where they kept it, he went to the morgue basement and excitedly told Harmlig of his next construct he would make.

“You have changed as of late,” Harmlig remarked.

Jakob scratched the top of his pate under his hood, where hair was starting to grow in, itching a lot as a result. “Perhaps this is who I was meant to become,” he replied.

“Or maybe your regrets about resurrecting your lady-friend have manifested into some manic aberration to your demeanour. I have seen it before, you know. There are many Magisters who suddenly find themselves in love, or discover a new passion, following a tremendous setback in their professional work or some near-death experience.”

Jakob took a deep draught of his scent-mask. “Are you going to help me?”

“I don’t know a lot about equine anatomy,” the Magister replied.

“Nor do I,” Jakob admitted.

Harmlig got up from his seat, where a shine had been worn into the wooden surface due to him always using the stool. “Let’s see if we can find some old draft horse or something to use for studying.”

Jakob nodded. He liked this about the Magister: he was resourceful.

The *thing* in the swaddling cloth would not stop squirming, as Nøgel rode north towards Sirellius’ hometown of Hesslik. It seemed an ominous thing that the Fleshcrafter’s Apprentice had visited not only the obscure village of Hekkenfelt where Harland had done his research, but now also the city where the Old Advisor had spent his youth. If he did not know any better, he would think that the Apprentice had some disturbing grand plan to undermine all the major players on the continent, one-by-one.

Of course, there was the possibility that these were all random occurrences, but it seemed quite unlikely. After all, Nøgel knew for a fact that a vile spell had been cast on his mentee Harland to cause him to publicly kill himself. And having witnessed the autopsy of the Gold-Ranker, he knew that they had not managed to recover any scraps of his torn-off face that he was supposed to have swallowed.

What use could the face of a Gold-Ranking Adventurer be worth to the likes of him?

The wriggling thing urged him onwards yet again, its impatient motions seeming to sense the distance to his target growing shorter by the moment.

“O Keening, render thy aural onslaught.”