

XXXXII

The house lay in ruins, and the citizens had gathered around it to see what had happened.

“There’s someone there, mother,” a child-like voice said, the speaker’s eyes more attuned to the night than her mother’s.

“Come on. Let the guards handle it.”

As their footsteps quickly retreated into the distance, echoing against the many stone buildings of the city, a three-clawed hand dragged the figure out of the rubble of where they had landed.

They sniffed the air, trying to ascertain what part of the Principality they were in. There were many wonderful smells of the warm flesh of untold thousands.

Raleigh allowed himself a satisfied grin, though the voice within had once again separated itself.

These are my people! Do not harm them!

Silence, weakling! We feed! Our Ascendancy is near! Once we achieve Knighthood, we will take our revenge on the Keening’s Servant and remake the world in our image!

The metallic clatter of approaching guards suddenly drew his attention. These people had a strange scent to them, as though they were his brethren in Vice, pure and undiluted, but then he noticed the faint aftertaste of mortality and wrinkled his nose.

He hated their scent, and yet it promised potent souls for him to devour, and with their sustenance, he would ascend the ranks of Demonkind and become ever-closer to the visage of his Primogenitor.

With a forceful shove, he recombined with the weaker half, and together they brushed off the last bit of battle-damage, before reshaping the blood in their body to become a hardened scale armour of crystallised epidermis, covered in sharp spikes and clawed hands and feet. A potent horn also adorned Raleigh’s brow, and before any of the four newcomers could react, he had speared the first on this curled spike and gored a second with his claw.

“MORRLIGHT, WATCH ME ASCEND!!!”

The slaughter began anew. It would not cease until they had reached the promised heights.

Jakob had made Harland drink a brew to appease his abstinences for the moment, though, as they grew in strength, his brew would not be able to keep up.

After having the Gold-Ranker buy all the tools he required, he had filled the Workshop with alembics, flasks, tubes, and boiling cups lifted above small flames. It was a miniature of Grandfather’s alchemy and chimera laboratory, but it would serve its current purpose in distilling a Euphoric that would utterly shackle Harland’s mind, making him a fiend whose morals and ethics held no sway over his actions, and he would do whatever was required to receive the next dose.

“You will tell me everything first, before I allow you this,” Jakob told the man.

He was sitting on a stool, watching the slow trickle of evaporated matter fall into the final flask, whereafter it would be mixed with an oil to produce an emulsion that, when chilled to room temperature would be like a paste. The paste would then be either smeared on the gums of the mouth, the roof of the mouth, or inserted deep into the nostrils, such that its absorption through the tissue would lead it directly to the brain, where it would do its work.

The eutrophics paste could also be mixed with food and consumed entirely, though this manner of consumption would result in a muted effect and thus not be as effective in enthralling Harland's mind.

The Gold-Ranker swallowed deeply, saliva forming on his chapped lips. Jakob only noticed now how the man's previous euphorics-binge had destroyed his body thus that much of his hair had thinned or fallen out, along with the nails of his hands which were either paper-thin and brittle or entirely gone. His teeth had fared little better, and were a crumbled ruin.

"Now, if you would. Once I give you this, you will be in no position to tell me what sort of task binds you here."

Harland nodded. "I have been doing this for twenty-five years or more. At first I was simply chasing a mystery."

"A mystery?"

"Have you ever heard of '*The Black Lakes of Lilibeth*'?"

"Yes."

Harland seemed surprised at first, but then he nodded. "Of course, you Magisters are more attuned to such mysteries."

"I began my search in Lilibeth, and it was clear from the onset that something unnatural had brought about the lakes, for no fish swam in their black waters, nor did any children nor animals dare approach it, as it was said that something lived in their deep recesses, snatching any who attempted to swim across or even imbibe the waters."

Jakob looked at the broken man, already understanding why he had fallen into the embrace of mind-altering euphorics. One did not seek to comprehend the Great Ones and their powers without a measured mind. One whose mind was rife with emotional turmoil and inner conflict and preconceptions was a cradle into which insanity and madness would be born.

He continued, "I must have looked through all the history of the region for over a year, before I came upon the myth of 'The Wicked Doctor'. A foul Magister whose work was said to be so unholy that it brought about the bottomless lakes and whose creations still flock in their dozens in the darkest forests of Heimdale."

"After leaving behind Lilibeth and my search for answers seeming inconclusive, I met a Gold-Ranked Adventurer, now the famous Rose-Gold-Ranker known as *the Divine Hand*. With his aid, I learnt of esoteric knowledge and ancient sites said to once have been visited by Gods, known as the Absolutes, or, more often—"

"The Great Ones," Jakob answered.

Harland blinked a few times, then nodded eagerly, like a scholar finding a willing and attentive listener to a tale he had told a hundred times prior to nothing but deaf ears.

"Exactly! After learning of these Gods and parts of their ancient language, I suddenly seemed to find clues all over the place, as though left behind by the Wicked Doctor for anyone with the knowledge to find it."

"These clues eventually lead me to Lleman, though many also pointed to Helmsgarten, but my mentor, the Divine Hand, told me not to venture there, though the reasons he did not explain."

"And, so? What have you found here?" Jakob wondered out loud. Despite himself, he was finding that he might benefit from the Gold-Rankers search.

"I have found some old texts that mention 'The Llemanian Widowmaker', and the descriptions of his work, though struck from public records, are eerily similar to those of the Wicked Doctor of

Lilibeth. The particular details are so distinct that, despite five-hundred kilometres separating these two historical villains, they have to be one and the same!”

Jakob nodded, it was not a difficult conclusion to make if one had the proper historical texts to cross-reference, and a Gold-Ranker was certainly able to dig up information that was never allowed to see the light of day, such as guard reports, official statements prior to revisions, private letters, and so forth.

“Have you found the Widowmaker’s lair?” Jakob asked.

He knew from Grandfather’s brief tales of the past that his laboratory in Lilibeth was now one of its two lakes, which were the ever-expanding portals to the realm of Nwetrou, the Great Devourer. However, his laboratories in Lleman ought to still remain intact, and, one of them was where he had crafted Hesel, before travelling to Helmsgarten. If Jakob could find the specific laboratory, he wondered what sort of insights he might glean.

In truth, he could simply ask the Wight, but he had the sense that Hesel was uninterested in retreading old paths.

“Not yet, but I am still diligently searching,” Harland blatantly lied.

“You have given up,” Jakob told him, letting frustration take over. “If you were diligent about anything, you would not have spent *this* long chasing shadows.”

“I—”

“Don’t bother defending yourself. I care not. Truly.”

Harland lowered his head shamefully. Jakob meanwhile ensured the seal on his mask remained perfect, then turned to the flask, where about a finger-digit-depth’s-worth of murky blue-brown water had collected. He took the flask by the neck and poured in a draught of Hester oil, then plugged the mouth of the flask with the thumb of his demon-flesh glove, before giving it a rigorous shake.

The resultant emulsion would remain stable thanks to the addition of a unique acid found in asparagus, which Jakob had used the majority of the alchemy setup to isolate, as the euphoric concoction itself was incredibly simple to produce, albeit requiring a rare flower native to the Llemanian forests, which, fortunately, a local flower vendor made a habit of collecting.

It seemed to Jakob that Harland knew woefully little about what he purported to have studied for years, and, thus, there was no more use to be gained from him. He had momentarily contemplated remaking him, but his body was tainted with the filth he had habitually imbibed to save his fragile sanity and he was too old for any of his organs to be of adequate condition.

Jakob was thoroughly disappointed to find a vaunted Gold-Ranker to be such a poor specimen, but he still held out hope that something could be made with a Rose-Gold Adventurer, given their legendary status as one-in-a-million specimens of human fortitude and talent.

“Did you buy the other items I requested?”

Harland handed him the sack that had been sitting by his feet as he talked, though his eyes never left the flask.

Jakob opened the burlap sack and withdrew the cheap mirror and balanced it precariously on the edge of the alchemy workstation, so that Harland could sit on the stool and see himself. Then he withdrew the slender knife the man had bought from the blacksmith in town. This too Jakob placed on the workstation.

Some minutes later, when the concoction had solidified enough, becoming less of a liquid and more viscous like jam, Jakob broke off the top of the flask and handed Harland the broken bottom, which

now was like a dish full of blue-brown paste. Even simply inhaling the stuff could have an effect on one's faculties, so he once again ensured the seal of his mask, then let out a puff of spent vapour.

"Dip a finger in, then run it along your gums."

With a single-minded focus, the Gold-Ranker put his index and middle fingers into the dish and fished out a glob of the stuff, then smeared the paste all over his chipped-and-ruined teeth, as well as his infected gums.

After watching a transcendent bliss overcome Harland and seeing his eyes glaze over, Jakob carefully intoned his following command, such that the man would hear and understand each word.

"Harland, take the skinning knife and carefully skin your own face and give it to me. Afterwards, go to the Guild Hall and tell them you have found the Divine before slitting your own throat in front of them."

Harland nodded dully and then picked up the knife.

Jakob sat on the stool, holding aloft the skinned face of Harland, as a piercing scream cut through the air from further down the street, where the Guild Hall lay. With meticulous care, he rolled the skin up and stuffed it into one of the internal pockets of his apron.

"Wothram. Destroy the alchemy setup and workstation. Make sure no one will connect this to us."

Before he left out the back of the workshop, he grabbed the remainder of the Elf's Lure euphoric and bade Marll craft a special sealed-off pouch where he could stuff it into without accidentally coming into contact with it himself.

Twelve more faces to go, he thought to himself.