

XXXVIII

His name had once been Carmine, but no longer did his body match his given name. No longer did the gracious gift of his Lord mar his skin and paint it white. No, he had become disfigured by the core in his belly, which the abominable Fleshcrafter had cursed him with. And his thoughts were no longer his own, occupied as they were by the hateful Demon, Raleigh.

Carmine had become a spectator in his own body.

He felt every prick of pain acutely. He felt the euphoric high of the Wrath Demon as it soared through the air and thundered across the hills in loping strides.

He heard the guttural voice as it berated him for being weak. He heard its hateful voice urge him to fight back, but, struggle as he might, Carmine was powerless, rendered entirely mortal by the stone in his stomach that held the soul of his possessor.

He saw as his skin, once pale and pure, was tainted black and crimson with a new dermis growing to replace the one stolen by the Fleshcrafter. He saw through his eyes the wanton slaughter perpetrated by the Demon on all who stood in his way.

The Fleshcrafter had given the Wrath Demon a task, but it seemed to have been forgotten, as Raleigh now sought out a faraway battlefield, bounding his way across the landscape of Helmsgarten towards the east, where Octland's border lay.

Do not hurt my people! Carmine begged, over-and-over. But, every time, the Demon only laughed in reply.

Nøgel was surprised by the endurance of his ursine mount. The grizzled bear had carried him from the middle-of-nowhere Heimdale to the Octland border without stopping once. As thanks for the trip, he hunted down a rabbit and tossed it to the beast, who gleefully tore into the meat and devoured it in slobbering and crunching mouthfuls.

He ran the last few kilometres to the capital of Octland, through the forested fields and untended soil of long-gone farms. There was only really one city in the principality, with all the smaller villages and towns having been absorbed into it by force after its founding some hundred-fifty years past. Of course, at its founding it had been a sovereign nation, but too much outside pressure and border skirmishing had led to Octland eventually signing a treaty with Helmsgarten's former King. Possibly small farms existed on the fringes of Serenity, but certainly none numbering more than three-dozen habitants.

As he reached the gates of the limestone city, it took some moments for the guards to recognise him and his unmistakable badge of office. But, once they *did* notice, they scampered like panicked mice to open the way for him. A man such as Nøgel was not made to wait, after all.

He smoothed his short grey hair with his left hand as he walked down one of the countless avenues that led to the centre of Serenity. The city was built like a compass, with four cardinal thoroughfares travelling in-and-out of its centre, where the Archduke held council, his office of state shaped like a compass-rose.

Smaller tributary streets and avenues ran parallel to these four cardinal roads. Unlike the main thoroughfares, these tributaries were where the denizens of the country lived, with their proximity to

the city-centre indicating their stature within the Ecclesiarchy of the Eight Saint. There were no non-adherents within Octland, for to live in the fold of the city was to be a believer in their Divine Truth. Though Nøgel doubted that all its citizenry were as zealous and fanatical as Octavio's Elite Corps, all of whom had undergone the ruinous transformation in the waters of the Glass Forest.

After he jogged briskly down one of the main arteries of the city, the sculpted and chiselled surfaces of the limestone growing in detail the further towards the core he went, he drew the gaze of many patrolling Men-At-Arms, denoted thusly by their wingless badges.

Nøgel was not surprised by the full contingent of Knights who awaited him before one of the four entranceways into Octavio's compass-rose palace. Their badges held the double set of wings that indicated their stature in the Elite Corps and at their fore was a lone Knight-Lord, who held his helmet under his arm, while his men kept theirs on.

"Sire Nøgel," the Knight-Lord began, "*We were unaware of your plans to visit our fair city. You unfortunately have arrived during tumultuous—*"

"I have no time for formalities. I come in the name of your Pope."

The Knight-Lord immediately stood upright and attached his helmet.

"Apologies. We will take you directly to the Archduke. Form up!" he yelled at his men, who split into four, forming around Nøgel like an omnidirectional barrier.

He paid it little attention and simply let himself be escorted into the great limestone edifice and its central chambers where the regent resided whenever he was not abroad, preaching the word of his church and helping those less fortunate than him.

As Nøgel came to the doors to the eight-sided central chamber, the contingent fell back and their Knight-Lord moved into the room first to announce his presence, shortly thereafter he entered himself, the guards in the room and the Knight-Lord departing at a gesture from the Archduke within.

"It has been a while, Nøgel. For what matter has the Pope sent you?"

"Octavio," he replied, by way of greeting. **"You know exactly why I was sent for."**

Jakob looked at the carriage Heskell had managed to find for them. They had hidden amongst the trees outside the Rooskeld town walls, while the Wight had gone in alone to search for transportation that might fit their enormous burden.

"Will we ruin the Toll if we separate it into smaller pieces?" Jakob asked, looking at the six-metre-long Branch. He did not wish to leave even a tiny piece behind, but he also knew they could not transport it in its current state.

"Does not state," Heskell replied, without needing to look at the scroll.

"What do you think?"

He nodded simply, seeming to agree to chopping the branch into sizeable portions that wouldn't poke out from the back of their carriage.

"Ciana, would you mind? Split it into three pieces of equal length."

The Elphin moved over to where Wothram had laid it to rest on the ground, then, with two quick swipes through the air, it was severed into three. Jakob still could not help but marvel at the awesome power she now wielded. To possess a fragment of a Great One's power with such ease was truly no small feat.

"Let's get it on the carriage and get a move on," he insisted. "The more we wait, the more likely we are of being spotted."

As Wothram and Heskell moved the heavy chunks unto the bed of the carriage, the horses at its front stamped about erratically, perhaps unsettled by Jakob's company or maybe sensing the transformation of the township beyond the walls nearby.

Ciana was sniffing the air, grimacing every now-and-then as she caught a whiff of the Daemon within. "The smell is everywhere."

"If he had the hundreds of vessels I helped him obtain, he must have transformed the rest by now as well. That gives him thousands of puppets under his command, and he himself told me that his power multiplies with every vessel he obtains."

"You seem to know him well."

"I was the one to summon him," Jakob answered. Ciana seemed surprised by this response.

"For what reason?"

"I was tasked with resurrecting a prince."

"Really? A prince?"

Before Jakob could answer, there sounded a loud, distinctly-familiar, *snap* and a cold pain suddenly flooded the wrist of his left arm. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as he looked down at his hand, seeing a tiny sliver of abyss-black crystallised blood poke out of his palm. Only a split-second later he realised what had happened and acted accordingly.

"Wothram, protect us from snipers! Ciana, cut my arm off, quick!"

Jakob held his arm before her, seeing the black fragment slowly absorb into his bloodstream and travel up the length of the limb. To her credit, Ciana did not hesitate for an instant, and sliced through his left forearm just below the elbow joint, her Vibrating Blade leaving so perfect a cut that his severed flesh and bones gleamed, and even the blood seemed slow to emerge from the open-ended veins.

Wothram quickly ran in front of Jakob and Ciana, holding his massive frame in front of them, as yet another *snap* sounded from beyond the town walls and the impact of its projectile slapped ineffectually into his reinforced bone-plates.

Heskell moved up close to them as well, but when he saw that Jakob and Ciana had things under control somewhat, the Wight started invoking some Chthonic Hymn that he had never heard before.

Jakob stared at the severed piece of himself as it lay in the dirt below. The fingers quickly started flexing with unholy life and the skin took on a dark pallor, before transitioning to grey and then black.

"Destroy it, utterly," he told Ciana. She pointed her palm at the spasming limb and, before it could turn into a weapon of the Daemon, she let loose a concentrated blast of vibration that reduced it to motes of dust in seconds, producing an awful whine that gave Jakob an instant migraine. He had meanwhile managed to step the flow of blood by performing a very precise incantation of Stoneflesh on the tip of his stump.

Standing next to the Bone Golem, whose arms were still outstretched and sheltering Jakob and Ciana, Heskell finished his invocation:

"Nwetrou, Leviathan of Leviathans, I pray you will gorge yourself upon my offering!"

"Nwetrou, open thy Devouring Maw!"

Both Jakob and Ciana gasped for breath as, just beyond the wall where the sniper had stood atop a roof, a massive shadow coalesced.

Heskell slapped his hands together and from belowground came an enormous creature straight out of the worst thalassophobic nightmares. A leviathan belonging to the darkness of the cosmos; a devourer of endless appetite; a maw that hunted any whose vessels travelled the oceans above the deep caves it called home. It was the undeniable Primogenitor of Gluttony, though Jakob had only ever heard its name uttered once by Grandfather, when recounting his adventures in Lilibeth. He was

awestruck by its majestic form as a jaw the size of four houses closed on a portion of the Rooskeld noble quarter.

He wondered if his Ambusher had survived, though he greatly doubted it, but it mattered little, for Guillaume was legion.

“Get in the carriage!” he yelled, the pain yet not arriving, thanks to the overabundance of adrenaline in his system.

Heskel took hold of Jakob and carried him to the back of the vehicle, sitting him atop one of the two-metre-long Branch pieces, before moving to the driver’s seat to rouse the animals, who, somehow, had not taken off in a panic. Ciana and Wothram joined Jakob in the back, and he was pleased to see neither had been harmed.

“What was that?” Ciana asked, her voice a mixture of dread and excitement. Jakob already knew from the tales of their journey to Svalberg that she had witnessed the Leviathan once before.

The carriage rocked side-to-side, followed by the snap of reins and a frustrated grunt out of Heskel, but then they were moving, the horses whipped into an immediate gallop to get them out of the reach of the Daemon.

“Before I met you, I had intended to have Guillaume aid me in retrieving the Branch. To that end, I gifted him with a long-ranged weapon. It seems he found a loophole in our contract and thus was able to turn my own weapon against me. Quite troubling.”

“*Troubling??* You lost your arm over it!”

“It is simply an arm, Ciana. I can always make... a... another...” he started dozing off, as the pain became overbearing.

“Jakob? Jakob!? Hey!”

Before falling unconscious, he heard Heskel shout something to Ciana, though he could not make out the exact words.