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Jakob was looking at the three Farmers' faces in the Butcher's shed he was borrowing. The faces came as dozens of scraps of skin and nose cartilage, and he wondered if they would count for the invocation of Nharlla. In truth, it did not matter if they had to get more. Ciana had proven they could easily attain their desired amount, if she used the Elphin Mask.

He was trying to build a new internal component for his prosthetic hand, using a mix of steel and deer bone. In hindsight, an electable stake was perhaps a bit overzealous for him, given that he was not much of a fighter. Marll had told him he should summon their older brother, Sarll, and use his soul to fuel his new weapon's design, but Jakob was yet wary of giving over too many of his faculties to demons. Besides, Marll and Purll had only become such excellent tools because he had been able to work on their natural corpuses, and they had only appeared in their natural forms due to the peculiarities of Mammon's aura and draw. If he were to summon Sarll, only the demon's soul would pierce the veil, and the Chthonic Sigils Heskell had used to bind the demons in his glove and apron would not work.

Jakob was drawn from his brainstorming by Ciana coming through the door to the shed he was in, holding a new quest flier above her triumphantly.

"Heskell says this is another potential lead on one of your mentor's labs!"

Jakob looked back down at the unfinished work before him, before getting off the stool and following the Elphin out the door. After all, this took precedence.

As soon as Nøgel entered Helmsgarten city through Eastgate, he could tell the metropolis had changed significantly in the six years since his last visit.

It did not take long for word of his arrival to reach the Royal Guardsmen, who, despite seeming to be in a state of war-preparations, took the time to issue him his own escort and lend him a carriage to traverse the disruptive districts that lay between Eastgate and the Royal district.

While the many guard corps were in the midst of gearing up for war on the Principality of Octland, the citizens of Helmsgarten were caught-up in the turmoil of all able-bodied men being conscripted, a food shortage due to some problems with ferrying goods from Heimdale, lootings and protests in the streets of the many plebeian districts, and a dozen other minor issues.

It was a pattern of disruption he had witnessed often enough to attribute to the passing of a strong leader, in this case King Ubrik, who had ruled with an outward smile and a hidden sword to great success. It would seem his heir, King Patrych the First, lacked the subtle of his father, given that he, within the first month of his reign, had ruined the alliance with his vassal state of Octland.

But this too was a common pattern, Nøgel mused, as the carriage tumbled across the cobblestones of Armory. After all, many ambitious children sought to right the perceived wrongs of their parents, and given that Ubrik had seemed like a pushover to those who did not know him, it was obvious that his heir would outwardly become a steel blade upon which fell any naysayers and challengers to his rule.

He knew that to stay in the graces of such a King, he must utilise flattery and appeal to the man's vanity. Nøgel let out a sigh. Such squabbles were ultimately beneath him, as his true calling served a

higher lifeform, whose machinations spanned dozens of generations. Compared to such complex schemes, a fledgeling King and his war of pride was utterly meaningless. But he would play a part too, in the end, and it was Nøgel's role to bring him down the right path, such that the Keening's whispered plans would come to fruition.

"You have gotten older," Nøgel told the wizened Advisor, embracing his arm with something very close to kinship. They had known each other for quite some time.

"And you seem to not have aged a day... though your scars have multiplied."

The Rose-Gold Adventurer nodded.

"And your burns? They seem recent."

"I had a run-in with a rogue Demon and its scalding winds."

"It would no doubt be the very same that tore a scar across our fair city."

Nøgel shrugged.

"But... why are you here, Nøgel?"

"I received an urgent summons from one of your Royal Guard Majors. It mentioned quite a lot of events happening all at once. I came here, wondering if the Ruler of the Sewer Deep stirred yet again."

Sirellius let out a heavy sigh. "I don't even know where to start."

"Make your summation brief."

With Sirellius next to him, Nøgel stared at the decaying corpse of a strange beast. It was a fused-together mass of several humans, which had attempted to take on the shape of some creature of myth by bonding bones, flesh, and meat.

"We have no clue what it is, but it is clear that the Haven Tragedy is what created it, along with the many other bizarre abominations."

Nøgel nodded. It was a side-effect of potent Chthonic spells. His Lord-and-Master, the Keening, had referred to them in many of his vivid dreams as the ill-conceived Void-spawn. Just like how ambient magic allowed for incantations of elements and complex rituals, so too was the void between the stars a potent fuel of ever-expanding infinite power that allowed for the Absolutes, like the Keening and Flayed Lady, to exercise their magic. It was rare for normal incantations to carry with them chaotic side-effects, but not so uncommon for the Chthonic spells of the Cosmic Deities, given the chaotic nature of the element that fuelled them.

He had often wondered if there was not some unnamed Absolute whose reign was exclusively over the element of chaotic energy, though, if such an Entity existed, it would easily match the Watcher or the Eternal with its power, but, then again, chaos was by its very nature untameable and unpredictable, so perhaps it simply was.

"Do more of these remain?" he asked.

"All those we captured have died, from what we are at a loss to say, but there is One which has defied our attempts to slay it and has hurled itself towards the Slums and the large sewer entrance there. Given the treacherousness of the deep tunnels, particularly as of late, we thought it prudent not to follow it, and our hope is that it follows its kindreds' example and dies off before it can wreak further havoc."

"It is seeking the Underking," Nøgel told him.

Sirellius nodded, having apparently reached the same conclusion. "Though for what aim?"

Nøgel shrugged. **“It matters not. I will, however, track it down for you, so that you may rest safe in the knowledge that the deep harbours only one evil.”**

The Old Advisor massaged the bridge of his nose. “There is also the matter of the Undying Daemon that I have yet to tell you about.”

“And, pray tell, which summoner was suicidal enough to summon such a creature?”

“The very same we suspect to be behind the Haven Tragedy.”

“This ‘apprentice’ of the Underking?”

“Indeed.”