



Nøgel looked over the railing, staring at the black waters of the ocean, the distant horizon still yet to show signs of land. He felt a tremor travel through the fingers of where the corpse-glove had fused with his flesh, the arcane sigils that had once covered it now fused into the skin of his palm.

Once, he had thought himself cursed, but after living a long life he knew that it was a gift of the greatest proportion. To think that he, who as a boy had been ridiculed for his congenital disability, was now the recipient of cosmic truth and power, was impossible to truly comprehend.

But he had learnt the necessity of keeping his power secret early on. As a result of his guarded nature, he had no one to call a true friend, but, then, such were the possession of weaker men, and he had a higher calling.

Even though he was beloved by poets and bards, treated with respect by Kings and Royals, and adored by the masses, none of it mattered in the face of what was now his true calling. Even the irreplaceable badge on his necklace was like a trinket that a lesser species had fashioned, crude when compared to the majesty of his corpse-glove.

When the Divine spoke directly to his mind, he was called “Envoy”, but when the Mundanes referred to him, he was called “Hero”. He found the latter a great irony, but as a Rose-Gold Adventurer, a one-in-a-thousandth of a one-in-a-ten-thousandth, he supposed that it was a convenient moniker, if only to grant him passage to all corners of the Mundane Realm, so that he might spread the teachings of his Benefactor to those minds that were receptive, few as they were.

It seemed an odd thing, but, in the Great Game of the Timeless Ones, humans were an important tool for obtaining cosmic power, though, truthfully, Nøgel had no clue as to why. But his place was not to question, only to obey, and he served willingly.

Another tremor flowed through the fingers of his corpse-glove, and he turned instinctively towards the cause of it. The powers in his right hand, gifted to him through cosmic providence, seemed ill at ease when anyone dared lay their eyes on him in anything but adulation, but Nøgel found he did not care. In truth, very little stirred his stone heart, his emotions, good and ill, ground away into nothingness by the decades of harsh non-stop fighting to attain his current rank.

The Captain seemed momentarily stunned by Nøgel’s gaze, but then cleared his throat and announced, “Milord, we are approaching pirate waters. We had best stay on guard, as those that hunt these waters are led by Garven the Bloodletter.”

Nøgel turned away.

“Let them come. If they wish for death, I will grant it to them.”

“As you wish, Milord. We will maintain course for the port of Hillfang.”

With a bored sigh, he returned to leaning on the railing.

Whooping cheers and jeering calls sounded off the sides of their small vessel. Even though it was built for speed on the open waters, the nimble boats of the pirates were so much quicker and had easily caught up and surrounded them.

The pirates were spindly and frail, as a life on the open water was not an easy one. Nøgel wondered briefly if most of them had even eaten in the previous two weeks, though it would not matter when he was done dealing with them. In truth, their weak constitutions made his task much simpler since he needed not use much of his power.

Nøgel nodded once to the Captain, who promptly inserted the wax plugs into his ears. Sharm was one of the few people who had witnessed his power and lived, but he was clearly not eager to test his resolve again, which seemed prudent.

With floating steps across the creaking deck of their vessel, Nøgel stepped to the prow, mounting the railing above the simple figurehead of an eyeless Caecilian from which the boat derived her name. He took in the quarries as they thronged their three sleek ships and waved their poorly-crafted-and-no-doubt-stolen swords in the air, while continuing to berate him. They were not to know their words fell on deaf ears.

“You have apprehended the vessel bearing a Rose-Gold Adventurer travelling in the business of continental affairs on behalf of the Kingdoms of Heimdale, Helmsgarten, and Lleman!” he announced to the assembled mass, drawing the unmistakable badge out from under his simple baby-blue linen shirt and woollen black vest.

A tall and scarred figure stepped in front of his men on the central ship, wearing an eager grin. It seemed this was their leader, though he fared no better than his men, and, from the look of him, an illness was eating him from within. Nøgel had seen the same signs enough times before to recognise it as a cancer of some form.

“Prepare to be boarded and hand over your valuables!” the man yelled.

“If it is food you seek, we have scarcely enough for the final leg of our trip. As for coins and treasure, we carry none aboard.”

“You misunderstand me, gentle-sir,” the man replied haughtily and with a dark grin creasing his ugly jaundiced face. “Your lot are not long for this world! They don’t call me *Bloodletter* for nothing, after all!”

The pirates all laughed at this, but Nøgel struggled to see the humour in it. Some titles were carried by unworthy shoulders, and it seemed this Bloodletting Garven was no different.

“You have chosen death,” he replied. It always seemed fruitless to attempt diplomacy, but it was ingrained in him to try, even if it mostly proved futile.

Before any of them comprehended the gravity of his words, Nøgel lifted the palm of his corpse-glove towards them and invoked his Patron Deity in the arcane tongue:

“*O Keening One, render thy aural onslaught!*”

Nøgel had always wondered what sound this spell of his made, but he doubted it was worth learning, and, given his disability, he would never know, unless The Keening revealed it to his inner ear through which he heard it speak its wisdom.

For many kilometres, the rings in the water would spread from the devastating quakes, and whole settlements of undersea mammals and forest-dwelling birds along the coastline would scatter to the corners of the world, given their sensibility to his gifted power. More locally, the seafloor was vibrated and upturned like in a vicious storm or tsunami, and those who were unprotected against the sound emitted from his sigil-covered hand would be obliterated from within, their corpses reduced to frail husks and their errant souls fed to his Benefactor as remuneration.

When Nøgel lowered his hand, large splinters floated in the water where once ships had been and hollow bodies lay lifeless amongst the rubble, cored like apples and bobbing on the water, too light to sink. He stepped off the railing and returned to where the Captain cowered, his head in his arms, as though such a thing could protect him.

With a tap, he roused the man.

“We can continue unimpeded now.”

The sun was hidden by the mountain range that ran along the western horizon, when Nøgel left the port town of Hillfang atop a zealous young buck, whose antlers must have recently fallen off, given its bare head. Sharm would stay in Hillfang for a couple months, but Nøgel doubted they would be reunited before then, given that his tasks seemed to be of the sort that would not easily be solved. He enjoyed the challenge of diplomatic tasks, despite his unique power being unsuited for anything but total annihilation, but such tasks were always drawn-out.

As the hooves of his eager mount thundered across the understory of a dark forest, he mulled over the missives he had received from his contacts across the continent.

The Pope of the Eight Saint in Heimdale had written frantically about a war brewing between Octland and Helmsgarten, due to the brazen new King of the latter nation. Nøgel knew that Archduke Octavio must surely share some blame as well, given his recalcitrant nature and strict purist mentality. It was always troublesome to deal with his kind, touched and warped as they were by this new upstart Saint of theirs. Saint Olemn had yet to become Vice Incarnate, like the seven Saints before him, but he was still wet behind the ears and, given the history of the previous Septet, it was only a matter of time. Purity was after all just another way to frame authoritative control as something *just*, but the way they dealt with internal matters in their fledgeling principality was demonic in its own uniquely-horrible way. At least their Pope was flexible and accommodating to outside pressure, but perhaps that was also why he resided in Heimdale and not Octland.

His second letter had come from one of his oldest acquaintances' grandchildren, who it seemed was now a Major in the Royal Guard of the Helmsgarten Crown. She had spoken of the brazen murder of the Guild Master of their local branch of the Guild; monsters and demons running amok in the metropolis; a boy who could manifest otherworldly horrors; and a dark secret behind the recent ascension of King Patrych the First.

The final missive concerned a decades-long investigation undertaken by a Gold-Ranker named Harland, whom Nøgel had mentored back when he was still a Gold-Ranker himself. Harland had been obsessed with a bogeyman of mythical proportions, known as the "Wicked Doctor of Lilibeth". In his message, he wrote briefly about his findings, and how he had connected this Wicked Doctor to a different bogeyman two nations distant, who was called "The Llemanian Widowmaker". Of the three messages, this was the matter that interested Nøgel most, given that the incident in Lilibeth half a century prior had exhibited signs of arcane magic that still influenced that region of Heimdale with strange bottomless lakes and entirely-new breeds of invasive wildlife.

He pondered what link there could be between these two bogeymen who operated within the same decade, given that the Widowmaker had simply been a notorious serial-murderer. But Harland had mentioned that he would reveal all that he had gathered when they reunited.

Suddenly, Nøgel's buck began to froth and sputter from the intense strain, and he slowed it to a halt, before dismounting. When he pulled his corpse-glove from its head, it abruptly kicked into a skittered retreat, vanishing amongst the ferns and brush in moments.

While deer were certainly fast, they seemed to tire far quicker than well-bred horses, but it was also not entirely under his control what creature manifested itself to aid him, and he was not one to refuse what the Gift provided him.

Nøgel fired splayed his fingers before curling his right hand into a fist, lifting it above his head, and uttering the litany of "Beckoning Bell".

"O Keening One, sound the bell that provides to the seeker the aid they require!"

From his curled hand came a susurrating wave that washed over the blackened bark of the nearby trees and ruffled the crisp leaves and brush, vibrating all it crashed against, until, minutes later, reaching the ears of a willing beast-of-burden, which came to find him.

As he beheld the grizzled bear, he wondered if perhaps his Patron was not being a bit too vague in providing suitable aid, but, regardless, he mounted the beast and continued west towards the Octland border.