

## LXIX

He wandered down halls that he had explored enthusiastically as a child, but now found to be devoid of the life and the intrigue it had held for him back then. The tapestries and banners were faded and untended to, left alone to fade in lustre, like a microcosm of the city itself.

It was quite obvious that he was to blame for this state of affairs. He knew how he was perceived and how people talked about him when they thought he did not hear them. It was common knowledge that none of his scheming father's great techniques of altering public perception had rubbed off on him, but the people around him were mistaken. Even the oh-so-wise Old Advisor did not think much of him. But Patrych was a change man. It had taken hideous death and unholy resurrection to unearth the talents instilled in him by his father, and those lessons had seen him slain his dear father and claim the city and its lands for himself.

No one else seemed to sense the voices that Patrych hear nor the sights that he saw. He had seen how those bright and evil horns grew from the Knights of the Eight Saint and he had known they were vile and needed to be exorcised from his realm. Of course, he had no way of knowing that it would devolve into so massive a conflict as what it had turned into. Already hundreds of his soldiers had died in skirmishes with the vile vice-indulging holy warriors.

Patrych knew what few had yet to learn: Purity was a Vice. It was an inevitability that the Eight Saint would fall and become part of the pantheon of Sinners. Only one look at the magic the Saint's adherents performed and the ways their bodies were shaped by the powerful Vice they let themselves be overtaken, and it was clear that they evil.

Those of his most promising Royal Guardsmen squads that had ventured deep into the Principality had begun to find mass graves and signs of genocide on a scale that made Patrych quite speechless.

Sure, the Kingdom of Heimdale had joined on the Principality's side when suspicions of Helmsgarten utilising demons was brought to life. Patrych would defeat the Archduke and show the proof of what he had done to all those who believed Helmsgarten was the villain in this. His father, old beloved King Ubrik, had aided the Principality, of that there could be no doubt, and it was just one of many reasons why he needed to die.

If the Old Advisor had not been the only person capable of Scrying within his retinue, then he too would have been sacrificed upon the altar of change that Patrych would create for his nation and its people. Hopefully he would soon find a replacement, for he was tiring of the codger's reticence and heavy-handed ways of dealing with everything. Just recently him and the Royals under his command had condemned several villages and towns to utter decimation, all to wipe out a single nefarious Daemon... It was clear that things had to change.

The whispers told him so.

Four Royal Guardsmen stood guard by the entrance at the foot of the staircase.

"Your Majesty?" one of them asked, noticing him.

The other three immediately saluted him and squared up their shoulders, putting on a fake charade of being productive and vigilant, despite Patrych having just seen them laze about.

"What are you doing *here*?"

“Am I not allowed to speak to my ancestors?” Patrych replied sharply, not even bothering to look the Guardsman in the eyes. He was one of the newer ones so he had yet to learn his place, but Patrych had expected better of his three comrades.

“I, erm, no of course you are, Your Majesty.”

One of the whispers suddenly made him aware that there was something amiss.

“Why are there four of you standing guard here?”

“Orders by Colonel Tress, Your Majesty.”

“*Colonel?* Since when? Is she *in there?*”

As the newcomer was about to reply, Patrych noticed the *things* in his eyes. With a quick scan, he noticed all four of them shared the aberration. It had somehow happened again... Truly, his Kingdom needed a change. His proud institution of Royal Guardsmen was so easily perverted by demonic influences, he objectively reasoned, as he clenched the corded muscles in his legs and arms.

Time seemed to slow as all but the newcomer noticed the change in Patrych’s body, but still it did not save them.

Like a crash of thunder, his right fist shot out and pulverised the newcomer’s against the stone wall behind him. He weaved under a clumsily-swung blade aimed at his head, then lanced his left fist up into the solar plexus of the wielder. As the swordsman began to keel over forward, Patrych rammed his elbow down into the back of his head, snapping his head against the stone floor where it bounced once before his body fell still.

The remaining two were in the middle of speaking the incantations of their magical attacks, when Patrych spun on the heels of his feet and launched forward with a kick of his powerful legs, which cracked the flagstone under him. He came up right within reach of them before either of them could finish, then grabbed one’s head with his right hand and crunched it shut, while lifting the other by his throat, immediately killing his incantation.

After he released the grip of his right hand, he put the hand on the last man’s throat and began squeezing slowly, *pops* and *cracks* emerging from his neck, while he tried desperately to fight back against Patrych’s inhuman strength.

Then it was over.

He looked around at the four dead bodies and felt nothing but frustration. *This time* he would not leave the clean-up to Sirellius. No, he would destroy whatever foul taint had infested his city.

With powerful strides, Patrych moved through the catacombs to the place where he knew he would find Colonel Tress. Only minutes after killing the guards she had left behind, Patrych found the traitress in the ritual chamber that had for decades served as an embalming chamber for the Royal Family and select few Aristocratic lineages.

“Right on time,” Tress said as she locked eyes with him. She was standing on the opposite side of the room, behind the offering bowl to the vile Entity that kept Patrych alive. Before he could get to her, she carved open her left arm and let a deluge of foul blood fall into the awaiting ritual vessel, where an oily black flame with a core of brilliant pale blue flickered with a life of its own.

No sooner had her tainted blood touched the bowl than the entire room changed. A fissure formed in the ground beneath them and the vile flame grew to great proportions, its colour changing to an absolute crimson like the blood it had imbibed. Then tendrils of crimson blood emerged from its brilliant core and shot outward, sticking into the walls of the chamber, as though anchoring itself forcefully.

One tendril picked up the corrupted Colonel and shoved her inside the flame, where she was immediately consumed.

Then a powerful wave of pain sent Patrych to his knees, as though his very soul was being dragged out of him by the foul thing that had taken over the Daemon itself.

As he knelt there on the stone floor of the tomb, he felt a teasing hand run along the length of his spine and up to his cheek, where it caressed him like a lover. He would have looked up if he had the strength.

He thought that the sensations were simply a by-product of his fading consciousness, but then he heard wet footsteps made by small feet as the *thing* that had been in his mind walked into reality and out in front of him. The loving hand moved from his cheek and across his lips, leaving a trail of warm fluid behind, like newly-spilled blood.

For a moment the hand left his face and he felt as though he had just lost something precious, but then it ran its many fingers through his hair. The hand stopped, then curled around and took hold of a clump of hair firmly and pulled his head up to look.

He felt pain flood his eyes, as though a thousand hair-thin needles had been hammered into them both at the same moment, and, as he tried to observe the figure through a bloodstained vision, it felt as though his entire body was set on fire, glops of melted skin and fat dripping off him, producing a cacophony of *splish* and *splash* in his ears.

Though he could barely see and pain-induced delirium was taking over, he noticed when the figure moved its mouth up to his flayed ear and whispered:

“Worship me.”

“Adulate me.”

“Praise my name.”

“Admire my brutality.”

“Behold as I flay.”

“As I butcher.”

“As I destroy.”

“All that you hold dear.”

“O, dear Patrych.”

“What fun we will have.”

A few hours later, he experienced his worst nightmare, as the Entity that had corrupted Tress and his Guardsmen used his body like a puppet, all while he only got to watch through his broken eyes and heard the pleading cries, the screams of children, and the sounds of excruciating death.

And still, in the background of the orchestra of nightmares, he could hear the sound of his skin and fat melting off his body.

*Splish.*

*Splash.*