

Ciana was accompanying Jakob to the Guild, where they were to pick up their new Silver Badges, when suddenly she scented that incredibly-dense smell of regal Proudful Vice.

She froze, putting a hand on Jakob's chest to halt him. Further down the street a man came wandering towards them, intently focused on something that wriggled in a swaddling cloth in his grip. His blue shirt and black woollen vest, along with his dark-grey trousers, were ruined and caked in dirt and old blood.

The intensity with which he carried himself immediately set Ciana on the edge, not to mention that with every step closer he came, the scent flooded her nose all the more.

"What is it?" Jakob asked.

Ciana's shoulder had scarcely healed, but she was ready, she would annihilate this foe without hesitation.

Nøgel was staring intently at the swaddling cloth and the *thing* that squirmed under its cover. It seemed to be pointing him straight ahead, but it was hard to decipher the intentions of something of its nature accurately.

From one moment to the next, it burst out of his grip and lunged down the street towards the two figures that he only now just noticed.

As the *thing* shed its swaddling cloth and became revealed in full, he lifted his corpse-glove up towards the pair.

Ciana watched in horror as the light of the sun caught on something around the man's neck, it glittered ruby gold and sent a spike of ice through her. *A Rose-Gold Badge*, she realisation internally, having heard rumours about the legendary rank many times within the Guild Halls of both Hesslik and Hekkenfelt.

Meanwhile, whatever creature he had been carrying had crawled towards them, its shrivelled skin and lumpen head giving it a horrifying resemblance to one of the boys she had been imprisoned alongside with at Svalberg, just before he died of malnutrition, following a failed experiment. As it crawled towards them, or rather, towards Jakob, its skin seemed to peel and char in the light of the sun, as though it had been birthed in the bowels of the earth and was never meant to see the world above.

"A homunculus?" Jakob muttered at her side, seemingly not having noticed the man who was aiming a black and withered hand at them, palm-first. Then some realisation struck him, as the creature died, its right arm pointing directly at him. "Ciana! Grandfather sent him! You must—"

Before he could finish his order, the air around them began to vibrate and Ciana clawed both her hands down in front of her, rebounding the impending strike, such that it detonated at the halfway-point between the pair and their assailant.

The air shook and dust blew in every direction, but before it could clear, a figure launched through the smokescreen cover, swiping her hand down as though she was wielding an invisible weapon. Instinctively, Nøgel jumped out of the way, fearing a melee wind sorcerer, but when the armoured figure finished her swing, a colossal *boom* of vibration assaulted his body from the vacuum of where she had severed the very essence of the air with her strike.

His eyes widened as he, for the first time in his long-lived life, encountered another person blessed with his Lord Keening's power. With a grasp of his corpse-glove, he attempted to crush her inside a cage of pressurised air and sound, but she used her free hand to somehow deflect the strike, such that the backwash of the spell hit him and sent him flying backwards into the side of an unmanned cart, breaking his left wrist with a poor landing.

With an offended roar, he flung his power out indiscriminately and upturned the earth and dirt underfoot, as well as quaking several houses to their very foundations, one-or-two visibly sagging afterwards. But the Pretender who stood before him had guarded herself and the Apprentice at her rear, such that an area untouched by his destructive vibrations spread out behind her.

As Nøgel got to his feet, he was about to unleash the entirety of what power he had available, his supremacy as Keening's Chosen demanded no less, but the Pretender pushed in closer, letting off a barrage of vibrations he had to guard against, while dancing out of reach of her invisible cutting edge.

While backpedalling away from her, he swung his fractured left hand outward, while subvocalising the incantation for Immolating Blast.

A sudden flare of heat made her fling herself out of the way, as the Rose-Gold Adventurer suddenly launched a fire spell at her torso and face. Ciana knew that the man's mastery of the vibration-based powers was better than her own fledgeling grasp, so logic dictated that she ought to keep him constantly on the backfoot, but the tide of their fight shifted as he started mixing minimally-charged concussive strikes with explosive flashes of scalding flame.

She stepped around to the side of him, swinging her Vibrating Edge down at his midsection, while using her left palm to let off pummelling buffets of vibrations, as well as targeted strikes meant to liquify him from within. But his spatial awareness and expertise in battle was too good for her to land any definitive blows, and as she moved through her repertoire of moves, she feared he would quickly figure her out and manage to find a flaw in her attacks to exploit.

Heskel had come running to Jakob's side, hearing the loud explosions of sudden vacuums being formed, while he was helping out in the morgue basement.

"Ciana seems to be able to hold him at bay," Jakob remarked.

Heskel grunted a warning. "**Not for long.**"

"You know him?" he asked, noticing how the Wight was sniffing the air.

"**The One who defeated Grandfather.**"

Jakob scratched the stubble growing around his mask in irritation. "Truly?"

Heskel replied with an affirmative grunt.

"We ought to aid her then, wouldn't you say?"

Without further prompting, Heskel kicked off from the ground, striding towards the battle in a loping gait, like a wolf closing in on its prey, though truly he was a bear with the agility of a felid.

Jakob doubted he would be of much use up close, so he pulled out the spell-tome and took off his glove, before letting the vein-like tendrils dig into the skin of his hand.

“Tchinn. A feast has come for you, its blood is the purest sort. Don’t you want a taste?”

The spell-tome hissed in response.

Nøgel recognised the Wight that stormed his way. It was bad news for him.

While normally his corpse-glove and gift from Lord Keening could render him victorious in any battlefield, he was limited thanks to meeting someone who possessed a similar power. The Pretender was no poor fighter, but her movements were still predictable.

The Wight meanwhile... Nøgel still bore the scars of their last bout, though he had assumed the Wight annihilated and gone since then, but it seemed the Fleshcrafter made durable servants given that it was the very same figure, with that uncomfortable appearance, who came loping towards him now.

“I will reduce you to less than ash! Our last fight was but a meagre display of my true might!” he challenged Heskel in Chthonic.

Though the Pretender was predictable, she kept switching styles, making it impossible for Nøgel to counter her, but the strategy would not last her much longer. Though her power over Lord Keening’s magic was strong, her mastery was underdeveloped, leading her to rely entirely on instinct, though what an instinct it was. She easily had the strength to be a Rose-Gold Ranker herself, but Nøgel would allow no Pretenders to tarnish his relationship with the Keening One.

Ciana scented Heskel’s arrival and the pair quickly worked to support each other, switching places and seeking to exploit any potential weakness, once again putting the Man on the backfoot by forcing him to adopt an entirely-defensive stance.

Then, from one moment to the next, a long rending tear worked its way down the front of his body. The pause in him was the perfect opportunity for Heskel to hammer his tremendous power into his torso, sending the Rose-Golder tumbling head-over-backwards, before he clipped the side of a stone lantern with a loud *crack* and fell to the ground.

Ciana was on him before he could rise, deflecting and dispersing his defensive attack, and then she swung her Vibrating Edge through his body, severing his right arm from his torso, releasing a tide of blood.

But neither she, Heskel, nor Jakob could deliver a finishing strike, as some incredible vibrating clash of wind assailed the city, reducing parts of the outer wall to ash and tumbling and literally erasing many houses all around them. It seemed as though the trio only survived the cataclysmic magic because of Ciana’s presence, as her body warded off the vibrations, perhaps because of own grasp of the vibrating power.

When the wind cleared, the Man was nowhere to be seen.

He had lost. It was unimaginable, but he had lost.

Nøgel looked around him and at the forest he had fallen into. He recognised the way the trees bent and how their leaves grew. He was not far from Helmsgarten’s metropolis, he realised.

A jolt of excruciating and humiliating pain reminded him of his defeat and he quickly moved his scalding left hand down his body, cauterising the snaking wound carved through his skin and flesh, before moving to the stump that was all that remained of his right arm, sealing it shut by superheating the flesh, fat, and bone into a charred and crispy nub of skin. It would necrose fast, it was not a matter of if, but rather when.

It seemed a gift had been bestowed on him by Lord Keening, transporting him out the dire situation he was in and placing him here, though the whisperings had fallen still since his loss. He feared his Benefactor had lost its faith in him, but those thoughts were brief and quickly dispelled. Nøgel would not be discarded so easily.

He arose from the forest floor, where the trees and shrubbery had been reduced to splinters and loose fragments from his landing, before picking up his severed arm, where the corpse-glove yet remained. With this burden, he marched towards the Slums of Helmsgarten.

The Fleshcrafter would aid him. That much was certain.