



Iskandarr found Jakob as he was putting the finishing touches on the ritual described within the scroll that Grandfather had possessed for maybe over a century.

*“It is done,”* his progeny told him. *“I have destroyed the malign growth along with the Daemon whose soul was used as its seedbed.”*

“I assumed as much, once the sounds of lightning fell silent. You have truly surpassed all my expectations of you, and I assure you they were high.”

Iskandarr nodded. *“You met with your Father?”*

“He is not my Father. He never was. He wasn’t even family. Just some crazy old man to whom the years had not been kind.”

*“Did you kill him?”*

“I realised that it was too good a punishment for one such as him, so I made sure he would suffer. To one who loves the sound of his own voice and to one who desires to live eternally, the punishment I designed is the cruellest I could come up with.”

*“You told me that cruelty was a waste, that it was inefficient.”*

“I suppose I must have said something along those lines, but there are always exceptions to the rules, Iskandarr.”

The Sovereign looked at what Jakob had been carving into the limestones of the plaza. *“And this? What ritual do you now plan to undertake?”*

Jakob handed him the tungsten scroll, whereupon it was detailed.

“Nharlla pointed me towards *this* in return for siring you. I believe it is my just reward for my dutiful service to the Watcher and his many Vassals.”

*“The Trial of Ascendancy?”* Iskandarr read out loud in confusion.

“If I could grin, I would,” Jakob told him.

The Sovereign kept on reading: *“It says the tolls are: ‘The Power to Ruin a Nation’, ‘True Sight’, and ‘Unchallengeable Mastery’. What do they mean?”*

“I thought I had taught you better than this,” Jakob replied.

*“The Power to Ruin a Nation could be a thousand different things and Unchallengeable Mastery... unchallengeable by whom?”*

“Unchallengeable by the Great Ones, of course!”

*“Father... do you possess such a thing?”*

“Don’t be daft. It is the one thing I share with my Mentor and which the Great Ones Above find so fascinating about us.”

*“Fleshcrafting?”*

“Indeed.”

Though fully mature by now and bearing the appearance of a true Sovereign, there was a sincere confusion on Iskandarr’s face. *“What happens if you ascend?”* he asked, genuinely concerned.

“Who can truly say? Nharlla promised me my search may take a million years, so I suppose I would continue to be a Seeker of Knowledge. But I would also join the ranks of the Watcher’s Vassals. After all, have you never wondered where the Absolutes like the Flayed Lady came from? Surely her ascendancy was born of a similar ritual, though whether she ascended from our world or another, I

cannot say, but her maliciousness and betrayal is not an element inherent to the fabric of the universe. Surely you can see that.”

“*And what about this True Sight? Does that pertain to Chthonic?*”

“I believe so. And, though you are correct in saying that there are many ways Ruin may be brought to a Nation, it is often said that the ultimate power to Ruin a Nation lies in the hands of its ruler. That ruler is you, Iskandarr. Though it is not much of a city any longer, Helmsgarten is ours by right now, for you have shown that none may stand in our way, not even the Betrayer and her servants.”

Iskandarr looked at the carvings in the limestones and Jakob followed his gaze. It was clear that the ritual had been meant for Jakob, for its lines made a shape that was inherent to his being now. Seen from above by one of his bone-shaped birds, it would be quite obvious to whom the ritual was meant, for it stated, in the Chthonic Sigil Alphabet: *The Seeker*.

“*You intend to go through with this.*”

“Power is meant to be used,” Jakob replied, stating the obvious.

“*That is not why you are doing this. I can see through you enough to tell.*”

Jakob chuckled. “May you continue to grow wiser with every day, Iskandarr.”

“*Is this farewell? Will you leave me as well?*”

He was about to reach out with his right hand, but then he stopped himself, before reaching out with his left. Iskandarr seemed to grow tense, perhaps still remembering the pain Jakob’s obsidian hand had inflicted on him when his actions had led to Ciana’s death.

With his four obsidian fingers on his son’s shoulder, Jakob promised him: “If you call upon me, I will listen.”

Then he let go and walked towards the centre of the enormous sigil. In the distance, huddled between the temples and houses of the Haven district, the few survivors of the Flayed Lady’s machinations watched on. None dared come near, as they feared the man who wielded lightning, the reptilian monster whose very gaze seemed to call their blood from their bodies, and the hooded abomination of a Magister with his army of terrifying bone servants.

Jakob looked up towards the clouds, which seemed to have parted for him, as though this was all some stage play and things were following a prescribed formula. Then he lifted his arms out and invoked the ritual:

“*I come as a humble Invoker before you,*”

“*In my eyes reside the True Sight,*”

“*In my blood rests the power to Ruin a Nation,*”

“*In my heart blooms my Unchallengeable Mastery,*”

“*I am the Father of the Sovereign,*”

“*I am the Son of a Monster,*”

“*I am the Seeker of Knowledge,*”

“*Absolutes, whose attention wanders from mortal realm to mortal realm, behold me in this very moment and judge me on my merits,*”

“*Deem me wanting and visit devastation upon this plaza,*”

“*Or deem me worthy and deign me to ascend to your lofty halls,*”

“*I come as a humble Invoker before you,*”

“*But I leave this mortal plane to stand amongst you,*”

“*As an Ascendant,*”

“*As an Absolute,*”

“*As a Great One Above!*”

*Once every millennium, an Invoker stands above the rest and reaches out towards the formless void between the stars. If deemed worthy, the void reaches back and the Invoker is granted ascendancy of body and mind. The Ascendant is an entity of boundless potential, whose merest gaze might scald stars and quake the heavens. They are known to the few mortals, who are gifted with a fragment of the True Sight, as the Absolutes and the Great Ones Above.*

*The Ascendants are Entities that exemplify a Mastery and are multifaceted Beings whose existences are shaped according to something that they seek or hold dominion over. Some take great interest in the mortals of the many realms beneath their gazes, while others are more concerned with their individual pursuits. Some find great power from the worship of mortals and others seek to usurp their betters by cunning schemes that play their adherents against each other.*

*There are no two Ascendants alike, and it is a rare few who rise from mortal stock and join the Absolutes in their cosmic pantheon. In the millions upon millions of years since the first of the Great Ones began their schemes, many haughty mortals have sought to stand among them as equal, but most were deemed wanting. Occasionally, some of the Absolutes find mortal champions whom they seek to elevate to become their Vassals, such that they might grow their untold power and stand above their brethren.*

*One such mortal was deemed worthy on that day. He bore the mark of the Watcher of Worlds and was favoured by many of its Vassals. Although the Betrayer, that hateful and jealous Entity, sought to prevent the mortal from his Ascension, he proved himself resilient to her wicked machinations.*

*For exemplifying the values deemed necessary in an Ascendant and for his role in fulfilling one of the Watcher's carefully-spun threads of Fate, he was lifted from the mortal coil and given a seat amongst those he had worshipped his entire life.*

*From the Ascendancy a tremor rolled across the endless expanse of the cosmos and was felt by all mortal creatures in their mortal realms, though hardly any seemed to comprehend what the sensation meant. Even the realms of the Saints of Virtue and Vice were not left untouched, and many of the Demons within and the Daemons that existed on their fringes found a desirable object of worship in this newly-ascended Absolute.*

*He was known as the Seeker of Knowledge and the Father of Monstrosity, but he would later become known by many more names, for an Absolute is a multifaceted Being not so easily defined.*

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Iskandarr stared at the sigil that was permanently burnt into the limestones of the district once reserved for venerating a Saint. He looked around at the bone constructs and saw that their leader, the one named Wothram, had begun giving them orders, as they began to move towards the Castle that Iskandarr himself had ruined with his devastating powers.

The Covetous Daemon that had served his father for several years stood nearby, having witnessed the Ascendancy.

*“You are absolved of your obligations,”* Iskandarr told the Daemon.

*“I never desired to be set free,”* the Daemon hissed in reply. *“Though my servitude to the Seeker was brief, it was a time I cherished.”* It turned its reptilian heterochromatic eyes to Iskandarr, then said, *“I would serve you, my Sovereign, if you would allow me such a pleasure.”*

Some beings were made to serve and some were made to rule. It was clear where they both fell on that scale.

*“Very well,”* Iskandarr told him. Then he lifted the Elphin Mask up over his head, spinning it around so he looked at the face that had been moulded by skilled hands from the skin of a half-demon human like his Mother.

*“Would you serve me too, Belamouranthyne?”*

*“If my lust is sated, you may be my Sovereign,”* her honey-coated voice told him.

Iskandarr put his hand on face of the Mask and drew out the essence of the Daemon trapped within, such that her true body manifested before him. As the Sovereign, this was his talent, for there were no Daemons who could challenge his rule and there were none that could disobey his will.

Belamouranthyne flexed her voluptuous naked body with a yawn, then began walking towards the people who hid amongst the buildings of the district, letting her enthralling aura fall over them. Iskandarr knew that a quirk of her power was that it only took hold on minds of men, but her control over them was of such intensity that this weakness was hardly felt. He still remembered how he had used her power to turn the entire male population of Lillebrünnr against its leaders, but he had other ideas of how her power could be used now, especially as he was a Sovereign with a city in ruins.

Without requiring him to tell her, Bel gestured around her and said, *“Adulate me and venerate your Sovereign! Show your worship of me through him and forge from these pitiable remains a city that is worthy of his title!”*

Hundreds of starry-eyed men came from all over the district that had served as their sanctuary for weeks or more, as the fiends of the Flayed Lady ran amok everywhere else. It was mildly off-putting how the men took to the work with immediate enthusiasm, and, as the Enthralling Daemon wandered through the ruined city, she brought out thousands more who had hidden away.

With their enthusiastic mind-slaved workers, the two Daemons and their Sovereign would soon have a proper kingdom to call their own.

As Iskandarr walked towards the ruined Castle, with Covetous Tchinn on his heels, he looked to the sky above and wondered if his Father looked down at him.

He would become worthy of his name and please the Great Ones well, so that he one day too might ascend to their lofty halls, to stand next to his Father as his equal.