

## VII

The city of Serenity. The Capital of Octland. The bastion of the Church of the Eight Saint. It was so much more impressive now than it had once been. In the crucible of war, things either broke under the strain or became stronger. The pious men of Octland had been tempered by war and become stronger than ever expected, and their city, their last safe haven in the region, had become like the shell of an enormous tortoise, which refused to submit to the claws of its predators.

But he hated it. It was a symbol of the resistance against his rightful rule.

He was the Sovereign and yet few seemed to heed that, apart from the Daemons who were like outcast to the denizens of vice.

Iskandarr was bequeathed the natural dominion of all things. For was it not the blood of an Ascendant which flowed in his veins? Was he not the descendant of a union of two Lords of Vice? Through the tinkering of the Seeker, Iskandarr had been birthed from the souls and corpses of the proud Demon Lord of the Solitary Spire, known as Jøkull, and the Demon Lady of the Ruinous Path by name of Kalameytas.

Based solely on his unique lineage, he was made to rule. He was meant to rule and even the Great Ones had gifted him the title to prove it. He wielded jealous lightning that devastated all it came against and yet he was denied his rightful claim.

Helmsgarten was his. The lands that surrounded it were naturally his to take.

But the pious men of the Liberated Octland would not relinquish it to him, nor would the Summoners of Lleman in the west, nor the Magicians of Heimdal to the east.

Compounding this travesty was the sad reality that his jealous lightning, *this* god-like power he possessed, was killing him. The jealous spark housed within the arcs of plasma and pure energy; it affected him as much as those he wielded it against.

If not for the discovery that he could wield his power and absorb powerful souls to recoup what he lost with every casted spell, he would surely have perished by his own hand already.

But, ten years had passed since his father left this mortal plane to Ascend, and what did Iskandarr have to show for all this time?

Nothing.

“My Sovereign,” said the wizened Advisor from nearby.

“*I wish not to hear it, Sirellius,*” he replied. He could already tell that the old coward would advocate restraint, even when the city of Serenity lay in wait *just there* on the horizon.

Iskandarr had come upon the old man after he had taken the metropolis of Helmsgarten for himself, after defeating the champion of the Flayed Lady. One of his companions, the Covetous Daemon Tchinn, had recommended that the Advisor be kept alive, as he possessed a power that was unique amongst most magicians: the ability to scry the whereabouts of any living soul upon the face of their world. While this power had been useful to Iskandarr, he despised the old man and hated his advice. Once he found a suitable Demon for the task, Sirellius’ body would be forcefully possessed.

*“I will break their fortress,”* the Sovereign growled. *“No longer will they defy my rightful claim. My lightning will boil them from the inside out and leave only scraps for the carrion feeders.”*

“The Slave Corps is exhausted and ground to a paste upon their walls,” he argued back, a shard of obstinacy yet lodged firmly in his old corpus.

*“Their corpses will become the guiding focus for my spell. Their blood will become the toll exacted for my revenge to bear fruition. I am the Sovereign and I will reclaim what is mine by right!”*

The remainders of their army, Tchinn, some of his Blood Slaves, Sirellius and his aide, and Iskandarr; they all stood upon a hill that looked towards the barren earth that surrounded the walled-off city of Purity.

The pious men of Octland, led by Lord Octavio the Pure, were the adherents of Saint Olemn, believed to be an incarnation of Purity. Through faith alone, this long-dead Saint had risen into something akin to Godhood, though which paled before the might of the Great Ones he imitated. It was an old story that had been seen seven times before.

A Saint, worshipped for their Virtuousness and risen to Godhood, only for their Virtue to wither and decay, becoming a Vice and making Demons of its adherents, with a singular purpose to their existence.

Once, the first Saint had been known as Humility Incarnate, but this Virtue had become the Vice of Pride. So too had the second, Charity, become Greed; Peace had become Wrath; Temperance had become Gluttony; Chastity had become Lust; Diligence had become Sloth; and Kindness had become Envy.

Iskandarr swore, *“I will make the adherents of Purity the spawn of Corruption.”*

The air around the Sovereign stirred with latent power that was awakened by his unspoken command. Those that surrounded him quickly made a retreat to safety, for they knew that his jealous lightning cared not about allegiances.

From the ground came wobbling arcs of plasma that connected to his feet, as the power lifted him off the ground and into the air, while forks of lightning shot out of the sky above and connected with his body. The energy that suffused his body like worms of light, were a hideous green, matching his left eye that belonged to the Envious Lady who was now part of his being. The lightning itself was the power of the Proud Lord visible in his right eye. Together, the magics of the Proud One and Envious One became a spark with undeniable power and a hateful aftermath that wreaked havoc on the survivors, like a lingering sickness in the soil and air.

“*Spark of Creation,*” he started, as he floated in the air, easily visible from the walls of Serenity with the bright glow he emitted.

Iskandarr raised his right arm to encompass the city that despised him and refused to kneel to his might. “*Make of this house of purity a corrupted shell.*”

The energy that came from the ground and from the sky condensed within the palm of his outstretched hand, making the entire limb glow a tainted green. The electricity shifted and hopped across his skin, eager to be released. Lightning magic was fickle and dangerous, but he had mastered its whim long ago.

The barren earth visibly charred in a hundred metres around him, taking on the same unnatural tainted glow.

Then, with a single utterance, he unleashed this potent power. The strongest spell he would ever cast.

“*Ruin.*”

*For many kilometres, it was as if sound was erased and natural light was overpowered by a bright green glow that would linger in the eyes of anyone who had witnessed it for days. A buffet of wind and a tremble through the ground would be felt by all those living across the continent, whether in the high towers of Heimdal or the fortified Summoning chambers of Lleman. A deep sense of unease would grip the hearts of all who felt this aftermath and they would sleep less soundly at night, fearing what lurked in the darkness. It was rare that such potent magic was unleashed upon the world, but there was always a cost to be exacted, a toll to be collected. Power had a price, and, for a spell that tore a city in half and corrupted its pious people, the price was steep.*

The Sovereign unleashed a stream of radiating energy that carved a deep furrow through the barren desecrated soil, flooding it with a tainted seed that would for centuries bear a lasting impact on those who came near. The beam of unholy energy moved through the earth and melted down the walls of the fortress-city of Serenity, wherein hid the adherents of the Eight Saint. Those it touched were reduced to nothingness, while those that survived were forever tainted, becoming the seedbed of a newborn Vice.

As the city of Serenity fell, so too fell the invoker of this devastating lightning. He dropped from the sky with but a flicker of life in his body. His loyal servant, Tchinn, caught him before he crashed down upon the earth.

The Serpent-like Daemon had known that this outcome was inevitable, but he would not defy his Sovereign, even as his frail body clung desperately to the shreds of life within Tchinn’s scaly embrace.

The remnants of their invading army, now reduced to but a handful of souls, made an unceremonious retreat to the metropolis of Helmsgarten.

When he came to, he was in the throne room of his castle within Helmsgarten. The Daemon armour, formed from the servile body of a weak Devourer Daemon by name of Marvill, lay nearby. What life the Daemon had once had was gone, now bound permanently as a mere semi-sentient suit of abyss-black plates. But the Sovereign knew that some creatures were meant to serve, and Marvill had accepted his faith willingly.

With a frustrated groan, he struggled upright from his large obsidian slab of a throne. He could feel the work that Tchinn had undertaken to keep him alive, but knew that he did not have long left. The spark of life in his body was ever-bright, but it was the body itself that was waning, unable to house so potent a soul as his.

Iskandarr stumbled and fell onto the stone floor with his knees, heaving for breath. The hall was empty of his servants, but he preferred it this way, especially at a time like this. Tchinn had no doubt ordered that the castle be evacuated for a period, as the Sovereign recouped his strength.

*“Father... why have you given me this weak body, if I was meant for greatness?”*

He ran his index finger across one of his sharp teeth, tearing the skin, then began to draw a sigil on the floor before him. The shape was peculiar and the ritual itself was one he had only used once before. He understood the ancient tongue, thanks to his lineage, but the rites and spells that invoked the Seeker’s power were new and he did not fully comprehend them yet.

As he finished the Chthonic Sigil for the spell, he leaned back to sit on his calves and looked up to the ceiling of the throne room. He had purposefully had the roof turned into a glass dome that allowed him to view the stars, and in turn allow himself to be viewed by them. The stars were like the uncountable eyes of the Great Ones who followed him.

He wondered what they would say about him right now. He was certain he had struck a decisive blow against Octland and their despicable Saint, his jealous spark would see to it, that was certain. However, he had exhausted his body much sooner than intended and it was all but a certainty that he would die before his Sovereignty was carried out.

*“Why did you gift me this title!?”* he screamed at the stars.

*“What is my purpose here!?”*

*“Was I not destined for something greater!?”*

With a slam against the tiles of his throne room, he intoned the invocation for the ritual he had prepared in his own blood.

*“Keeper of Tomes! Traveller of Realms! Seeker of Knowledge! I beseech thee!”*

*“I bringeth a gift of knowledge for thee and seeketh a gift in exchange!”*

The sigil lit with a pale-white glow, and as the blood-drawn lines blackened and charred, the light manifested into an offering bowl.

*What knowledge have you brought me, Sovereign?*

The blackened veins on Iskandarr’s ruined body grew hard as the blood within froze beneath the attention of the Great One he had beckoned with the Erudition Barter ritual.

As the breath in his body seemed to stagnate and die, he yelled, *“The Eight Saint of Purity will fall to Vice, becoming the Demonic Incarnation of Corruption!”*

*I accept this offering.*

*Saint Olemn will become the eight incarnation of vice and his adherents will become his demonic servants, this truth is now known to me.*

*Ask for the gift of knowledge you seek and I will grant it, if the answer is known to me.*

The offering bowl glowed brightly as his gift was accepted and Iskandarr coughed violently as the blood in his veins thawed and the air returned to his lungs. He never felt more mortal than when he beseeched the Absolutes and suffered the aftermath of their brief attention upon his being. It pained him to feel so cowed by a greater force, but he knew better than to challenge their superiority.

*“I seek an answer to my question! Will I succumb to my mortality before I bear out the legacy I was handed at birth!?”*

The first time Iskandarr had invoked the Erudition Barter ritual, he had asked for guidance on which of the three nations he warred against would be the biggest threat to his rule. The Seeker had told him that he must aggressively seek to destroy Octland, lest its swelling power overwhelm him. Now that he had followed the advice and paid the price, he wondered if perhaps he had been led astray.

*You will live to see your legacy bear fruit, for the Sovereign shall not succumb to his mortality.*

*Patience shall be your undoing, if not recognised as your greatest foe.*

*Three of the Seeker’s Chosen will find you in time.*

*Become reborn.*

*“I cannot wait that long,”* he replied, but the offering cup was gone and the light had vanished.

The great doors to his throne room barged open as Tchinn entered with a unit of thirteen Blood Slaves, seeming distressed.

*“My Sovereign!”* he called upon seeing Iskandarr kneeled on the floor, bile dripping from his mouth.

*“I am fine, Tchinn. The Seeker has assured me that I shall survive my mortality.”*

The reptilian Daemon lowered his head in deference. Iskandarr knew him well enough to know that he disagreed, but he would not openly defy the words of a Great One, for such a thing was sacrilege in the Sovereign’s lands, where their pantheon was revered above all others.

With a pained groan, Iskandarr lifted himself from the floor and returned to his throne. His body had thinned significantly over the years from the destructive taint of his own power, but the light in his eyes was as fierce as ever.

He waved his hand, beckoning his servant forward. *“Tell me how the Enthralling Daemon, Belamouranthyne, fares in the west against Lleman.”*

Tchinn acquiesced and came to kneel before his ruler. *“I bear good news in that regard.”*