

He looked at his new arm, at the many scrawling ever-changing sigils that flowed across it with the liquid skin. With a thought he changed the number of clawed fingers at its end and with another he doubled its length and joints, even causing another forearm and hand to grow from it. It was the ultimate tool to suit his every desire, as, beyond its simple ability to transform, it had total domination over the blood of any creature and could even spontaneously manifest a servant of the Great One within any humanoid vessel.

To make the limb, the Fleshcrafter had taken his old arm and offered it up to the Betrayer. She who was contempt and envy incarnate, whose every action was laden with double-crossing schemes and ruinous decimation of friend and foe alike. Nøgel had worshipped her through his devoting to the Keening One, but he had never been granted any of her power, for she was miserly with handing them out, even when it benefitted her. But through the Fleshcrafter's ritual, her gift-giving claw had been extended to him and now one of her treacherous arms adorned his body.

He could already feel how it spoke to him on an innate level, but his decades spent with the corpse-glove leading him every which way had prepared him for this. His will could not be so easily broken. Nøgel would obey, for that was his place in the cosmos. A lowly pawn that served a higher calling. Even becoming a hero and Rose-Golder had all been at the behest of the Flayed Lady's machinations told to him through her vassal, the Keening One.

But he had some pride in the work he had done, for, after all, human souls and their devotion was a greatly-sought prize for the Great Ones, and he had brought many such souls into her fold. Certainly this was his long-sought reward for his lifetime of service.

The ritual complete, he immediately obeyed the first command of his Benefactor. With his constantly-shifting arm, he tore his way through the Fleshcrafter's laboratory, destroying his tools, servants, and chimera vats, while the Old Spider could only watch from his inner sanctum where he had wilfully interred himself.

And as Nøgel left the sewer demesne, the Fleshcrafter was the sole survivor within a ruin, his days as a creator of monsters brought to an end. If he had cared, he might have wondered what the Old Spider would do, whether he would remain alive and wait out the end of the world around him or cross the threshold of his inner sanctum and become dust.

A grin covered Nøgel's face. He adored the Flayed Lady's schemes, even knowing he himself would no doubt succumb to one of them someday. And yet, he served willingly. This world that he hated, he wanted to see it torn asunder and reduced to ruins.

Tress sat in her room, looking through the letters and plans she had been given to prepare for the coming war. She had no doubt that the Summoner that Sirellius had tasked her with finding was the cause of their newest headache: this report of a Wrath Demon tearing its way through the metropolis, before ending up in Octland and causing great destruction within its capital. No doubt it was the very same one that a year prior had led to the Market West disaster.

She took in a deep breath and put the papers on the desk and went over to the tall mirror near her simple bed. Carefully, she peeled the bandage back to witness the hastily-stitched ruin the left side of

her face had become. The skin was purple and black along the seam and the stitches pulled at her skin uncomfortably, giving her a permanent grin that lifted the corner of her mouth upwards slightly.

She let a single self-pitying tear travel down her right cheek, then a sound from her door quickly made her turn, hand outstretched and ready to launch shearing wind at any attack.

Then Tress reminded herself that she was within the castle of Helmsgarten and no one would be coming for her life. She figured it was probably just Arn that wanted to confer with her about something, now that he had been promoted.

When she went over to the doorway, she found the door already opened wide and a dark silhouette standing just beyond, its right arm disturbingly elongated. She then caught sight of the face of the figure and recognised who it was.

“Nøgel?”

Archduke Octavio walked amongst his people, seeing which of his citizens were fitting to be elevated to footmen in his army. There was no time to have new recruits undergo the Glass Forest Ritual, but he could still bestow a sliver of his Lord’s power to those deemed suitable, such that they could fight with increase strength and stamina on the battlefields that would soon emerge where Octland bordered Helmsgarten.

As he continued his tour, he wondered when the promised reinforcements from Heimdale and the Pope would arrive. Given that the Pope was the figurehead of the Church of the Eight Saint, he was constantly surrounded by many of the strongest fighters within their Holy Corps, and Octavio expected to see these men come to bolster his army, as well as the vaunted and often-celebrated cavalry troops of Heimdale’s army that he had been promised.

But weeks had passed and yet no sightings of them had manifested within his lands. Given the strength of Helmsgarten’s opening offensive and the many lives the abominable Demon had taken, he feared that the reinforcements would arrive too late to make a difference. But he yet held the faith. After all, had he not, by the might of his Lord, exorcised the foul Wrath Demon to his Lord’s realm of purity, where it would suffer for an eternity?

“O Untainted One, blame us not for being weak, for we are but sheep in your fold, shepherded under your strength. Lend us but a figment more of that strength, so that we may continue to sing praises in your name, undaunted by all who seek our defeat.”

Maybe once it would have troubled him, but now Nøgel took joy in committing atrocities against those he was supposed to hold dear, whenever those malicious whispers commanded him to.

At his feet lay his latest victim, the granddaughter of his oldest acquaintance, whom Nøgel had himself slain two decades prior. Her blood flowed between his feet, but, using his new arm, he collected it all, before lifting the lifeless body up by its neck and pumping that life-fuel back into its veins, sealing shut its grievous wounds and even healing the horrendous disfigurement to its face.

Then he set it down on its feet, a facsimile of the person the body had once belonged to. If not for the faint reflection of terrible creatures within its eyes, it was impossible to tell the difference.

“I serve,” it told Nøgel, sounding just like he remembered Tress’ voice.

“**You know what to do,**” he told the servant.

It was to play only a minor role in the upcoming schemes, and its creation and the death of yet another familiar tied had more to do with Nøgel once more proving his loyalty.
But he lived to serve and he offered everything willingly to his Benefactor.