

Iskandarr continued pointing south-southeast as he held Ciana's hand. As his words sunk in, she noticed a disfigured silhouette cresting a hill directly where the boy pointed. She let his hand drop and started striding towards the approaching figure.

At last he had found the place. Even with how the Great Ones meddled to keep him from locating the Pretender, the Apprentice, and their unworthy spawn, he had found them. It was all thanks to the Lady's guidance.

By now, the arm he had been gifted had consumed half of his face and torso, turning the skin and flesh into the same swirling mass of blood and power. It was an intoxicating rush of omnipotence that filled him every time it expanded further across his skin, and he knew that when his entire body was consumed by it he would be unstoppable. He would become a Flayed Avatar of the scheming Lady.

As he crested the hill just beyond the treeline of the forest he had run through for the last few hours, Nøgel saw the diminutive tavern in the distance as well as the approaching figures.

"You have blessed me," he remarked to the River of Fate. It had after all brought him exactly what he sought.

Nøgel raised his bloodied right arm into the air, its massive form a weapon of destruction, then he swung down its claws, hitting the dense soil of the hill and flinging his entire body forward like a projectile.

As he descended upon the approaching figure, he relished in the thought of flensing apart her skin and punishing her for believing herself the Keening's Chosen. His body spun around, the clawed and disfigured arm reaching for her, but then a powerful explosion of air punched him off-course, sending him on a collision course with a nearby coppice of slender leafless trees. His body broke against their trunks, but was already beginning to heal by the time the Pretender strode towards him, sending powerful vibrating bolts into his body, shredding his skin and flesh, while also pulverising his internals.

With a swing he sent two dozen bullets of blood back at her, while his own life fluid leaked from a multitude of cuts, holes, and open wounds.

Ciana raised her hand to obliterate the projectiles sent back at her, then she leapt forward with a downward chop of her Vibrating Edge. The disfigured Creature blocked the strike of her unseen blade with the massive clawed hand, somehow avoiding being split in two. With her free hand Ciana clenched the air inside his untainted left flank and a massive cavity formed as her gifted power pulverised everything it touched with its devastating tremors.

Despite the fatal wound in his side, the Creature swung back at her with its enormous and skinless right arm, the very air singing an unholy tune as she moved out of its reach. With space between them, the Creature fired off more of its blood magic, tiny shards of crystallised blood shooting from the hideously-overgrown upper arm.

Ciana backstepped while selectively destroying each of the projectiles that curved through the air to try and catch her from a blind spot, but her awareness of her surroundings was total and it was as though she saw everything without needing to look directly at it.

Is this what it feels like to be undefeatable?

The Creature used its massive claw to fling its body forward again, but she saw it coming and sent a slash of her unseen blade right at his mid-section, cutting apart the portions of his body that was still human and untainted.

As his waist separated from his torso, a dozen tendrils shot out of his crimson arm as his body fell to the ground. The tendrils reached for Ciana like blood-thirsty lamprey mouths, but with a sweeping gesture of her free hand, she pulverised them into a mist that immediately vapourised. Then she let the Vibrating Edge fall away into the air and focused both of her hands on the prone and mutilated Creature, letting the full brunt of her magic bear upon its miserable form.

As the very atoms of its being began to vibrate destructively, the human portions of the body yet attached were reduced to nothingness, but nothing happened to the swirling mass of blood that made-up its right arm and half its torso and face.

Even as she increased the intensity, the dirt around the crimson Creature becoming finely-grained dust, nothing seemed to happen, as though her magic could not harm it. She continued to apply her destructive magic however, as to let up would be to allow the Creature to regain a foothold.

Then she heard the soft footfalls of the boy as he came up to her side.

“Iskandarr, get out of here!” she demanded through gritted teeth, the strain of keeping up the aural onslaught already beginning to drain her reserves.

The boy did not listen however and walked over to the lump of misshapen crimson matter.

“The Keening cannot harm its Master,” he remarked.

Then he spoke a phrase and the lump of crimson matter vanished. *“Unmake the bonds that bind thee to this realm.”*

Like a pressure that had been held back by an equivalent force, the disappearance of the Creature meant that there was no target for Ciana’s magic, so it shot straight into the ground and made an enormous crater as it vapourised the grass and earth before she could shut it down.

She turned to look at the boy in wide-eyed disbelief, just in time to see him collapse to the ground, unconscious.

Nøgel struggled to believe it. He had been defeated despite everything, despite the overwhelming strength he had possessed. He had scarcely enough time to contemplate the matter, when he realised that, somehow, he was still alive, though his vision was black and his senses were numbed.

Then a cold and searing pain shot through his body, making him wish for true death. Wordless screams and shrieks filled his head and blocked out all thoughts he might have had.

Crimson light cleared away the darkness of his vision and he found himself within the bowels of some colossal creature, the curving and pulsating walls around him covered in reaching limbs full of claws and mouths.

If he had possessed the ability to, he would have begged to be put out of his misery, but he was unable to do that much. He was incapable of even moving, knowing instinctively that he had no true body, but was only a misshapen lump of formless soul-matter.

The screams in his thoughts began to take on shape, until they formed words.

“FAILURE.”

“WEAKLING.”

“WORTHLESS.”

“USELESS.”

“HIDEOUS.”

“PATHETIC.”

The screams and shrieks continued to berate him in a thousand different words and he felt the space between each word like a knife being pulled from his body, before the next word plunged it back into a new spot and brought with it a fresh pain.

He wanted to plead with the voices.

He wished to prove himself undeserving of them.

But he had failed the Flayed Lady.

And she did not take well to failures.