

VIII

Hesslik was so much bigger and full of people than Langer could ever have guessed. It was not a stretch to say that he had lived a sheltered life, but now, as he looked at the many people his golem carriage passed by on the streets, he wondered why this part of the world had been kept from him.

Why had he been secreted away at some small insignificant estate in the countryside?

It seemed that his parents had hidden him from the world, rather than the other way around.

Perhaps they had been ashamed of his dysfunctional body or perhaps his life was, by its very essence, something to be ashamed of.

“What do you see when you look at me, Wothram?”

The Knight that sat opposite him in the carriage regarded him for a moment.

“You are a human child.”

Langer frowned at the primitive answer. “But am I offensive to your eyes? Am I something you would be ashamed to be associated with?”

“We serve. Such considerations are not for us to have.”

His frown deepened. What a useless servant he had been saddled with. He decided to save such introspective questions for when he found Charles, after all, he had always been good at allaying Langer’s concerns.

The carriage was moving through the town, following some unknown route.

“Do you know which way we need to take to reach Charles?”

“No. But we recall our last visit here.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“To the morgue.”

“Don’t bring me *there!*” he demanded, outraged. “Take us to the Noble part of Hesslik instead, my family has a manor there.”

“We serve.”

Langer sighed in frustration. Even with *this* power, he would have to do things himself, as his companion was clearly not of its right mind.

A while later, the wooden carriage, drawn by wooden horses and featuring a strange coachman at the front, arrived at a district of the town where large houses lay. Several of them had guardsmen out front.

“We will stop here and ask for directions.”

The carriage came to a sudden halt at his words, then the Knight made its way out through the door and waited for him outside.

“Can you carry me on your shoulder?” Langer wondered.

“**Of course.**”

With some difficulty, he sidled up close to the doorway and used his arms to pull himself to a standing position, by gripping the top of the doorway on the outside. But the moment his feet fell to the floor, it was as though a hundred needles of ice-cold fire were hammered into the flesh of his legs all at once.

Langer suppressed a scream, before almost falling face-first out of the opening. The Knight caught him quickly however, arresting his fall while steadying his body, and then, with ease, planted the boy on his broad stone shoulder.

He grimaced as his legs shifted and dragged along the front of Wothram’s body, but held on to his large helmet and did his best to bear the pain. Initially, he had considered sculpting some sort of external skeletal frame to allow him some manner of ‘walking’, but, with how every slight movement and bump upset the needles in his legs, it would clearly be excruciatingly painful.

Better to have all my senses dulled to the point that I felt nothing... he thought darkly.

With Langer safely seated atop the Knight’s shoulder, he walked over to some guards who had watched their arrival with curious glances.

They looked on the verge of breaking into laughter when they saw how Langer clung to the golem’s head, but had been taught not to openly mock the rich and powerful, though it was clear that they were having a hard time figuring out if the boy belonged in *that* group.

“You two,” Langer said, speaking to them in the only language they understood. “Show me to the Tingleif manor.”

“It’s gone,” one said, while the other snickered. “Didn’t ya hear? Old lord died years back and it was recently sold into more capable hands. The Tingleif Family is no more, everyone has been saying it for years.”

Langer narrowed his eyes, then placed his right hand on Wothram’s arm. With a single thought, he transformed his servant’s gauntlets into fiendish claws.

“Kill the one that laughed,” Langer said coldly.

Wothram took two long strides forward and then punched his clawed left hand through the guard’s face, producing a loud *crunch* and *pop*, followed by a nauseating *squelch* as he withdrew his clawed fist.

The other yelled in outrage, reaching for his blade, but Wothram quickly seized his arm in a vice-grip, keeping him from moving, while squeezing his limp just hard enough that he paid attention.

Langer reconsidered his earlier thoughts. Perhaps Wothram was not so useless a servant after all, though clearly his conversational skills could use some work.

“Show me where it is and do not insult *my* family again.”

“You’re...?”

“I am Langer Tingleif, scion of my family.”

After throwing the dead body into the carriage, the remaining guard led the way down the row of large manors, even keeping his face and emotions in check as they passed by other guards along their journey. The carriage rolled behind them a few paces back.

While the guardsman feared for his life and seemed to only focus on his immediate survival, Langer took the time to look around at the buildings belonging to rival families. He knew hardly any of them by look alone, though a few had crests that he recognised from Charles’ teachings.

Most of the families here were minor ones, though that went without saying, as Hesslik was but a smaller town in the region. The Great Academies lay further to northwest, and it was said that the Council’s army was the most powerful on the continent, armed with their magical weapons and artillery as they were.

Granted, Langer had only read a few books and looked at some old maps of Lleman, but Charles had assured him they were still up to date, though it seemed obvious that not everything he said could be trusted.

Truth of his manservant’s duplicity lay before them as they came to a halt in front of a dilapidated and sad-looking manor, where boarded-up windows and an untended garden greeted them unceremoniously.

“See, is like I told yas, the manor is no more. No one has seen any of the noble lineage in a decade or more.”

“Who told you the Lord of my family was dead?”

“It was on everyone’s lips a while back.”

“Such rumours don’t just come from nothing!” Langer insisted. “Who told you!?”

The guard tensed up, perhaps expecting Wothram to take his head off if he answered poorly again.

“I overheard it first down at a bar I frequent. Some man who claimed to have worked for your family said so! That’s all I know. I swear it!”

The boy nodded. “Take me to the place.”

“I’ll lose my job if I abandon my post for too long,” he insisted. “I need the pay to support my family. Have some mercy!”

“Then tell me where to find it. You have been helpful enough that I will spare you.”

The guard nodded quickly and gratefully. “It’s just call ‘Larny’s Place’. It’s built above where the old plague morgue lay.”

“**We were correct,**” Wothram bragged, though clearly it was just a coincidence.

The man swallowed loudly at the sound of the Knight’s ominous voice.

“Why was it built there?”

“I don’t know, but I think that Larny just has a wicked sense of humour and bought the place because it was cheap.”

“I see. I will go there at once. Thank you for your service.”

The guard took that as his sign to leave and quickly ran back the way he had come.

“**He will warn others of our actions,**” Wothram said.

“I am doubtful,” he replied. “If he admits that he stood by while his friend was slain, then he will be punished by his Master. He seemed eager to retain his employment after all.”

“**You mirror the Seeker with your schemes,**” the golem said, praising him by once again comparing him to his creator.

After returning to the wooden carriage, they turned around and headed partially back the way they had come, before making a different turn at a large intersection on the thoroughfare. The morgue was easy enough to spot, as its façade and design was simple and utilitarian.

“Were you here during the plague?” he asked his companion.

“**Yes. My Creator and his companions aided in the cure against the sickness.**”

“What kind of man was he? He must’ve been clever to make something like *you*.”

“**Once, he as mortal as you, but his mind was cunning and bright. I see in you many of his facets.**”

“And now he is called the Seeker? What exactly does that mean? And what magic allows him to gift the power of creation to me?”

“In the metropolis of Helmsgarten, he ascended and became an Absolute. A Great One. One of countless powerful Gods who watch this world with interest.”

“He became a God? I did not think such a thing was possible.”

“We were gifted to you by his design. He has plans that you must play a role in. Seek the Sovereign.”

“Is this Sovereign to be found in Lleman?”

“We do not know.”

Langer pursed his lips. “You come bearing a divine message and yet do not know where the object of my quest lays? Peculiar.”

“We do not speak directly with our Creator. We were given to you as a gift, along with his demand. We know nothing more than this and the memories of the past.”

“Who is *this* Sovereign?”

“He was birthed by the actions of our Creator. In his hands he holds a jealous lightning and in his eyes lay the desire to rule all that he sees.”

“So he is a King?”

The carriage came to a halt near the entrance to the bar residing in the morgue building. **“We have arrived. Find your servant Charles so that we may carry out the Seeker’s plans.”**

Langer considered the words of the golem and began to wonder if his hands truly held its reins. For now, however, he pushed his speculations aside, as he allowed himself to be lifted out of the carriage by the Knight and placed upon his shoulder.

With a single tap against the dense stone armour, he altered the claws back into gauntlets. After all, it seemed prudent to approach with an open hand instead of a closed fist, though he would not allow his family name to be tarnished again.

The Knight carried him to the double doors of Larny’s Place, stooping to avoid hitting Langer’s head against the top of the doorframe, before entering into the clammy and putrid-smelling air of the bar.

A man was half-slumped against the counter, behind which someone was refilling mugs with ale, while mumbling incoherently about the bar’s name and the fact that Larny should have chosen something more exciting, like ‘the Afterlife’ or ‘Dead Man’s Drink’. The owner, who seemed to be the one refilling mugs, scoffed and told the drunkard to shut up.

There were a few round tables in the barroom, around which seedy-looking people sat, some of them laughing and drinking, while others engaged in games of chance. It took only a moment of

scanning the room, during which time Langer and his Knight were also observed closely, before he spotted the man he had been seeking.

Charles sat with his back to the entrance, a pipe in his mouth and a beer in his left hand, while preparing to toss a die with his right. In the centre of the table was a pile of cheap-looking jewellery as well as small denominations of Crowns. The whole pile was worth no more than a hundred in total, Langer judged, having been taught how to appraise fine jewellery by Mary, the lead servant of his house.

“*That one,*” he told Wothram and the golem move to stand behind where he was seated.

One thing struck Langer as peculiar, and that was the fact that Charles did not wear the suit he always had on when he resided in the estate, instead he now just looked like a commoner. A filthy and smelly one at that.

“Charles,” he said loudly, making the man nearly jump out of his seat as though obeying a reflex to serve.

The servant turned around slowly, while his friends around the table always stood up, one of them pulling aside his coat to display the shortsword that hung from his hip.

“...Langer? What are you doing here? And who brought you here?”

“**We brought him,**” answered Wothram, his deep bassy voice like a concussive weapon.

Every pair of eyes in the room were locked firmly on their exchange, though most seemed to find it entertaining. Langer imagined they lived boring and meaningless lives if this was how they spent their days.

“It is time to get back to work,” he told the man.

“Your parents are dead,” Charles replied. “There is no more work to be had.”

Langer narrowed his eyes. Unlike the servants such as Mary, this man had left rather than give his life. He was unsure why his servants had all killed themselves along with their master, but it was at least the honourable thing for a loyal servant to do.

But perhaps Charles was not as loyal as Langer had always assumed.

“Why has my manor been neglected and sold?” he asked.

“...I... uh...”

“Why do you waste your time and money here, rather than at the estate?”

“It’s not what you think, Sire.”

“Isn’t it? Then explain yourself!”

“Charlie, is this kid bothering ya?” asked the man who had displayed his sword threateningly.

“Stay out of it!” Charles told him, clearly shaken and wrongfooted.

In the past, he had always been someone Langer admired. Someone who was courteous and kind, as well as smart and intelligent, but as he looked at him now, in this seedy place and with such terrible company, he wondered if all of *that* was an illusion.

He scooted forward on the Knight’s shoulder, until he started falling. Instinctively, the golem caught him and lowered him, such that his eyes were on the same level as Charles’, though his legs dangled below him uselessly.

“You have betrayed the Tingleif Family and brought ruin to our Hesslik manor through your careless neglect. As the Scion of our house, I absolve you of your rank and service.”

Something like fear mixed with dread fell over Charles’ face. Then Langer reached out and placed his right hand on his forehead. The Seeker’s Sigil burned brightly as the transformation took hold.