

## XXVII

Jakob did not have to inquire around the affluent parts of town for long, before he found someone willing to help him set up in an abandoned house. Though he would not ply his trade under the cover of an apothecary this time around, but rather a Doctor's Clinic, where he would serve as Physician and Surgeon both.

Once again, he found himself in the peculiar position of aiding people with their ailments, rather than utilising their bodies and constituent parts for his own machinations.

It took the better part of the day and night to refurbish the ground floor of the house, so that it had a small receiving-and-waiting room, a workspace for surgeries and general consultations, and a storage that he hoped to fill with materials for his nocturnal Fleshcraft. The second floor was left as-is, with a decrepit washroom, a dusty study full of worm-eaten fiction on unsteady bookshelves, and a bedroom with two beds next to each other.

After the refurbishing, Jakob set about finding additional space, as his consultation room could hardly accommodate everything he needed to create new constructs and monstrosities, and eventually ended up buying the next-door three-story with the last golden statue in their possession: a golden femur. The top floor and attic there were turned into barely-acceptable workspace for his true craft. Heskell continued to work diligently to renovate this second house, so that Jakob would have his hands free to focus on constructing new creatures when the clinic was closed.

Already after only a couple of days, word of his new clinic had spread across most of the town and his waiting room was full of everything from life-threatening injuries to persistent coughs. The receptionist-and-secretary, Pernille, quickly showed herself adroit at dealing with the mass of people and scheduling their consultations and surgeries based on urgency. She was a hire forced on Jakob by the nobleman who had given him the abandoned house in the first place, though she had already earned her employment. He was unsure if she was related to the noble or not, given the ease with which she dealt with the lower castes of Rooskeld.

"Magister," the Receptionist called from the doorway, while Jakob was in the middle of excavating a half-metre-long splinter from the thigh-meat of an unconscious patient. Despite the fact that a wrong move would potentially damage the man's femoral artery, he answered her, having learnt already that she only came to him when it was important.

"What is it?"

Pernille seemed to hesitate, before answering. "There is a man here to see you. He's accompanied by a strange woman, and they both... there's something *wrong* with their eyes."

"You can let them in," Jakob replied, then, with a deft motion, pulled the splinter from the man's leg, putting it down on the table next to him. As she left the room, he bid Purll transform his glove fingers into needle-like spikes, which he used to knit the patient's wound shut. A quick utterance of the Amalgam Hymn ensured the skin would not reopen.

Before Jakob could administer the concoction to rouse the patient from his induced sleep, Guillaume entered with Sig in tow. The red-haired corpse-doll was dressed in new clothes, as was the undead serf. He now wore a form-fitting black tunic with matching trousers, and she was dressed as a funerary widow with a veil over her face that fell from a wide-brimmed hat.

"...you are quick...to adapt...a true child of Nharlla...it would seem..."

Jakob had not given the comparison much thought before, as he always thought it blasphemous to compare oneself to a Great One. Though the comparison was an easy one to make, as Nharlla, the Disfigured One as he was known, was a being of infinite guises, said to have once been a mortal actor, though Jakob wondered if perhaps that origin was not a fanciful reimagination of the truth of things. After all, the Great Ones were the wave of impetus upon which the lesser beings, such as humans, were driven forward, encouraged to greatness they themselves could never have spontaneously imagined. And not just humans either, as the Saints of Vice were clearly strict adherents to various Great Ones, given their innate abilities and quirks.

“They are automatons,” Jakob replied, quoting Heskell’s words. “They accept anything that seems to fit in, and I simply exploited that to my benefit.”

“...may I make a...request...” Guillaume abruptly asked.

Jakob turned to regard him fully, his eyes moving away from Sig.

The corpse-doll walked to one of the tables and held his hand above it. A multitude of *pings* and *plunks* sounded, and when he moved his hand and its obscuring shadow, there remained about twenty pellets the size of a pinkie-finger nail. They were black as moonlit blood.

“...would you gift these...to your patients...”

“You wish to have me transform people into your legion?”

To Jakob’s astonishment, it was Sig who answered, her mouth moving in a mechanical fashion as it sounded out the words. “They, will, be, dormant, in, their, transformation.” For some reason, he felt disappointed at how blank and lifeless her voice sounded. It was as though her vocal cords belonged to a machine that knew how to only replicate words.

“How did you teach her to speak?”

“...she required no teaching...”

Jakob frowned at the response, as it would imply she simply had not wanted to speak to him, but that ignored the fact that reanimated servants were known for being mute. To his knowledge, simple undead did not even possess the self-awareness to facilitate speech. “That is impossible. Undead such as her have never been able to speak.”

“...perhaps...a fragment of my aura...has caused this...”

“...perhaps the Supreme Great One...the Eternal One...has chosen to acknowledge me...”

Both possibilities were unsettling in different ways, though the latter seemed improbable. If a Great One chose to gift an undead with a voice as a reward for the life-long adherence of its creator, then surely it would have happened before, and the Eternal Serpent was not exactly known as a being that interacted with its adherents. It simply was a force of the endless cosmos, synonymous in many ways with the formless black between stars. The first was the more likely scenario, though it meant that each of the corpse-dolls of Guillaume exuded enough of his natural aura to alter reality, which over time would have devastating effects on the natural world.

“If I let you influence my patients, I will require something in return.”

“...you are known to me...as a fair dealer of contracts...what you desire I will give...”

“I need you to inform me if the Crown or Clergy warriors track me down to Rooskeld. Additionally, every patient I give your essence to, I will need you to expel whatever ails them, so they believe I have cured them fully, and thus will not seek my treatment again. As it stands, I have been too busy to locate the Esoteric Toll we came here to find.”

“...these will be done...”

“Also...” he paused, the question only coming to him since Heskell was absent and therefore unable to judge him for his weak sentimentality. “Does Sig remember anything from before her death?”

“I, know, only, what, I, am, told.”

“I see. I have one more request.”

“...enlighten me...”

“Don’t bring her around here anymore. I do not wish to lay my eyes upon her ever again.”

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“How have you been finding your new employment?”

Pernille hesitated before answering. “Magister Jakob is certainly talented. In the last week, I have not seen a sickness, injury, or mental anguish his consultations could not alleviate and cure.”

“But?”

“He keeps very strange company, his bodyguard being the most sinister of them. The way he stares at me makes chills run through me.”

“Magisters must be allowed their peculiarities, dear.”

“Yes, uncle.”

Count Bastian smoothed the front of his lapel. His coat was flawless and without a wrinkle or crease, but it was less of a thoughtful action and rather more of a habitual mannerism.

“There is another thing...”

“Yes?”

“I feel as though... I do not quite know what to make of it, but... he has been paying me a lot more than my last employer.”

“How much exactly?”

“A thousand Novarins per day.”

Count Bastian nearly choked, then laughed heartily. “That is no bad thing, is it?”

“No, but...”

“Pernille, dear. If he rewards you thusly, you must not look too closely at why. Just consider yourself expectant of such payment because you are valued. Of course, only as long as he continues to treat you with due respect.”

“No, no! He has been nothing but a gentleman towards me,” she insisted.

“Then what harm is there? Amass yourself a fortune, so that you have plenty to start a family and live out your motherhood with naught to worry you.”

Pernille smiled slightly shamefully, but when her uncle gave her one of his charming grins, she let up somewhat. “Thank you, uncle. You always know what to say.”

“Make sure you thank him properly though. Who knows, we both may come to rely on his talents eventually.”

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“What’s this?” Jakob asked, holding the brown vellum bag by its rope-straps. The bag itself was of a kind he had not seen before, and no doubt quite expensive to produce.

“It’s a gift, as thanks for the opportunity to work here and how you have been treating me. Have a look inside.”

He set the bag on one of his vacant worktables. An hour prior, a man had lain there in the throes of death, but Jakob had diligently scrubbed it down after, quickly learning that many of his patients found a blood-filled consultation room off-putting.

Within the bag were two books, a strange pair of glasses with multiple overlapping adjustable lenses on one eye, and a smaller vellum pouch. Lifting the glasses out, he immediately tried them on. The lenses on the right eye were like those of a telescope, allowing him to see things enlarged many times their normal scale.

“Where did you get these?”

“They belonged to my grandfather. He was a jewel-maker.”

“I will find good use for these,” he answered. Already, his mind was full of ideas on how to produce the same zoom effect using hardened membranes, such that he could create a construct with the ability to see far into the horizon. Given that he worked his fleshcraft mostly through long-learned practice and thus did not require to see things in great detail, he doubted he would find much use for them there.

Next he pulled out the two books. One was about animals endemic to the region around Rooskeld, and the other was a historical overview of the town over the last three-hundred years, seeming to detail several wars, the changes in mayors and noble families, and the ways their traditions worked.

“My uncle picked those.”

Jakob nodded simply, then pulled out the final item. After opening the pouch, he scented the faint fragrance of the dried flowers within. He could already guess their use, despite not recognising the plant.

“These are regional flowers, called hibiscus. We dry them and use them for tea.”

“Can you make some for me? I would like to taste it.”

She paused for a moment, surprised, then smiled enthusiastically and went upstairs to find something, before returning with a spotless ceramic pair of drinking vessels. She had spent the recent days cleaning up the second floor, talking much about how it was not befitting of Jakob to live in such a dirty house. He had not told her that he had not used the upstairs area once, opting to sneak a couple hours of sleep every night after working in the laboratory Heskell was still renovating.

After filling an iron pot with water from just outside their house, where a well sat available to anyone on their street, she prepared a fire in the little fireplace that occupied the corner of the consultation room.

Some minutes later, they both sat outside in the reception area on two cushioned chairs, sipping their hibiscus tea.

“It needs *something*,” she complained, returning to the upstairs to grab additional things.

Jakob swished the tea around his mouth, savouring the flavour, finding its fruity tartness more to his liking than the flavour of the calendula tea Sirellius had served him.

When Pernille came back, she had a jar with translucent-orange viscous *something* inside.

“What’s that?”

“It’s honey? From bees?”

He tilted his head to the side quizzically. He had drawn his hood back, letting his mostly-bald pate breathe for once.

“You’ve never tried honey before??” she seemed almost incensed. Before he could reply, she pulled a silver spoon from her pocket, jammed it into the thick goopy mass and basically forced it into his mouth.

Jakob's eyes lit up as he tasted it. "It's sweet," he said with the spoon in his mouth.

Pernille crossed her arms and nodded thoughtfully. "A life without honey in your tea or on your buttered bread is not a life worth living."

He pulled the clean spoon from his mouth. "Can I have some more?"

Sensing a convert in him, she smiled victoriously. "This time, put it in your tea and stir it around for a moment."

After following her instructions, he was surprised to find that the sweetness perfectly accented the tartness of the hibiscus.

He reminded himself to tell Hessel and Guillaume not to touch her. Perhaps it was the loss of Sig, or maybe it was the growing emptiness inside him, but he felt a strange overprotectiveness for the girl, despite her being easily six years his senior.

"Pernille," he said, his voice serious.

"Yes, Magister?" she replied, suddenly seeming to regret her overly-convivial manner before her employer.

"Bring me more things like these. It seems I have much to learn."

She laughed warmly. "Of course, Magister!"