



Jakob stood next to Iskandarr in front of where they had buried Ciana's body beneath a blooming plum tree. With no soul within it, it was a lifeless vessel, though it was uncertain if, given Nharlla's gift to her, the body would ever decompose.

In order to never lose her again, Jakob had grafted Ciana's soul-wing to his back, but it simply hung there like a lifeless cape, despite the fact that her soul still existed within.

Iskandarr was staring intently at the mound of raised earth below which her body lay. His mental state was hard to discern from his posture alone, so Jakob put a finger on his head.

*"Stop that,"* the Sovereign warned him. *"Let me have my thoughts for myself."*

"You resent me," Jakob replied, "For taking the vestige of her soul and binding it to my own body, but, more than anything, you resent yourself for causing this, even as a part of you blames Ciana for being weak."

Iskandarr turned to face Jakob, angry tears in his eyes. *"She wasn't weak! My Mother was undefeatable!"*

Jakob nodded. "She was. She still is. I am to blame as much as you, so I will carry her soul with me until I find a way to return a full life to her."

He released the tension from his dangerous body with a steady breath, then he straightened his back and looked his Father in the eyes, "I am ready now. I have made my peace with the consequences of my actions."

Jakob knew it was a lie. One did not so easily accept one's failures, but it was true, the Sovereign was ready. Iskandarr stood at closer to two-and-a-half-metres tall, his apparent age showing him as twenty-two, though his eyes held a maturity that was ageless. It would still take about a week before his body completed its growth spurt, but that would happen underway to their destination, for Jakob could wait no longer.

With the cart loaded up with the many crafted constructs and Jakob himself, Iskandarr took the reins of Invincible and set them on the path south towards Helmsgarten. Those of the servants who were too cumbersome to fit on the cart itself or for whom space had simply run out, trudged along behind the wagon in a steady jog. Within each and every bone-puppet was a Birthed Sentience mirrored after Wothram's, but, as with his bird construct and Invincible, many exhibited unique mannerisms according to their frames.

Of the constructs, there was the Golem Wothram; the tall humanoid Mayhew; the flock of sparrows that served as mind-linked scouts to Wothram, as a mind-link to Jakob directly would pose too great a risk, which he had learnt long ago from when he made a centipede construct and slaved it to his impulses; there was also the centaur-like construct formed from an adolescent guest and the heavy frame of the tavern chef; there were the six-limbed twin constructs which borrowed some semblance to the Wolf-Head Arachnids they had encountered near Hekkenfelt; and lastly were seven ordinary-looking humanoid constructs with skin and flesh still intact, but who, at a single command, could unfold like a finely-crafted paper decoration to reveal a hidden maw in their belly or curled-up scythe-limbed arms from their bulky backs or dexterous whip tendrils of long smooth muscles from where their intestines should have lain.

In short, Jakob had made a unit of powerful and versatile constructs, such that he would be able to respond to any sort of battle they were no doubt going to find themselves embroiled in. While Grandfather possessed few bespoke creations, he had a forte for birthing hordes of terrifying creations from the artificial wombs of his chimera laboratory.

However, with Iskandarr close to being fully matured, he possessed a strength only dwarfed by that of Ciana, with no mortals or demi-gods in existence capable of defeating him. But the Sovereign still possessed many weaknesses that could be exploited, such as his careless and reckless nature, not to mention his haughty belief that he was the superior of all other creatures. It was obvious that the element of Pride ran thick in his veins, though, at times, so too did the pernicious Envy, and Jakob was certain that the jealous part of Iskandarr could become his undoing or lead him into obvious pitfalls.

Despite Jakob's tenure as the Sovereign's mentor, he still felt that he needed to instil much more wisdom into him, but then, failure was the best teacher, so perhaps his best option was to watch over Iskandarr and let him make the sort of mistakes that he could recover from, while steering him clear of the failings that would prematurely end his life.

*"Father."*

Jakob grunted in acknowledgement.

*"Will we decimate this city of Helmsgarten?"* he patted the mask that hung around his neck like a strange pendant. *"I could do it easily."*

*"No. Helmsgarten is worth more intact. After all, a Sovereign needs a Kingdom, doesn't he?"*

*"They would never accept me as their ruler."*

*"Might makes right, Iskandarr. The powerful has nothing to fear from the weak."*

*"The Mighty of Lillebrünnr succumbed to the horde of the weak,"* he argued in return.

*"Do you believe the rich families that you led to the pyre were powerful? They wielded their affluence as a whip, but such power only works in a world where the people let themselves be controlled by Greed. When you seize the throne, you will conjure a world where true power reigns and none will be able to challenge your right to rule, for there are none more powerful than you. There are none who have the Great Ones paying such attention to them, except for you."*

*"But why do the Great Ones watch me so closely?"*

Jakob could not see the future, but he wielded enough knowledge to make an educated guess at why the Great Ones had ensured that the Sovereign came to be, though by telling Iskandarr what he believed would come to pass, he might alter the flow of Fate's River or divert its course, so he simply replied, *"Only time will tell."*

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He could feel it drawing nearer and nearer, even within his tomb beneath the world. He knew that the Chosen of the Betrayer had failed in his primary task, but felt how the shifting of the metropolis above had come about as a result of the Flayed Lady's schemes. Though the Lady abhorred subjects who failed her, she always seemed to prepare for such eventualities in every instance where she sought to affect the world.

He felt the roiling of souls, like an angry sea of anguish, as its waves clashed against the stones of the city. Each wave took with it more of the citizens who cowered in fear, but there was yet enough to resist its hateful and jealous power.

The Fleshcrafter let out a chuckle at the people's defiance against a Great One. Though he knew that, if the Flayed Lady attempted to spread her influence much further, some of the Absolutes that crowded the void between stars would take notice and move against her.

The people of the Mortal Realm were grains of sand that the Great Ones counted and tallied, each grain possessed of a miniscule figment of power that they absorbed, and their great piles the very fundament for their existence. Certainly, the Mortal Realm was the current obsession of only a handful of the Great Ones, with many of their coevals more interested in other realms across the endless expanse of the cosmos.

He leant back on his hindmost limbs and began tearing off those of his triple-jointed arms that were rarely used, using his deft seven-fingered hands to rework the flesh, skin, and bones into new shapes. The arrogant Rose-Gold Adventurer might have taken from him all the tools of his craft, but the Fleshcrafter was possessed of a resilient and ever-evolving mind. And besides, he ought to look his best for when his grandson returned to his side with his given task finally complete.