

SOVEREIGN MONSTROSITY



There was the same pervasive feeling in his legs as what he often experienced, when he awoke at nights like these. It was like tiny needles that were only felt when something brushed against the skin, though sometimes even just the wind could trigger it.

Langer struggled to sit up in his enormous bed. Although he hated how his voice sounded when he did it, he called for one of the servants. He heard the muffled echo of his voice down the hall outside, but there came no answering call or shuffling feet. Normally, their servants were always available to help, no matter the hours.

He scanned the dark room, where naught but silver moonlight provided its dim illumination. They had left his chair three metres from his bedside table, as usual. It was almost as if they feared he would try to leave if it was closer, after all, his parents never liked to let him out of their sight, except for at night when they went to sleep.

Steeling himself to scold the servants for their tardiness, and also driven by the need to slake his thirst, Langer carefully manoeuvred his body to the edge of the large bed, dragging himself across the silken sheet.

He had to take a breath before he slowly lowered himself to the floor and began the undignified process of pulling himself to the chair. It was far from the first time he had needed to do such a thing, but it felt no less shameful despite the repetition.

The worst part was how the movement made the unseen needles in the skin of his legs sting painfully, and tears dotted the corners of his eyes by the time he reached the foot-rests of the chair. The servants would get a proper scolding for subjecting him to this. They knew his ailment well. He thought they had more compassion than this.

After pulling himself up into the seat of his chair, his face was dotted with perspiration and his nightgown was soaked down along the back. Slowly, he moved his feet to the rests at the front of the chair. He hated his weak and pathetic legs; those gangly useless things.

With his palms on the big wheels on either side of his seat, he slowly rolled himself towards the door, which was always left ajar at night, even though he often complained about the wind and how it aggravated the needles in his legs.

In frustration, he slammed his chair into the door, sending it flying on its hinges into the wall outside his room. Normally, such a commotion would bring at least three of the servants out of hiding. Langer wasn't a cruel child, but he had trouble with his outbursts. He blamed the lack of emotional investment by his parents.

It also didn't help that they were the way they were. Placid and so uninvested in life, preferring to simply stare into each other's eyes, instead of engaging in life with their child. Charles was the only real parental figure in his life, but he was currently travelling to Hesslik on behalf of their family.

His father had once been a great man, or so Charles often claimed, but now he relied on their servants for everything. Of his mother, not much was worth being said it seemed, at least Langer knew very little of her, and she was rarely one to talk about herself. The servants were likewise reticent about her past before giving birth to him.

There were no windows in the hall, and so he did not see what it was that lay in his path, blocking his wheels from moving. He rolled back to get a proper run-up, then spun the wheels forward as fast as he could, bumping against the obstacle and sending himself tumbling forward, leaving his chair behind.

With a small *thud* and *splat* he hit the floor ahead of his unseen obstacle, landing in something wet and lukewarm, which made his finger sticky. He had not noticed until then, but the air was heavy with an acrid stench.

Frantically, he looked around for his chair, but it lay in the darkness behind him. Some metres ahead, a sliver of moonlight, seeming so bright when contrasted to the deep darkness around him, showed the doorway to his parents' bedroom.

He crawled forward, while screaming for anyone that would listen.

“CHARLES!”

“MARY!”

“ANYONE!?”

But there came no answering calls to his pleading screams. With loud gasps for air, he clawed his way forward, dragging his useless legs behind himself, while almost every new movement and fall of his hands produced a *splat* as he hit something wet and lukewarm.

The estate they lived in had a large outdoors area, where their servants kept a few sheep and geese, but the house itself was of modest size. Charles had once said that his father had owned a grand manor in the town of Rooskeld, within the nation of Helmsgarten far to the east. His family also had lands within the city of Hesslik, but for some reason they now lived far removed from civilisation, at the behest of his father it seemed.

“CHARLES!” he screamed again, despite knowing the man was not here.

Every few months, Charles went to Hesslik to deal with family affairs on behalf of Langer’s father. He had once told him that when he turned fourteen, he would come with him and learn about his family legacy.

Langer’s hand landed on something soft and lukewarm. He felt coarse fabric, like what the servants wore. In disgust he pulled his hand away and scrambled closer to the wall, then let out a scream of frustration. He hated his weak body and he hated his uncaring parents who had given him this lot in life.

After letting himself calm down a bit, he began scooting closer to the moonlight on the floor up ahead. He had only crawled about ten metres thus far, but it had taken him what felt like an eternity. When he finally came into the light, he had a look at his sticky hands and saw that they were black in the moonlight, as though covered in ink like what he used to write his poems with.

He looked down at himself, seeing that his nightgown was stained with the same black ink. The door to his parents’ bedroom was in front of him and from where he sat against the wall, he could see a pale hand illuminated by the moonlight, and that same ink on its fingers.

Langer crawled across the floor to the doorway, following the sliver of moonlight as a guide. He noticed how the ink on his body left a trail behind him on the wooden floor, as well as how the door was spattered with the stuff, as though someone had thrown a giant inkwell in the hallway.

He pulled himself to his knees as he reached the threshold, and looked right down into the lifeless face of Mary, the lead servant of their estate. Her eyes were wide and locked on the bed in the centre of the room, while ink stained her neck, face, and body.

His mind recoiled at the sight, but he needed to know what lay in the bed and began crawling his way there. More wet sounds came from where his hands hit the floor as he dragged himself across, and something soft and lukewarm met his palm again, but instead of retreating from the sensation, he continued forward, crawling over the obstacle in the way, knowing in his mind the truth of what he was feeling.

When he at least reached the foot of the bed, he pulled himself up to his knees, barely managing to look over the edge. He was eleven, but he was small for his age.

As though perfectly framed by a bit of moonlight, he saw what the many dead servants in the hallway, and on the floor near him, had seen. He had known that the servants were devoted, but to know that this sight had driven them to take their own lives was the ultimate proof of their loyalty to his family.

In the bed lay two figures, one male and old, one middle-aged and female. They lay like two chambers of one dead heart, its life-giving rhythm stilled forever.

His father and mother were dead.

As though all the unseen needles in his legs reacted to the sight, he screamed in soul-wrenching pain. Not a moment later, scalding and frigid fire burnt on the back of his right hand, and he fell back from the foot of the bed and down onto one of the dead servants that lay there on the floor.

A voice spoke to him on an existential level, and it said:

*Langer Tingleif;
Scion of your house;
Boy born of a twinned heart;
I gift to you a fragment of my power;
Seek the one they call Sovereign;
As the Seeker, this is my demand.*

When Langer put his right palm down on the floor to push himself up, the Sigil on the back of his hand burnt bright, before the floorboards rumbled and awoke to some newborn life. *Something* pulled itself from the ground, with a body made of rock, soil, and wood, and carrying the vague resemblance to a thickset man.

“**I serve,**” said the creature he had made with a single touch of his hand.

Langer swallowed down his emotions and told the servant, “Help me up.”

“Milord! We have received urgent summons from both the Pope and the King of Heimdale in the southern continent!”

He looked up at the Advisor with faint interest. “About time, I would say.”

“Yes, milord!”

“Prepare the fleet to leave before the end of the month.”

“You’re finally going then, milord?”

“To wait much longer is to invite trouble, wouldn’t you say, Kamo?”

“Indeed, milord! I shall oversee the fleet preparations and troop conscriptions personally!”

“I leave it in your capable hands,” he replied.

As the eager Advisor left his tent, Yuuki returned his gaze to the painting he had been working on with his ink-dipped brush. He had made a vague outline that mirrored the coastline of the north-middling continent of Oblus, and to it he had added the many rivers, tributaries, and lakes that dotted its vast landscape, as well as the prominent mountains and ancient forests.

At the age of twenty-seven he was perhaps the youngest ruler Oblus had ever seen, but his sights were now set on world dominion. Yuuki had given up the reservations he had felt for many of his early years and now fully indulged in this preposterous idea. Part of him was hopeful that he might find a fitting opponent in the Usurper King of the southern continent, but he had already bested many fiends and demons across Oblus, so he was doubtful there were any left standing who could challenge his might.

Once, he had held firm to the dream that he might return to his home, when he had established peace across the Kingdom of Sterling, but that peace had never come, as the rebellion he had helped quell had quickly been replaced with a war against the neighbouring kingdom. And from there his march had simply not stopped until he reached the farthest coast and could look back to see a continent united under his rule. Granted, he left the minutiae of governance in the capable hands of his vassals, but there were none who doubted his sovereignty.

Yuuki was a rare creature in this world, for he had been summoned here to aid Sterling in its time of need, with no say in the matter. He had been seventeen at the time and had had to quickly learn how to acclimatise himself to so alien a place. The first year had been particularly brutal and he had often despaired at the enormity of the responsibility and hopes placed upon his shoulders, but now he had found a solemn patience that fuelled his potent earth magic and resilient body. Many said he was blessed by a Deity or that he might be the offspring of one of the Old Gods that only few worshipped in this era. Yuuki was uncertain about such things, though he had to wonder if perhaps there was not an element of truth to the rumours, as his resilience was certainly legendary.

He made another deft stroke of his brush to the painting, adding the great rend in the centre of the continent, where he had once, in a fell strike of his most potent incantation, wiped an entire army from the face of the world.

When he had first discovered his mastery over the earth element, he had been terrified of the power he possessed, but, like the unshakeable bedrock upon which the continent lay, he had become wise and patient with his power, understanding how best to utilise it. Certainly, he possessed the power to condemn entire nations to cataclysmic ruin, but he knew that with proper attention and observation, one need not apply such excessive force to achieve the same outcome. And though he was not proud to admit it, he had developed a knack for pitting his foes against themselves.

But what truly worried him the most was the newest title that his adherents had gifted him: *the Living Saint* they called him. *The Saint of Patience* or *the Patient Saint* were likewise often used to describe him. And most confusing of all, they seemed to draw some mystic strength from his presence, allowing even the weakest of his footmen to somehow withstand ruinous blows and lethal injuries.

Perhaps there was a truth to the rumours. Perhaps some secret God *had* cast its blessing upon him. He only feared what might be asked for in return, for he knew that nothing in this world was given freely.

Yuuki left his tent after donning his armour of living stone. He carefully moved his fingers around within the large gauntlets, manipulating the dense desert stone beneath his feet, such that it appeared as though the very rocks became smooth marble with his very step upon it. It was all part of the careful manipulation of his followers. They expected him to be a Deific ruler, so he simply played the role to the best of his ability.

All around him the people fell to their knees in reverence as he passed by the many troops in their group tents. Conversations halted at his presence and words of solemn prayer were spoken to his title. In truth, Yuuki cared little for the worship and the adulation. He had never truly cared much about *that* element of his heroic journey, for he truthfully found little comfort or joy in the presence of others.

Only once in his life had he felt a sense of joy, when he had shared a brief love with a half-demon outcast. But it had been stolen from him and he knew there would not follow a second love, for his heart would never forget the first and could spare no room for anyone else.

As he came to the edge of the rocky outcropping, upon which the main portion of his army’s tents lay, he overlooked the distant port of Petumber and the enormous vessels that lay in its emerald-green bay waters.

With a single step, he walked off the outcropping and fell to the ground at the foot of the rocky hill. Like a human with bones of unbendable steel, he landed feet-first on the ground below, no worse for wear and leaving behind a small crater from his impact.

He walked from the foot of the hill to the emerald water that lapped against the beach and, with a simple gesture, lifted a seat out of the large-grained sand, upon which he sat, letting his living stone armour fall from his body in pieces, as though a sand wolf shedding its protective coat.

For a while, he sat and admired the waters, letting it touch the tips of his toes with its surprisingly-fresh coldness. Yuuki reached into an inner pocket of his shirt and withdrew the ephemeral and impossibly-thin piece of his past lover’s soul, holding it draped across both hands, while watching the way the dim peach-red glow sparkled across the gossamer wing. For years, he had carried this piece of his first and only love with him, and its touch and sight served well to alleviate the apprehensions in his chest.

While staring intently at the shifting colours and swirling patterns and tiny twinkling lights of the Elphin wing draped across his hands, he spoke the brief litany that his lover had taught him.

“Guardian in your lofty abode of stars and formless void.”

“Allow this lowly one to receive thy blessing once more.”

“Grant this one the power to overcome its struggles.”

“And safeguard the soul of its beloved.”

He had at first simply assumed it to be a meaningless prayer and had only indulged his love’s passion at first, but, as he spoke this brief prayer every day, he felt as though a minor blessing imbued him with the strength to accomplish whatever he prayed for.

Yuuki had known the power of demons and their twisted offspring, but none of them possessed such a strength to bless as what he received. Perhaps the rumours were true after all and this ‘Guardian’ was an Old God, who answered his prayers with benediction. Perhaps it was the source of his overwhelming power.

He sighed, it would be preferable if *that* was the case. After all, he had been nothing but ordinary before he came to this world, so it was painful to imagine that he had squandered such potential his entire life back on Earth, only to have it realised once coming here.

As he arose from his seat, the living armour flew to his body, covering him from head to toe, while he marched towards the port city.