

## 136 – Second Vessel

Just as the four of us had entered the Necromancy Guild, a metallic skeletal armour suit emerged into the wide lobby. It was very similar to Mortimer and Elaine, albeit older-looking, insofar as such a thing was possible. Part of the face-plate was shaped slightly differently and the brow had three spiked ridges like a crown. I got a sense that this was the ‘main’ Chaplain that ruled over the rest.

*“I was not expecting this many visitors,”* remarked the Chaplain, then it bowed slightly with a hand on its torso. *“Salutations. Mine name is Letthorr and I am at thy service. I recognise Savant Pawn and Eminent Ryūta, but not thy companions, though I must admit thy scents are peculiar.”*

“You employ many Demons, Incarnate,” Saoirse commented, something like disgust in her voice. Letthorr walked up to Armen and seemed to study him for a while.

*“Such countenance as what thou possess is a rarity indeed. I daresay the last time I came upon one such as thee was many centuries past.”*

“What are you talking about, Lett?” Ludwig wondered.

*Gonna be pretty difficult hiding the truth now,* I thought, since the Chaplain had clearly noticed that Armen was a True Undead.

*“Open thy eyes, Savant Pawn.”*

Ludwig made a great show of staring at Armen, who, for his part, remained stoic and unphased.

“There’s nothing to see. It’s just a suit of armour.”

Armen looked at me and I nodded, knowing that he sought my permission to reveal his true nature.

As he took off his black helmet crafted from Saoirse’s smoke, his golden hair fell from within, spilling out in a cascade around his slate-grey face, where sat two eyes containing a glowing cosmos inside their irises.

“I apologise for misleading you,” I said to Ludwig. “Armen didn’t become an Armour Rider.”

“I don’t even know what I’m looking at,” he admitted.

“That’s because you aren’t meant to know,” came a gruff raspy voice. I immediately turned to the entrance of the lobby where a robed porcelain skeleton stood, a familiar mask adorning its face, and glowing green eyes regarding us.

I blinked in surprise. “Mortl?”

Saoirse strode across the room, manifesting her greatsword out of smoke that billowed from her hand, but before she could do anything against the Necromancer, she held up a hand and said, “This is not my true vessel, harming it will not kill me.”

The Dullahan paused. “You are ever elusive, Mortl.”

Mortl ignored her and looked at me. “You have brought some fascinating entities with you, Ryūta.”

“I wish I could tell you it was all part of my plan.”

“...A fucking Soul-Pact!?” Ludwig cursed while scolding me.

There had been no point to hide it, I thought, given that Mortl had already realised what Saoirse and Armen were.

“All things considered, forming a Soul-Pact with a Dullahan is not a bad decision. After all, bonding yourself to a powerful entity is exactly what such Pacts are for,” Mortl said evenly. “Though, and I am sure you are aware, it is highly forbidden.”

“As is the True Undead you made!” Ludwig blurted out. He wasn’t taking the news as well as I’d thought. “This, on top of your weird new abilities is seriously making me worried the Crown is going to send its executioners after you.”

Saoirse had pulled out the pouch made from the Gleeful Hoarder’s body at my request, such that I could finally display what Reforge Spirit had accomplished.

“This is all highly unorthodox. The Crown will definitely perceive you as a threat,” Mortl agreed.

“I suppose I might as well damn us all then,” I said grimly. “Thanks to my Soul-Pact, I have learnt that the Royal Family came to be through the power of a Librarian Specialisation called ‘Anointer’. It allows for a second Specialisation to reach beyond an Advanced Role and it seems to lead to something akin to the power of a Demi-God, which is what the Royal Family is then, somehow, able to pass to their children. This is the reason why Librarians and their Advancements are so closely monitored, and why they are always kept at Guild Halls.”

In response, Mortl just laughed, while Ludwig fell into stunned silence.

“At last, their origins make sense to me!” the Necromancer remarked in rapturous glee, apparently not bothered by the threat that possessing the knowledge represented. Though I’d thought I’d made a few baseless assumptions, she didn’t question them at all, so perhaps they had perfectly fit into pieces of a puzzle she had long been staring at.

“I suppose now is a good time to get off the continent,” the Incarnate muttered.

“It pleases me that I have gained such a trove of knowledge from our acquaintanceship,” Mortl said. “With such bargaining chips, I may be able to push back against some of the Crown’s more obscene demands.”

“Or they might decide that you’re a heretic after all,” Ludwig replied darkly.

“It is fascinating how your mind works, Mortl,” Saoirse commented. “But I will still cleave the soul from your vessel in due time.”

“Maybe one day I’ll let you try, though I doubt that it would work, unless you have the power to sever a Tome Warden’s Pledge.”

Saoirse frowned, which seemed to please Mortl, as the glow of her eyes changed slightly.

“Now I’m seriously concerned about why they took the Music Box from Ryūta,” commented Owl.

“They didn’t take it from me,” I told him. “What they got was a facsimile.”

Mortl nodded. “For a Dullahan it is easy to mimic auras and magical signatures. In the past, I believe that Saoirse has used this power to lay many traps to get me to expose my neck for her scythe.”

“You fell for them all,” she replied, though it was a sour tone, as clearly none of her efforts had led to her actually managing to kill Mortl.

“It’s unfortunate for you that I am quite paranoid when it comes to things that seem too good to be true, but you’ve certainly destroyed many of my vessels.”

“I have an eternity to figure out how to accomplish my duty. Eventually you will fail.” It wasn’t a threat; it was a promise.

Mortl nodded. Despite being promised death at the hands of a Reaper like Saoirse, she was totally unphased, but, then again, being as long-lived as her probably had dulled any sense of existential dread she might once have felt.

“Which of the Witch Hunters took the Music Box from you?” she then asked me.

I shook my head. “It wasn’t a Witch Hunter. It was a Genius.”

“Yeah, it was Kasbar,” Ludwig added. “You know, *that* bootlicker the King fancies.”

“Weren’t there any Witch Hunters stationed at Main Gate or something? Why would a Genius be in charge of taking a Possessed Item for safe-keeping?” Mortl wondered. “They shouldn’t even have taken it in the first place, as I vouchsafed for you and received King Egil’s permission to handle the matter.”

I considered the question. A bad feeling suddenly welled forth in my chest.

“I think we should find Kasbar to see what he’s up to,” I then said.

Letthorr suddenly came to where we were sitting on volcanic rock ‘benches’ draped in furs, placing a large tray on the ‘table’ between us. The tray was covered in cookies, dried fruits, and a large freshly-baked cake.

*“Master Mortl, I have taken the liberty of baking thy favourite treat, Syrup Cake.”*

“Thank you, Lett.”

She gestured to the tray. “Dig in.”

We already had cups of tea that the Chaplain had refilled once already, and before Letthorr left for the kitchen, he refilled them once more.

Armen, who had kept his helmet off, eyed the cake with clear ravenous intent.

“Let’s discuss how to proceed after a well-earnt break,” Mortl said.

After we had finished eating, the Necromancer announced, “I have located Kasbar with one of my Scouts. He seems to have discovered that the Music Box he was given is fake.”

“Impossible,” Saoirse said.

“Give the ingenuity of humans some credit,” she retorted. “He has broken it apart and seems quite upset after being cheated.”

“Where is he?” I wanted to know. If he had already realised it was fake, he might come after me soon, and the thought-power of a Genius was a terrifying thing, as he would no doubt quickly figure out exactly where I’d gone and where I’d be going.

“He is outside of Evergreen, in a forest clearing,” Mortl replied.

“What’s he up to out there?” Ludwig wondered, then quickly answered himself, “Nothing good, I reckon, right?”

“It is a ritual of some manner, though I cannot tell exactly what its purpose is, but my guess would be an attempt to force a Pact unto the Siren in the Music Box.”

**“Do you not think it is possible that he is working with the Demonologist,”** Armen then suggested and all eyes fell on him, as the terrifying revelation slowly sunk in.

“I will have him apprehended immediately,” Ludwig said.

Mortl nodded. “I am sending a Scout to the Witch Hunter’s Guild. Oliver Smile and his team have returned here after losing the trail of the Demonologist.”

“Oliver is here??” I asked, surprised.

“He believes that the Demonologist heading north was a feint to draw attention away from Evergreen, his true goal.”

“You don’t reckon a powerful Siren has a role to play in such a goal, do ya?” Ludwig wondered, putting to words an idea that’d just now sprung forth in my mind.

“How about Ryūta perform the Reforge Spirit on the Music Box?” Saoirse then suggested.

The glowing eyes of Mortl’s second vessel flickered and somehow translated, in my mind, into a mix of desire and emotion best described as: curiosity & mirth.

It was deeply troubling to imagine something that could make a functionally-immortal centuries-old Necromancer exhibit such a thing.