

138 – The Petrified Hero

I’d decided on the familiars I wanted to summon, and, after telling Ludwig and Mortl, they had agreed to help me look for the ingredients in the Guild storage above the summoning basement. Saoirse and Lyssalynne walked ahead of us up the stairwell, with Letthorr and Armen bringing up the rear.

“**You said you had met a True Undead before,**” Armen reminded the Chaplain.

“He was incomplete, unlike thee, but yes. Thy kind is very rare.”

“It takes an inordinate amount of energy to create a True Undead,” Mortl commented.

The voices bounced back-and-forth in the stairwell, making any attempt at a quiet one-on-one conversation impossible.

“It was no big thing,” Saoirse commented, self-satisfied, from the front of our procession.

“I could feel how I would’ve died without Saoirse’s soul providing the majority of the required energy,” I remarked simply.

“That’s often how it goes for Necromancers who attempt it. Mind you, it’s all experimental, since there are no proven instances of it working perfectly, until now,” Mortl replied.

“**I do not wish to be studied in-depth,**” Armen said dryly.

“Master Mortl once attempted to make one such as thee, by using souls she had collected. It was why the summoning chamber was constructed.”

“Don’t remind me,” she replied sourly.

“Humans often undertake great pains to artificially extend their lives,” Saoirse noted philosophically.

“And when we accomplish it, we run afoul of beings like you.”

“It is not my only duty to deal with strays like yourself, but it is the biggest annoyance.”

“Are there other functionally-immortal people you are hunting besides Mortl and Kumi?” I asked the Dullahan.

“Yes. Right now there are five, including those two.”

“Used to be six until eight years ago,” Mortl remarked bitterly.

“I was quite proud of that Reaping,” Saoirse said in what sounded like a gleeful tone, borderline celebratory. “He had eluded me for many centuries, that one.”

“Who was it?” I wondered.

Mortl sighed. “The former Master of the Witch Hunters’ Order, Paul-Wilhelm. Mondus lost a powerful protector when he died.”

“What about the Crown family?” I wondered, and at the mere utterance I heard Ludwig emit a sound. “Do they not run afoul of the Reapers?”

We came to the top of the stairwell and one-by-one exited out into the hallway that joined the lounge with the storage room and sleeping quarters, as well as Letthorr’s shop.

“The Royal Family accept their ends with grace,” Mortl replied.

“It’s a shame they do not struggle more against their mortality,” Saoirse complained. “They are my favourites to hunt.”

“How pleasing that my guide to the sea also enjoys to hunt humans!” Lyssalynne exclaimed.

“I hope I am not the only one that finds such fellowship unsettling,” Armen said.

The Siren turned to look at him, then her black eyes fell on me. It was indeed unsettling to think of her going through a city full of people, her favourite prey, with only Saoirse by her side.

“Maybe I should go with you, just in case.”

“Thank you, Exorcist, but you do not need to worry.”

Then Lyssalynne grabbed my face with both of her ash-grey human hands and kissed me briefly on the lips.

I blinked in surprise.

Ludwig looked shocked and Mortl sported an expression of intrigue.

“We will meet again,” said Lyssalynne. *“The waves and the Song of Time will carry us to the same shore, where we will meet as friends.”*

I wasn’t sure if that was some kind of prophecy or just a weird Siren way of saying goodbye.

“Don’t forget the promise you made,” I told her. She had said she would convince her kind to uphold their agreement to never sing the Keening’s Choir.

“I have not forgotten.”

“You want to walk or ride?” Saoirse asked her.

“I would like to walk amongst the people of this city. It will be a quaint story to regale my sisters with.”

“Alright, then let’s get going.”

And just like that, the two of them were heading for the exit of the Necromancy Guild.

“That right there is the most terrifying duo ever to walk the streets of Evergreen,” Ludwig said with a shudder.

“You’re keeping an eye on them, right?” I asked both him and Mortl.

“Couldn’t even if I wanted to,” he replied.

Mortl nodded. “The Dullahan makes all attempts at observance impossible. It is why she is a dangerous one to be hunted by.”

Ludwig scratched his grey head of hair. “I should’ve known that’s what she was, when I couldn’t spy on you back in Altar.”

“There was no way you’d have guessed something like that,” Mortl told him.

“Yeah... Fucking hell, Ryūta, you really just want to be an enigma, huh?”

“I believe he is owed some consideration, as I believe he is not at fault.”

“It’s this damn F-tier misfortune-magnet,” I agreed.

Mortl shook her head. “You’re not the first to have such a trait of bad luck, but you certainly have a penchant for drawing in the biggest dangers.”

“I haven’t even been in this world a year yet, and it already feels like I’ve used up a lifetime of bad luck.”

Ludwig clapped me on the shoulder. “Well, chin up! Let’s go get you some ingredients for your soon-to-be familiars.”

“We do not keep petrified corpses on hand,” Mortl reminded me. “We will have to buy a statue somewhere in the market. It should not be impossible to find.”

I pulled out a slip of paper and then started writing on it all the things I’d need for the two summonings. I was also going to attempt to bind them with unique roles, thanks to Mortl’s advice, as she said that the more specific and niche a role, the more control I’d have over that exact aspect of the familiar.

After writing it all down, I looked at the list:

—*Petrified Hero ingredients*—

Human Statue

Veil of Spidersilk

Grave Moss

Site of Defeat

Sword Broken in Battle

Silver Necklace

—*Drowned ingredients*—

Salt Water

Putrid Flesh

Blood of the Invoker

Sand Touched by Waves

Corpse Hair

“Why are these things always so grim and weird?”

Ludwig shrugged, while Mortl looked at the list.

“We have the putrid flesh already, as aged meat or dried meat works, because it really just has to be over a hundred days old. Salt Water, Corpse Hair, Grave Moss, Spidersilk, Site of Defeat, Invoker’s Blood, and Wave-touched Sand, all of this we have here as well.”

“Really?”

“That’s one of the benefits of this Guild,” she replied. “We keep a good stock for all manner of rituals, at least the most common ones and a few of the oddities. There are only two other rituals I know of that uses the specific type of sand, but it’s such a hassle to get reliably that I decided to have a barrelful transported here.”

“All we need then is: a Human Statue; A Sword Broken in Battle; and a Silver Necklace.”

“I may have a necklace lying around here somewhere,” Ludwig remarked, “but we may as well go to the market and get it along with the other two things.”

I nodded. “How much will it cost to reimburse you for all ingredients?”

“You have already paid in advance with knowledge,” Mortl replied. “In fact, I ought to reimburse you.”

“I wouldn’t mind some hush money and a contribution to my trauma therapy,” Ludwig joked.

We spent the next two hours in the Great Market. I’d found a silver necklace immediately, but tracking down the unique type of sword was not as easy, as few people kept, let alone sold, broken weapons. I managed to locate a sword that’d bent and chipped in some apparently-important battle at an antiquities vendor, who kept assuring me it was once wielded in the hands of a Prince. He wanted an absurd amount of money for it, but I haggled him down to fifty silver crowns, which was still a hundred times more than it was worth.

As for the statue, that was less straightforward. Such statues obviously existed, but most weighed tonnes and were the property of rich people or the city itself, and it wasn't possible to just buy one outright. When we finally found someone willing to sell a marble sculpture of a naked male figure, he wanted forty gold crowns for it.

We were walking away from his gallery when Ludwig said, “You know, it's possible to stretch definitions quite a lot, right?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Mortl apparently caught on to his drift and took us to a strange store that lay several streets away from the main thoroughfare of the Great Market district.

As we walked down a small set of steps to the front door that was buried below the first floor of a residential building, I spotted several puppets through its open windowsill.

The Necromancer walked in and greeted the owner, who was an old man with spectacles. He'd been in the middle of painting a frowning face on a doll that looked like a little boy. Countless dolls in sizes ranging from as-big-as-my-hand to as-big-as-a-dog were arranged around the claustrophobic shop, with many of the smaller ones hanging from hooks in the ceiling like meat in a butcher's shop. It was supremely unnerving with all the painted-on eyes staring at us.

After a bit of talking, the old man went deeper into the shop, before returning with a half-metre-tall puppet made of wood and covered in sheet-thin tin moulded into a facsimile of knight's armour. The face, hands, and other features were delicately carved and the eyes were actual glass beads with paint on them to make the eyes.

“I see now,” Armen commented. **“A statue does not have to be made of stone, nor does it have to be life-sized.”**

“It may affect the physicality of what's summoned,” Ludwig said, “but the powers of the entity should be unchanged.”

After buying the wooden knight puppet for four gold crowns, which was quite hefty of a sum, the four of us returned to the Necromancy Guild, once more braving the perilous stench of Butchery district.

“I'm glad this vessel does not have the ability to smell,” Mortl commented, while the rest of us suffered with groans and complaints.

Once we made it inside the Guild, we got all of the requirements together, before taking several trips to ferry it down to the summoning chamber.

Finally, after much preparation, all of which I undertook alone, while my seniors merely watched, I could begin the first of the summoning rituals.

The wooden knight stood in a spot where Ludwig had wagered and lost a gold crown to Armen in an arm-wrestling match, atop a mound of grave moss, with a broken sword by its feet, a necklace coiled around its body, and a small square of Spidersilk draped over its head.

It was absurd how far some of the requirements for the ritual had been bent, but, as with rituals in general, it seemed the intent was more important than the accuracy, although I couldn’t help but wonder about Ludwig’s comment from earlier.

“Hero of bygone days and past glory, heed this beckoning call for thy aid.”

“I seek thy sheltering shield and thy tremendous might.”

“Though thy limbs might be stone, thy heroics are a light.”

“Grant me this light to scare away the dark, so that I will no longer be afraid.”

There was no sigil around the wooden puppet, but it was a fairly-simple summoning, perhaps because the ingredients were so specific. Either way, as my brief invocation ended, a creak sounded from the puppet and its head turned to look at me, with some sentience having taken up residence in its glass eyes.

I immediately reached out with my energy and formed the Pact of the Familiar. As my soul touched that of the entity I’d invoked, it felt as though my skin turned solid and my body became immovable. With a newly-born sense of urgency, I hurried through the Pact.

Petrified Hero, I have sought your aid to fight off terrible evils. Become my Knight who fights and defends on my behalf.

I felt a vague blip in response, almost like it was trying to communicate with me.

I name you Jupiter-no-Kishi.

With the Pact completed, I retracted my outreached soul and let out a sigh of relief.

“One down, one to go,” I said out loud.

“My Liege! I shall serve you until my dying breath!”

“Ryūta, what the hell!” yelled Ludwig from nearby. “Another one!?”

I looked down at the wooden knight that’d just spoken, then I pulled out my Guild Card and grinned at what it said.