

84 – What Comes Next

We sat on a block of volcanic rock with a soft animal skin draped over it, when a table of gnarled wood was dragged in front of our seat by the metal Chaplain. Mortimer returned a minute later carrying a stone tray with two cups, a tea pot, and a plate of biscuits on it.

The metal skeleton poured us both a cup and the air of the room was filled with a complex scent of floral notes and subtle spices. I lifted the glazed ceramic cup to my lips and took a test sip. The flavour hit my tongue and then quickly seemed to develop into something that, although not to my exact taste, was quite delicious. I grabbed one of the biscuits as well, taking a small bite. Cinnamon, cloves, and a subtle hint of raisin filled my mouth, though not in an overpowering way, and there was an almost caramel-like sweetness to the aftertaste.

“Do you like it?” asked Mortl.

I nodded. “I haven’t had something like this in Mondus before.”

“Cuisine varies greatly here,” he said. “Whenever I come across those whose cooking or baking exceeds my expectations, I try to foster their talent, so that the world at large might benefit from it. To me, food is sustenance for the mind as much as the body.”

I put my cup back down on the tray, then regarded him. He still wore his mask, but was looking at the tray with a sense of longing. As though prompted by my gaze, he put his fingers against the lip of his porcelain mask and removed it from his face. It wasn’t fastened to his head by straps or anything like that, rather, as he loosened it, I saw that tiny needles held it fixed to his strange skin.

Mortl carefully placed the mask on the gnarled table next to the tray, then picked up his cup and gingerly put it to his lips. His face, like the rest of his body, was covered in a strange layer of liquid porcelain, and it was immediately clear why he normally covered it with the mask.

The Necromancer’s cheeks were sunken, his eye-sockets were hollowed pits with the eyes in the centre, and there was not a whisper of meat on his skull, or so it seemed. Every part of his face was like a centuries-old corpse that had recently been dug up and draped in a thin layer of synthetic skin: the teeth were protruding without lips to cover them, the cheek bones were jutting outward like spikes, the nose was gone and replaced with an upside-down heart-shaped hole, and the cranial sutures of his skull were visible despite the porcelain skin.

“Perhaps looking too closely will ruin your appetite,” he joked.

“Can’t you manipulate your ‘skin’ to restore your old appearance?”

“I could, but I’m not fond of misrepresenting the truth.”

Suddenly the Chaplain spoke up. “*Master Mortl, thou will be interested to know that Savant Ludwig recently visited this establishment.*”

“Did he now? I thought he was off the continent, exploring the world.”

“*Savant Ludwig decided to return and tour the Guilds across the Hallem continent.*”

“Did he mention where he is going next?”

“*As I recall it, his order was: the Harrlev branch; then Lundia; followed by Altar; Evergreen; and finally north to the Meteorite Valley.*”

Mortl took a long sip of his tea, then said, “I may try to reach him in the Valley then. I still have work here.”

“*Understood. I will have my brethren relay the message.*”

“Who’s Ludwig?” I asked.

“Ludwig Pawn is our resident tinkerer and containment genius.”

I realised this was the same person who had made the demon door. “Is he an Exorcist like me?”

Mortl nodded. “Indeed, though he advanced to become an Incarnate, so a more offensively-focused version of your current Role. You should try and find him in Lacksmey, he has a lot to teach you.”

“I’ve only met one other Exorcist besides myself,” I said, “So it would be nice to glean some knowledge from him. But I thought this was a Necromancer Guild.”

“It is. We are technically not allowed to add Roles other than Summoners and Necromancers to our roster, similar to the limitations placed on the Witch Hunter’s Order or the Rogue Syndicate, but we have a few Exorcists as honorary members. Without someone like Pawn, much of what we do would not be possible though.”

“Why are there limits on your order?”

Mortl smiled, an ominous expression on his skeletal face. “You met the Prince. Unless you are entirely daft, I am guessing you understood that he is not a man that takes kindly to insubordination.”

I nodded. “I got that sense from him, yes. His voice is like that of a Siren’s charming song.”

“Exactly, and his brother, the King, is no different. They have the power to enforce their rule across their lands and any unsanctioned group of Otherworlders is swiftly dealt with, as they are deemed a threat. To get around this and allow them to exist, the Guild System was created. The Witch Hunter’s Order and the Church are also Guilds, but they don’t like to call themselves *that*...

“Anyway. To create a Guild, one must be granted a Royal Charter. Not only are they very restrictive, but they also include yearly goals and enforced Quests that cannot be disobeyed. Fortunately the Necromancy Guild rarely ever receive any such demands, since the Gyldenrose Family rely on us to keep the other Guilds in line.”

“Is that why he asked you directly for aid with the problems around Helmstatter?”

“It was. Given my age, I have unfortunately become a bit of a figure-head for the Guild Council. I also have several of my familiars acting exclusively as overseers in major branches of each Guild. You may have noticed that one of the trophies on the wall in the Mercenary Guild of Lundia has living eyes.”

I shuddered. I definitely hadn’t noticed *that*.

“Why isn’t there an Exorcist Guild?”

“There used to be one before the Realm Gate, or whatever you wish to call it, started spitting out people in Lundia. The King back then took the opportunity to deal away with most of the Guilds, except the Church, the Witch Hunter’s Order, and the Necromancy Guild. Before this shift, the Mercenary and Adventurers’ Guild were one combined Guild, but there were apparently issues when they had to reacquire their Royal Charters, so now we have two separate factions, so to speak, although they work more closely together than other Guilds.”

“But hasn’t anyone tried to reestablish the Exorcist Guild since then?”

“Oh, sure, several have tried over the centuries, but they are often given absurd tasks. The last person who tried to acquire a Royal Charter was your old pal Owl, but he vehemently declined the task required of him. If you can imagine it, they usually always involve using your Contain Spirit to capture the soul of some immensely-powerful entity and trapping it in a weapon. The tasks asked of other Guilds are never so extreme, but Exorcists are obviously thought to be desperate enough they’d supply the Royalty with a literal weapon of mass destruction.”

I blinked in surprise. I hadn’t realised that Owl had once tried to help all Exorcists in this way. Though I vacillated on whether or not I respected him, he was clearly someone who had done his best for those with our Role, but he was also someone who had raised apprentices that became monsters.

“Speaking of which,” Mortl said, turning to look at me. “The Prince knows you have the soul of a Siren on your retainer. I wonder why he allowed you to keep it.”

I frowned. Somehow, I’d known it would come to this topic eventually.

“How’d you go about getting such a thing?”

“I was kidnapped by a Summoner named Leopold and he forced me to bind a Siren’s song to a music box.”

Although there was hardly anything to lend Mortl’s face an expression, he still managed to appear upset at my words. “Leopold was an old apprentice of mine... If I had known he’d stoop so low, then...”

He sighed. “Please destroy the music box. It’s too dangerous. Anyone who holds it can invoke the Siren’s song to cause untold devastation.”

“I bound her entire soul to the object, so I think she has the ability to decline a request. She at least refused to do what Leopold demanded of her before I killed him.”

“You killed him?”

I nodded gravely. “With my own hands, although I released his dangerous Soul-Pacted familiar as a result.”

Mortl laughed, his coarse voice making it sound like a coughing fit. “That was *you!*?” He shook his head. “You have no idea how much work it was to get rid of *that* Envoy. But now it makes sense! It kept screaming ‘Give me the box!’.”

“Sorry, I know I got a lot of innocent people killed with my actions.”

“I heard that there was an Otherworlder in Silvermarsh, who screamed about a monster named Nirvah and tried to get people to evacuate. I’m guessing that was you?”

“I tried, but they wouldn’t listen,” I said regretfully.

“Better to try and fail, than to not try at all.”

“I can’t give you the music box though, I promised the Siren that I’d set her free.”

“I would strongly advise you to not trust a Siren’s words, but so long as it is only you that she listens to, then it does not pose too great a danger. But I hope you know that Possessed Items are no frivolous matter. Better to destroy them than to let them be lost to the hands of someone else.”

“I understand.”

“I must know one thing though, what did Leopold aim to accomplish with the Siren’s song?”

“He wanted it to sing something called ‘The Keening’s Choir’.”

Mortl laughed in surprise, then he clapped me on the shoulder. “Consider the whole affair with the Envoy water under the bridge. You did a good thing by killing him.”

A ball of anxiety formed in my stomach. “What would’ve happened if he succeeded in playing that melody?”

Mortl’s skeletal face distorted into a sinister grin.

“What do you think the voice of an old hateful god sounds like? What might happen if the world were to hear it?”

I swallowed hard. “I’m guessing nothing good?”

“I once read a story, an ancient piece of a fairy tale, or so I believed at the time. It talked about the Choir of a God. It was said that the oceans swelled at the heavenly sound and that the crust of the earth broke open, while the veil between Life and Unlife was torn asunder.

“If the Keening’s Choir is what I believe it to be, it is a spell of apocalyptic proportions. The melody is supposed to be forgotten by mortal tongues, but it is said that the Keening once bestowed children upon a barren woman and that those children took to the sea, becoming—”

“Sirens,” I interrupted, realising where this was going.

“And they had not forgotten their sire’s song.”

“Holy shit.”

I pulled out the Music Box and pushed the tray back so I could place it on the wooden table. I opened it to display the mechanism.

“Lyssa,” I said, invoking the occupant within the small box. “Is it true what Mortl says?”

“*Exorcist*,” the melodic and lilting voice said, regarding me. “*The corpse speaks the truth.*”

“Promise us that you will never sing the melody,” the Necromancer pleaded.

“*I promise nothing, though my sisters and I are too fond of this world to invoke the lullaby of destruction that our maker taught us. We have agreed on this matter. If Exorcist Ryūta fulfils his promise, I will ensure that they are reminded of our agreement.*”

Mortl and I shared a glance.

“What do you need to set her free?” he then asked me.

I left Market Quarter and the unsettling Necromancy Guild hidden there. Though I hadn’t realised it at the time, I had somehow thwarted a great disaster by preventing Leopold from having his schemes bear fruit. A single thought would not leave my mind though: *What would compel someone to invoke apocalyptic destruction?*

Then again, what had compelled the Illusionist and Demonologist to attempt to slay the Prince and overrun Helmstatter with monsters?

I wonder what Armen would say to this?

I let out a sigh, my loyal companion was still missing and every day without his guidance felt empty and lonesome.

Darkness was settling over the city and street-lanterns were lit by organised gangs of Natives in black cloaks, who went through street-after-street with spear-like sticks that held flames at the end and allowed them to reach the tall lanterns.

I passed by the Guilds, as I headed for Renji’s apartment in Artisan Quarter. The cobblestone streets had been diligently cleaned, but it didn’t take a sharp eye to spot the remnant signs of fighting and the spilled lifeblood of the defenders and their foes. It would take years before the most obvious signs were wiped away by the passage of wind and weather, and it would take several generations before the loss that was felt became just another part of history.

A cold wind ruffled my hair and I pulled the neck of my robe-coat up higher, while upping my pace, wanting to get back into the comforting warmth of a soft bed.

The plaza that housed Renji’s apartment was one of the places that seemed to have returned to normal operation the fastest. It was positioned in a part of the city that apparently held no strategic value, so it had been spared much of the death and destruction, although the people here had lost many of their relatives, so it was no doubt a hollow comfort.

I glanced around the empty plaza briefly, noticing lights in the windows from Renji’s apartment, as well as some of the other ones that formed the ‘walls’ of the area.

After heading up the steps to the third floor, I heard talking from within and couldn’t help but smile as I recognised the voices. I pushed open the door and was greeted by one of the cats jumping from Renji’s chair and coming over to rub against my ankle.

“*Welcome home, Yuuta!*” said Elye excitedly.

I smiled. “Shouldn’t *I* be the one to say that?”

“You won’t believe where I found her,” Renji interjected.

I looked around. “Where’s Rana?”

My friend’s expression quickly changed and I couldn’t help but feel an immense sense of dread. Without pausing to take my coat or boots off, I stormed into the room she and I shared. Inside, I found that all her things were gone, replaced with a single hand-written letter.

I didn’t have to read it to know what it said.

Renji came up behind me.

“I’m sorry. She was gone before we came back.”

I took a deep breath, then picked up the letter, reading through the brief message addressed to me.

“She’s gone west,” I said, remembering how she’d talked about wanting to see the beaches and relax there.

“Are you gonna follow her?”

I shook my head. “She wrote that she can’t bear to lose another friend. If I go after her, I’ll just bring my bad luck with me. People are bound to die. I’m a fucking two-legged apocalypse magnet. I only bring misfortune to those I’m with.”

Renji’s large hand gripped my shoulder and he spun me around on my heels with ease, then looked me into my eyes with a serious expression on his face.

“You’re not unwanted, Ryūta. I know she’ll come back.”

I choked on the clump that’d suddenly formed in my throat, then tears formed in my eyes.

He pulled me into a hug, as I bawled my eyes out with my head buried in his shoulder.

“Let’s go to Lacksmey,” he said. “Let’s get you away from Arley for a while. The change of scenery will do you good.”