

135 – What the Reaper knows

Renji, Elye, and Emily had decided to go look for lunch somewhere, while I headed to the Necromancy Guild with Armen and Saoirse close behind. Renji had told us that he needed to go to the walled-off Academy for his Role Specialisation Ritual, but he said he wanted to wait to go until tomorrow, since he was still meeting up with some friends.

“I didn’t realise Role Specialisation required something like a Ritual,” I commented.

The three people with me were all Advanced Roles, though Saoirse was faking it of course, but I was hoping to get some insight.

“For most Roles they do it in the Academy district in Evergreen or Noble Quarter in Helmstatter. It’s usually someone from the Church undertaking the ritual, like an Archpriest.”

“I performed a few in my time,” Armen commented. **“Anyone with Rank V in ‘Invoke Ritual’ is capable of performing it. The knowledge of how to do it is hidden away however, as the Crown likes to know exactly who in their Kingdom has been ascended.”**

Ludwig made a *tsk* sound with his mouth. “Bastards sometimes block people from taking it, if they deem them a risk.”

“Really??”

“Oh yeah. But it doesn’t happen often, but guess who gets the brunt of those blocks.”

“Summoners and Exorcists?” I replied.

“Bingo! Though they are also concerned about Librarians.”

“Really, why?”

“Librarians have several potentially-calamitous Advanced Roles. If it does not seem that a Librarian will become a Genius, as decided by a committee of Geniuses, then they are often barred from taking the Specialisation Ritual.”

“What kind of Roles can they get?”

“I actually do not know, truth be told,” Armen admitted.

“Nor do I,” Ludwig said, before adding, in a conspiratorial whisper, “But I bet it’s something the Crown is afraid of.”

Amusing that they do not know, Saoirse said in my mind.

You know what Roles they can get?

Of course. They are called ‘Adjudicator’, ‘Anointer’, and ‘Herald’.

What do they do? I asked. I could feel Armen slow down as he followed the conversation, while Ludwig continued leading us east out of the Guild district, seemingly none the wiser.

Heralds can speak to the Absolutes and borrow a figment of their power, for a price, though this remuneration often kills them. Adjudicators can embody an Absolutes’ power by signing a Pact to receive a Chosen’s Mark, but they always end up as unwitting pawns. Anointers can perform a type of Ritual that elevates a being even higher than an Advanced Role, and it is through their power the Royal Family came to be.

Armen and I both came to a halt.

“Holy shit...” I muttered.

Ludwig finally noticed something was up with us. He looked between Armen and I, while Saoirse just continued walking ahead nonchalantly, as though she hadn’t just dropped the biggest bombshell ever.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Why do you look like *that*?”

Armen quickly improvised, **“Apologies, I relayed some information to Exorcist Ryūta that he found to be quite troubling.”**

The Incarnate nodded slowly. “Anything you’d like to share?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I replied.

This feels like the kind of knowledge that the Crown will kill to keep a secret...

It’s amusing that knowledge can carry such power, isn’t it? Saoirse replied, enjoying our obvious inner turmoil.

“To know that the Crown has withheld power from the hands of Otherworlders for their own gain... it troubles me greatly. And yet, I am not surprised. Human greed and pride always lead down this path,” Armen commented thoughtfully through our secret bond.

In the wrong hands, this kind of information could be very dangerous.

“It is little wonder the Crown keeps such an eye on Librarians. Perhaps this explains why, despite their manifold boons, they are ostracized by most Otherworlders, and confined mostly to Guild Halls.”

What about the guy by Main Gate? He’s on the Crown’s retainer, right?

“It is simply a different kind of confinement,” he noted poignantly.

I cleared my throat, then asked a question to placate the suspicious frown on Ludwig’s face, while hoping to distract myself from the sudden existential dread I felt from having this forbidden knowledge which, once it left my lips, could seal my fate forever.

“If Invoke Ritual at max rank is the only requirement for the advancement ritual, along with the knowledge of the ritual itself, couldn’t anyone with the ability technically do it?”

“That’s dangerous territory to contemplate, Ryūta,” Ludwig replied. “But yes.”

I wonder if that is how Owl got his Adherent Role...

Adherents are similar to Adjudicators, Saoirse said.

Since it was too suspicious to just stay in place while not speaking, I began moving forward, closing the distance to Ludwig. The Incarnate gave me a look that was no doubt focused on my aura, so I tried my best not to let my tumultuous thoughts show, which, thanks to the meditation I practiced was not too difficult. It was a bit like pressing flush and sending all my thoughts swirling away.

Becoming an Adherent involves signing away your autonomy in exchange for a reward. Depending on the Absolute that is entreated with, an Adherent can essentially just become an enslaved puppet to their will, the Dullahan said, continuing her rare moment of divulging secrets in my mind, while I continued walking as normally as I could.

“Do you have a rock in your boot or something?” Ludwig asked. “You’re walking all weird.”

“I’m just a bit tired,” I said.

“I gotcha, such a long carriage ride does a number on my hips and knees too. Though you’re a bit too young to be dealing with that already, aren’t ya?”

“**It is because of his F-tier Vitality,**” Armen explained, trying to cover for me.

“We’ve only been walking for like fifteen minutes though,” he replied.

“I’m okay,” I quickly interrupted. “It’s not that bad.”

I’ve Reaped a few Adherents in my time. They are an unusual sort, because they never fight back, as though they know the futility of struggling against my powers over Death.

I nearly tripped.

Ludwig laughed. “Didn’t realise you were so clumsy, but don’t worry, we’re almost there.”

To my immediate dissatisfaction, the Evergreen Branch of the Necromancy Guild lay in Butchery district, which, true to Potts’ description absolutely reeked of the most ungodly stench I’d ever experienced. The air was thick with bloated iridescent flies and wild wolf-like creatures roamed the streets, picking at the putrefied remains of carcasses dumped from various butcheries.

“This is beyond foul,” I gasped, covering my nose and mouth with the hem of my new robe-coat.

Bones clattered as we walked across the cobblestones, while melted flesh and congealed fat sloshed down the gutters on either side of the streets. The normally-white façades of the city were tarnished by spattered old blood and the insects that thrived in this hellhole.

“Be glad that you can’t smell anything, Armen,” Ludwig said, while covering his mouth with a cloth.

“He is incorrect in this assumption,” he replied in my thoughts. **“I have unfortunately regained my sense of smell upon becoming a True Undead.”**

Saoirse was breathing in the air as though it was full of amazing spices. “So potent a smell is normally only found on battlefields after the crows have left.”

Speaking of crows, several of Karasu’s clones were nibbling on bits of the carcasses, which I found unsettling, as I had assumed the Many didn’t need to consume sustenance...

“Here’s the place,” Ludwig announced, leading us off the foul main street and down an alley.

We stopped in front of an angled hatch to what seemed to be a basement, and after he pulled it open, we all went down.

“Saoirse, you’ll have to wait outside,” Ludwig said.

“I would like to see what hides below,” Saoirse said, a predatory grin on her face.

“That won’t be possible.”

“She’ll be able to enter,” I told him, knowing that I couldn’t to stop her.

“You know the rules, Ryūta. Only members can enter.”

“She’ll be able to,” I repeated, and he gave me a suspicious look.

We descended a long spiralling staircase, before following a hallway of volcanic porous rock.

“What a peculiar place,” Armen commented.

“Apparently Mortl had a Spellhand craft these volcanic halls, though I’ve never met the guy.”

Finally, we came to the Demon door, which was nearly-identical to the other two I’d encountered in Altar and Helmstatter.

Ludwig and I pulled out our finger pendants and prepared to say the magic phrase for the door to dissolve and let us pass. I had assumed Saoirse would just follow me in, but, to my surprise, she pulled out an identical pendant to ours.

The Incarnate looked at her. “What the fuck...? How’d you get one?”

“I happen to know your Guild Master,” she said and I realised that she must’ve known about Mortl for a while, since The Necromancer was technically someone who had evaded Death’s scythe through her pseudo-immortality.

Did I make a mistake by bringing you here?

Saoirse chuckled, then pushed past us and said, “Open sesame!”

The door didn’t make a single sound and just dissolved into a puddle of liquid metal.

“What... this door’s usually the most temperamental of them all... Who the hell are you?”

The Dullahan walked through, and we quickly followed.

Armen was the last one to cross the threshold, before the Demon door started rebuilding itself.