

175 – Our Friend, the Lich II

I spent the entire trip to Mossbloom Redoubt discussing strategy with Ludwig, as well as participating in a navigation trial subjected on Renji and I by Saoirse. We had to move through a maze of walls, while illusions overlapped actual dangers, and it was clear that the Dullahan enjoyed playing dungeon-master.

Fortunately, Renji’s Magic Sense was good at picking out fake paths and illusionary enemies. In fact, he was so competent at it that Saoirse accused him of cheating. My Drowned Caster was also proving useful in dispelling Saoirse’s magical illusions with his magic-nullifying powers, although, after we were done, the whole courtyard smelled like rotten fish and seaweed.

We took a break by one of the café tables lined around the courtyard, while Saoirse used her magic to remove Nami’s foul stench. Elye was tearing a piece of dried meat with her teeth, while crouched atop her chair. Next to her, Emily was drinking tea with the sophisticated posture of a noblewoman, though perhaps it only seemed that way because of the clear contrast.

Armen and Renji were talking amongst themselves at another table, and the Spellhand kept stealing glances towards him. Ludwig seemed to notice, but just grinned and kept his mouth shut. Jules was sitting on a chair between the two of us, and had been in his full-sized form ever since we left Evergreen.

After finishing her food, Elye started talking to him and gesturing wildly, clearly excited about how he was able to assist her archery with his Wood Affinity. The wooden Knight seemed happy to be of use, although he kept insisting on calling her ‘Princess’, which made me cringe.

A couple of hours later, the Singing Branch on my back began to buck and writhe wildly, and I had to pull it into my hands to calm it down.

“Something wrong?” Renji asked me.

“The fragment of Kumi’s soul in my staff is waking up,” I told him.

Saoirse walked over to me and said, “I told you to get rid of it.”

She placed a hand on the gnarled wood and said, “It’s too late now, however, as the fragment has become fused with the power of the other souls you’ve absorbed.”

“Why is it waking up now? Is it the proximity?”

She nodded.

Then the carriage stopped.

“We have reached the edge of her domain, hence why the fragment is trying to reunite with its siblings.”

The rest of my Party gathered around me. I looked at each of them in turn.

“Are you all ready?”

No one objected, but I could see that their auras showed varying levels of concern and trepidation. Ludwig was by far the one who was worried the most, and I thought it was a bad sign, given that he also knew the most about Liches out of the seven of us.

“She likely won’t realise we’re here until we set foot in her territory,” Ludwig said. “That being the case, I suggest we all take a moment to rest before we go in.”

He glanced out the window, which showed the moon in the sky. Within the carriage, the ‘sun’ was shining down on the courtyard regardless of the world outside, and it was creating a strange dissonance with reality.

Saoirse seemed to notice as well, and with a wave of her hand, the sun rolled away to be replaced by a silver moon above the courtyard, while warm-glowing lamps appeared out of nowhere on all the café tables lining its outer edge.

“How about we prepare for the mission to start in the morning?” the Incarnate then suggested

“That sounds like a good idea,” Renji chimed in.

“**Fatigue is detrimental to performance,**” Armen added.

“I’m not tired,” Emily said.

“*Me neither!*” Elye chimed in.

I shook my head. “They are right. We should wait until tomorrow morning.”

“I will ensure that the carriage is protected throughout the night,” Saoirse said.

“Thank you.”

I didn’t sleep a second during the night, and I wondered if anyone else was struggling like me. However, I managed to meditate instead, doing my best to reach some sort of inner calm. As I sat in a lotus pose, I tried to probe my abilities, just like I had during the self-discovery ritual Ludwig had shown me.

Perhaps it was due to lack of sleep or maybe thanks to the anxiety of what was to come, but I could easily get a feel for my skills now, even without the special linework surrounding me. I also managed to get a sense of the kind of shapes they took.

Some, like Repel and Unleash, were abilities that felt as if they could take many shapes, but no matter their form would go outward from my body. Infuse Spirit and Pact of the Familiar were inward-going powers, as they had to travel through me in some way. Many of my abilities worked in one of these two directions, although the ones that contained knowledge, like Hymnal, Ritual, or even Spirit Sight, were rigid and unmoving powers.

Despite Ludwig’s warning, I probed Hymnal a bit, but it was hard to get a sense for, though its ‘shape’ was basically the same as Ritual’s, as it had firm and unchanging borders. My Ritual power wasn’t exactly a rigid thing in my mind, as I felt fairly confident that I could reword most verses and obtain the same effect, but perhaps the rigidity was the Tolls required for summonings, or the way my energy was utilised when invoking these things.

Hymnal was purportedly a type of Magic, and the continent-spanning Sigil that Carmine had conjured was part of this category of power. But with that being the case, I wondered if Wards were a subset of the same kind of magic, since they also utilised Sigils. It was meaningless to ask Ludwig, as he’d confessed to never having studied it. Mortl had, but she was far away now, working to alleviate the devastating consequences of Carmine’s ritual.

Saoirse, do you know anything about Hymnal Magic?

I thought you were sleeping.

I’m meditating. Or well, I was.

So that was why your mind was that way. I thought you were having a pleasant dream.

I ignored the comment. *Do you know it?*

I do. Its use is not common in this era, but it was integral to the Kingdoms of the past. Its use is what brought Otherworlders to Mondus.

I immediately lost the little bit of meditative focus I had left.

Can it be used to send us back home!?

Yes.

How??

You would need to beseech the same Absolute that brought you here. The same one which Carmine seemingly communed with.

I swallowed hard. *Who?*

There came no answer.

My room, just like those of my Party, were placed in the outer wall of the courtyard on the floor above where the café tables took up space in front of simple shops, which the Dullahan must’ve seen somewhere and decided to memorialise.

Without so much as a knock on the door, Saoirse barged into my room. The door slammed shut behind her and she stalked across the wooden floor to where I sat in front of the large comfortable bed I’d been given. The candles on the small nightstand lit up in her presence, and a chandelier manifested itself above her head, casting a warm glow all over the room.

“Do you really think I would tell you how to escape this world?” she asked me, in a tone as if I was trying to cheat her. Which, I guess, was fair. If I could leave Mondus behind, she’d probably be unable to follow.

“I’m not trying to live forever. The Shinigami of my own world will call me to the afterlife when it’s my time to go.”

“Your death belongs to me.”

“That’s rather selfish,” I fired back.

“I’m not telling you how to commune with the Realm Gate’s Creator.”

“Just knowing there is a way is enough for me,” I replied.

She scoffed at my words. “There is no living soul who knows the rituals anymore. Even his name is unknown to the people of this era.”

“Clearly not,” I retorted. “If it was unknown, then Carmine wouldn’t have been able to do what he did.”

She paused. “Perhaps he learnt it from a Demon. Some of the clever ones might know about Hymnals. They’re always telling people things that’ll poison their minds.”

“Then perhaps I’ll seek out such a Demon.”

“I’ll stop you.”

“Then why even tell me it’s possible!?” I shouted, standing up to confront her properly. “Why would you give me hope and then deny me the answer!?! It’s cruel!”

She was taller than me, and her presence and nature made her seem even taller still.

“We are bonded of soul and I saw fit to answer your curious question. This knowledge has upset you, though I do not understand why.”

“You don’t get that showing me hope and then promising to never let me reach it is cruel!?”

The Dullahan took a step towards me. The chandelier that’d appeared above her vanished in an instant, leaving just the candles on the nightstand behind me to light up the dark room. Outside was the silver moon. The moon she had crafted, along with this entire pocket realm.

It was easy to forget that she was a powerful being, way beyond the comprehension of a mortal’s understanding. Still, I didn’t back down.

“Why are you doing this? All of this?”

Her green eyes met mine. These weren’t her real eyes. The eyes of her severed head, the ones I’d seen in the Black Box, those were grey with a milky-white iris.

“There are many reasons,” she said, not moving away and not breaking free of my gaze. “To understand the ones I hunt, it is beneficial to experience the world from their perspective. But I have also been performing my duty since the dawn of mankind and I am tired. Even though I am tireless by design.”

I took a step back and my calf pushed against the frame of the bed, leading to me sitting down on the edge. The wind went out of my sails at her very human expression of exhaustion.

Saoirse sat down in front of me on a chair that appeared beneath her.

“Are you enjoying yourself?”

“I am. This world is amusing to live in.”

“If you want, I could try to use Reforge to make you a human for real.”

“You’re just trying to get out of our Contract.”

“Perhaps.”

“I appreciate the offer. But I suspect it wouldn’t work.”

“Won’t know until we try.”

“Given that we are bonded of soul, we would have to become untangled for you to even attempt it without damaging yourself in the process.”

“And to become untangled, we would have to break our Soul-Pact?”

“Such a thing cannot be done.”

“Not even with Reforge Spirit?”

She smiled and got up from her seat. The chair disappeared.

“Perhaps you are too clever for your own good.”

I couldn’t react in time as some magic of hers hit me, but my body fell back against the bed and my vision blacked out. Meigetsu, who was perpetually orbiting me, hadn’t even reacted to her movement. Before I could consider why, sleep overtook me.