

87 – On The Road

It was an eerie feeling to be working on swapping Mortimer’s soul to a new vessel with Owl just sitting there, eyes glazed over. If not for the fact that he had revealed himself to be the orchestrator of all the evils that’d befallen me, I would’ve felt an immense guilt for reducing him to such a state. But he was a dangerous individual, fuelled by his misguided belief that the end justified the means. He was no different than those he fought against and I worried that I would turn into someone like him over time.

Surely there are better ways to achieve the best outcome for the most people... I want to believe that his methods were wrong.

The next two hours were spent following Mortimer’s directions on how to draw the sigils needed for swapping his soul into the healthy vessel. Halfway through it did occur to me that I was naively following the guidance of a sub-species of Demon, but I trusted that Ludwig Pawn, Mortimer’s summoner and creator, had contained the spirit with the kind of contract that prevented him from lying.

I finally finished the last sigil, which had to be redrawn six times, because of its complexity and the fact that it was quite a challenging task to take the Chaplain’s descriptions and turn them into an exact drawing.

The swapping itself was a simple thing, requiring me to just use my body as a sort of ‘bridge’, with my soul as the vehicle to transport Mortimer’s essence from his ruined body and into the new one. Since I wasn’t making any new binding, but instead just shifting the spirit’s vessel, it relied entirely on the sigils used.

I made sure to draw down each of the symbols in the mostly-blank Encyclopaedia that I’d taken from Owl’s belongings, which he’d placed on the table at my bidding. He’d had just two such tomes on him, with the one I drew into being fairly-new and the other a time-worn piece that was much older than the original one he’d given me. I considered confiscating the tomes from him as part of his punishment, while also hopefully preventing him from easily resummoning his familiars later on, should Mortimer prove to be a merciful arbiter.

Since my journey to Altar would take around two-and-a-half weeks, I planned to acquaint myself with the two new tomes intimately. I wanted to get another Protector to compliment Armen, as well as a Fighter that was easier to control than Sera, so acquiring Owl’s Encyclopaedias was a godsend.

The sigils on Mortimer’s two bodies, ruined one and the replacement, glowed a murky-red and then disappeared, as his soul was transferred across. Moments later, the new body stirred to life and he carefully stood up, moving his arms and legs around to test the joints.

“Thank you, Eminent Ryūta. It saddens me that we are not allowed to make you a full member, since that would allow me to give you something as thanks, but I am sure that Savant Ludwig will wish to reward you when he hears of this.”

I smiled. Weird as it was, I really liked the bizarre Chaplain. I hoped his brethren in Lacksmey were as courteous and sincere. “Don’t worry about it, Mortimer. You are doing me a great service by watching over Owl until Master Mortl returns.”

“Of course! Eight years ago, Savant Ludwig banned Master Owl from the Necromancy Guild, because he used his magic to subvert Master Mortl’s authority, so I am glad to see him punished.”

“Owl said he worked with Mortl recently,” I commented.

“I believe that Master Mortl is a gracious leader who will seek out erstwhile foes for aid, if she believes they might be able to help. Even if she loathes Master Owl for his transgressions, she must have deemed him the best person for the task.”

“I see.”

I stretched my arms, but tried not to overdo it, as my back still hurt from being slammed into the floor.

“I think I ought to get going. Thank you for giving me some food and water for the trip.”

“I am allowed to dispense a modest amount of sustenance for any guest of our Guild,” he replied.

I wasn’t quite sure what exactly ‘modest’ implied, but I’d been given half a kilo of dried fruits and meats, as well as three waterskins. Now all I needed was a fast horse, though probably a carriage of some sort was better, given that I didn’t know how to ride.

After showing my pendant to the Guild door and saying my farewells to Mortimer, I left the underground below the seedy part of Market Quarter and headed directly for the marketplace outside the city gate, where caravans, horses, and such were on offer.

It took a bit of haggling, mostly because none of the coachmen were interested in taking a direct trip to Altar without stopping at many of the villages and towns along the way. Eventually, I managed to find someone willing to only make three stops on the way, leading to an expected arrival time of two weeks. I just hoped it was fast enough to get to the city around the same time as my friends, since I wasn’t entirely sure how soon they’d arrive.

Then an idea popped into my head. If it worked, I wouldn’t have to wait until Altar to see my friends.

I can’t believe I didn’t think of this sooner... I berated myself.

Sera, can you hear me?

A flame blossomed into life in front of me, as I sat alone within the carriage, which I’d paid a gold crown to acquire. From the flame emerged the Condemned Ifrit, a puzzled look on her face.

“Exorcist!?! Are you playing games?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you in a carriage already! You told the Elfin child that you would not leave the city until tomorrow!”

I blinked in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“Do not lie to me! I saw you! You found the Elfin and her companion as they were browsing the market and told them to leave without you!”

I rubbed the bridge of my nose, unsure how to explain this to her. “*That* wasn’t me, Sera. It was someone impersonating me.”

She regarded me with narrowed eyes, floating close enough that our foreheads touched. “***You are telling the truth,***” she then decided.

“Do you know which way Elye and Renji are heading?”

“North.”

“...I mean the exact route.”

“I did not listen closely. The Elfin child was acting very strange and I was trying to console her.”

“Probably because of the illusion cast on her.”

“Show me where this impersonator is hiding! I will melt the flesh from their bones!”

“I’ve already dealt with him.”

She grumbled disappointedly. “***I will be returning to the Elfin child now.***”

“You know where they are? I’ll follow you with my crow.”

Without so much as a ‘Ready, Set, Go!’, Seramosa flew out through the walls of the carriage which was bumbling down the north-bound road. I quickly scrambled to connect with Karasumany, who tracked me from the sky, gaining control of one of its clones, which I used to follow the veritable flaming rocket my Ifrit had turned into.

Seramosa soared along the road and I used my crow to follow her from above, though she quickly outpaced it. Fields lined the road for the first part of it, but then cut through a great forest with tall pine trees, similar to the one that I’d nearly escaped Leopold in. I followed her flaming light for many kilometres through this forest, until the road passed a large village and came out into rolling hills full of farmsteads and colourful fields of crops and flowers.

After a few more minutes of trailing after the Ifrit, I saw that she went inside a carriage on the road. There had been a few up until this point, but *this* was clearly the one Elye and Renji had taken. It took a couple minutes to actually reach it with my crow, but, as I manoeuvred it down, I saw through the window in the door that my friends were alright.

Though it wasn’t the easiest thing to control, I managed to get the crow I was ‘piloting’ to tap its beak on the window. Elye immediately seemed to notice and opened the door, allowing my familiar inside.

“*Yuuta sent us one of his birds!*” she said excitedly.

I settled the crow down on the bench opposite the two and tried to flap its wings to relay the message that they should slow down, though it didn’t seem to work very well.

“Do you think he’s trying to tell us something?” Renji wondered.

I made the crow flap its wings.

Renji picked up the bird, as though it was some kind of fantasy telephone, then spoke directly at it, which was an odd sensation seeing as I was viewing him through its eyes. “Ryūta, if you’re in trouble flap your wings.”

I didn’t move as much as a feather.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,” he said.

“*Ooh, my turn!*” exclaimed Elye and took the crow out of his hands.

She seemed to think about her question for a long moment, then asked, “*Do you have important news?*”

I flapped the crow’s wings as much as it was possible within her fierce grip.

“*What news do you have!?*” she asked excitedly.

“It doesn’t work *like that*,” Renji reminded her, then took the crow and set it down on the bench in front of them, for which I was grateful. After all, one too-tight squeeze and the clone would *pop* and disappear.

There followed a long back-and-forth of yes-or-no questions over the next twenty minutes, wherein Renji and Elye slowly worked their way towards the realisation that I wasn't very far behind them in a carriage of my own.

“I'm a bit confused why you said you had to stay longer in Helmstatter, but then changed your mind, but we'll stop in the next town and meet you there. I think it's called Linner.”

I performed a small happy dance with the crow, insofar as such a thing was possible, then severed the connection and knocked on the wall behind the coachman, telling him of the change in plans. When he happily agreed to the extra stop on our route, I sank back in my seat and breathed a sigh of relief.

You didn't get your way this time, Owl, I gloated internally. Now if only Armen would come back...

Six hours later, when the sun was about to set, my carriage reached the town of Linner. I spent a few anxious moments looking around for my friends, but then found them waiting by a tavern, carrying the crow I'd left with them, as though it was some kind of GPS that connected them to me.

We decided to stay overnight in the town after having some dinner at the tavern, and the coachman I'd already paid a hefty sum agreed to take all three of us with him without charging more, though we were to make stops at all the important places along the route. It was an easy compromise to make and I was glad to find a Native who was flexible, though I chalked it up to my payment being way more than the trip actually cost.

“I think I understand now why Rana didn't want you to leave her sight,” Renji commented, after I'd loosely explained the events that'd transpired in the Necromancy Guild. Granted, I'd skimmed over quite a few things that I didn't feel like sharing, such as Owl's insane rambling about being some grand architect of fate, or the fact that Renji had been manipulated through me.

“Hopefully I won't be seeing him ever again,” I said.

“You said you left him for the Necromancer to deal with after banishing his familiars... but are you sure *that* was a good move?”

“It's too late now, regardless. But what would you have done?”

“I would've killed him,” he said, coldheartedly.

“*Me too,*” agreed Elye.

I blinked. “You're serious? Both of you?”

“Just seems a bad idea to leave someone like that alive.”

“I think maybe you’ve been in this world for too long,” I said, only half-joking.

“Ryūta, this world plays by different rules, you must’ve learnt that already. You can’t let sentimentality and doubt cloud your judgement.”

“Yeah, but, killing someone because it’s the ‘safe’ choice just sounds insane to me.”

“You yourself said he admitted that he was behind you being assaulted in Lundia, harassed by Witch Hunters in Ochre, and goddamn kidnapped by a psychotic Summoner. That’s quite a lot of reasons to kill someone.”

I hadn’t mentioned that he’d potentially also brainwashed Rana into starting a relationship with me. I really didn’t want to believe it was true, but now that the seed of doubt was planted, I couldn’t stop it from sprouting and taking root.

In the end I just sighed. “I’d like to believe that Mortl will make the right choice on how to deal with him.”

“You also said you got two extra Encyclopaedias from him, right? You mind if I look at those?”

“Let me check them first, then sure. You are welcome to look through my old one though.”

Renji grinned from ear to ear as I handed him the tome that Owl had given me back when we met. I knew it was the exact kind of thing he loved to dig into, since it was this world’s equivalent of a wiki on monsters and their weaknesses.

“Just be careful with it. As far as I know, it may be one-of-a-kind.”

“I’ll treat it with the same reverence as my ‘Time Gal’ heirloom,” he replied seriously.

I chuckled. I remembered seeing the game showcased proudly in his room and had more than a dozen times endured long speeches about this so-called ‘heirloom’ of his...

While he was absorbing the contents of the pages, humming to himself and making amusing sounds every time he found something new and interesting, I looked at the Elfin who was toying with one of her arrows. The amethyst necklace was displayed over her Spidersilk cloak and clothes, and her hood was drawn back, despite the many open-mouthed stares it elicited from the Natives in the tavern.

“Are you doing okay, Elye?”

“*Do not fret, Yuuta, Elfin carry the souls of the dead with us forever.*”

I wasn’t sure how to interpret that response, so I just nodded lamely.

“If you ever want to talk, just let me know.”

“*We are talking right now.*”

“Well, y’know, in the future.”

“I do not understand.”

“Eh, forget it,” I mumbled.

I turned back to look at Renji. “I think I’ll go to bed,” I said.

“Good idea,” he answered, without looking away from the book.

“I will go for a run!” Elye announced.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Have fun, I guess.”

As she left our table and ran out through the doorway of the tavern, leaving gawking Natives in her wake, I made my way to the stairs that led to the rooms we had rented for the night.

“Don’t read all night,” I told Renji. He was too absorbed to even hear me, so I just smiled to myself, before finding my way to my room. I hadn’t even been awake that long, but when I laid down on the humble bed, I immediately passed out.