

139 – The Hero in the Tree

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>18</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist III’</i> <i>‘Curse of the Excruciating Bond’</i> <i>‘Siren’s Kiss’</i> <i>‘Gravelight Ring Wielder’</i> <i>‘Death’s Hand Wielder’</i> <i>‘Soul-Pact (Mythic Companion)’</i> <i>‘Pact (????)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Observer)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Lifeward)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Knight)’</i>			

“My Liege! Are you upset with me?”

“Not at all, Jupiter,” I replied to the talking knee-high wooden knight.

I was surprised to find that, not only was my new familiar similar to Armen in that it had a personality, but also that Lyssalynne’s kiss seemed to have magical properties.

Mortl had come over to have a look at the Petrified Hero, who, unfortunately, didn’t really live up to his grand description in my Encyclopaedia. He seemed more a parody of a true hero, or, concerningly, the essence of a true hero trapped in an inadequate vessel.

“Quite auspicious that you have managed to summon a Greater familiar.”

“He is my second one actually, Armen was a Greater Protector when I first summoned him.”

“My Liege has a soul as bright as a sun!” exclaimed Jupiter sincerely. His voice was eager and sounded almost like a child’s, which is worrying on several levels.

“Perhaps the Gods are not so unfair after all,” Mortl contemplated. “With such great misfortune as you are cursed with, it seems there is a counterbalancing force at play.”

“I would be inclined to believe it is the reverse,” Armen said. **“It is possible that Ryūta possesses so potent a soul that a greater-than-normal misfortune must be heaped upon him.”**

I didn’t like either explanation, truth be told.

“Little Hero,” said Mortl, addressing the familiar. “How do you plan on defending your Liege?”

“Like this!” he said brightly, then suddenly his wooden figure swelled to about my height, his tin armour scaling with it. He pulled out a simple sword with a toothpick handle from his belt scabbard and drew a shield from his back that was just a flat kite-shape.

At this size, it was like his simple construction became more human in appearance, and if not for the wooden body, simple straight nose, and lack of mouth, he could probably fool most people in the streets of Evergreen.

“I will test your strength,” Armen said, then charged the wooden Knight.

As he swung his sword directly at Jupiter’s neck, the Knight pushed me back, before catching the strike with his flat shield and deflecting it into the floor, following it up with a stab of his sword that connected with the throat-guard of Armen’s torso plate.

The Crusader took a step back.

“Where did you learn such reflexes?”

I was surprised to see that Armen had given up so quickly, but it was clear that he’d seen something I hadn’t.

“In ages past, I was the Hero of the fairest of all Princesses!”

“Don’t Petrified Heroes need to have been turned to stone in order to qualify?” I wondered.

“I cannot say, my Liege, though I was transformed into an oaken tree by a vile Sorcerer who coveted my Princess’ hand.”

“Fascinating,” commented Mortl. “It seems the nature of the statue controls the type of ‘petrification’ your summon will have suffered.”

“Which Princess did you serve?” Armen inquired.

“Lady Smerelda Goldenthroner! Fairest in all the Kingdoms!”

“I’m unfamiliar with any Goldenthroner family,” he replied.

“Likewise,” added Mortl.

“Were you an Otherworlder?” I asked the Knight.

“Native of Mondus I am, my Liege!”

“Your type of entity should possess an elemental power,” I started. “Can you show me what you are capable of?”

Jupiter looked around. He was still in his human-sized form.

“**Due to my transformation by the vile Sorcerer, it seems I can wield dirt and wood, moulding it to my designs.**”

“‘Seems’? Have you not tried your powers before?”

“**No, my Liege. You are the first to have summoned me from the In-Between!**”

I chewed my lip. “We’ll have to do some tests later then. For now, transform yourself into your smallest version.”

“**As you wish, my Liege!**”

The wooden Knight shrank to his prior size, before shrinking even further, becoming the size of just my thumb, which was curious. He could still move though, so perhaps I could use him in discrete ways. Stooping low, I picked him up and placed him in a pocket of my robe-coat at chest-height.

“You’re not unsummoning him?” asked Ludwig.

“It is a waste of your available energy,” Mortl added.

I shook my head. “It’s cruel to unsummon an entity with a personality.”

Both of my seniors looked at me like I was mad.

“**Ryūta is right,**” Armen added. “**When we are unsummoned, we return to the In-Between, or some layer of reality close to it. It is an uncomfortable place to be and drives many spirits to insanity.**”

Mortl blinked, then said, in apparent revelation, “I had no idea... but that certainly explains why over time many familiars become less reliable or even turn into liabilities, particularly those that serve as fighters. Granted this can take decades to manifest, but it’s usually catastrophic when it happens.”

“I don’t know if I understand it fully,” I said, “But I’ve almost always just kept my familiars in an incorporeal state, rather than fully unsummoned them.”

Ludwig seemed to have reached a revelation of his own, “I imagine that for Fighter familiars, it’s a bit like returning them to a dog kennel full of barking and screaming, then only pulling them out for air to fight stuff.”

“Still, not fully unsummoning familiars will drain your energy and make you more susceptible to attacks against your mind.”

For once, I felt like discovering my own way had proven better than following whatever school of thought Mortl and Ludwig adhered to.

The Necromancer turned around and started heading for the stairs. “I must return to my real body in Helmstatter,” she said. “If you wish to get a hold of me, tell Letthorr to pass on a message to his brethren.”

“What about Kasbar?” Ludwig asked.

Mortl stopped for a moment and turned to face him. “Continue to keep an eye on him. I will return to this vessel in a few days.”

Then she was gone.

“I’m wondering if she was simply worried about seeing a Drowned with a personality,” Ludwig joked.

Given the description of the Revenant, it sounded like it would be pretty disturbing if it did indeed have a personality.

“I’ll begin the preparations for the ritual,” I said.

I tapped the tiny wooden Knight atop his head where he sat in my chest pocket. “What was your name before you were turned into a tree?”

“I do not recall, my Liege. I am satisfied to wield the one you have given me!”

“Might I suggest a name to obfuscate the one you have assigned him?” Armen suggested.

I nodded. “What would you call him?”

“Jules.”

“That works. What do you think?” I asked, tapping the Knight again to get his attention.

“I will accept this name if you deem it right for me, my Liege!”

“Jules it is then,” I said.

Before I could get started on preparing the summoning ritual for the Drowned, Letthorr came down the stairs to the basement chamber. *“I have taken the liberty of preparing dinner.”*

“Thanks, Lett,” said Ludwig, and we followed him to the lounge.

After eating some sort of boiled grain that was a mix of bulgur and rice flavour-wise, but much larger in size, as well as dried meats and pickled vegetables, I returned to the summoning chamber and began setting up the ritual.

The wave-touched sand had to be positioned in such a way that it could contain the salt water, so I ended up making a bowl-shape with the sand pouring about two litres of salted water into it. Fortunately, it didn’t spill out onto the floor. I then added aged meat and corpse hair to the little pond I’d made, before drawing a sigil around this simple structure with Blood Chalk. The drawing was a

ring with several ‘arms’ spreading out from it on seemingly-random trajectories, and at the end of each of them was a small circle, six to be exact. One was used to place a Black Tallow Candle in, while the other five were for where my blood would go.

It only now struck me as odd that the previous summoning for the Petrified Hero hadn’t needed my blood nor the candle as a catalyst, but it wasn’t the only ritual to forego these requirements, though it was a rarity for summonings.

After everything was ready, Ludwig checked my linework.

When he gave me the ‘looks good’ thumbs-up, I placed myself in front of the candle. While reciting the litany, I had to walk around and place a drop of my blood in each of the five circles I’d drawn. However, it seemed too precarious to attempt to drip blood from a bleeding hand at precise intervals, so I had a cup Letthorr had lent me that held some blood I’d prepared in advance.

I took a deep breath, wondering if I was about to get myself another talking familiar. My head was already plenty crowded with voices and such, so I doubted there was much room left for newcomers. Several notes in the time-worn Encyclopaedia mentioned that there was a limit for how much Exorcists could handle, in terms of familiars. The most often-cited number was four, but later notes said six was perfectly doable for many.

There were several listed theories about why going beyond this number was bad, and the descriptions of what happened were generally quite grim, such as: spontaneously-manifested insanity; soul collapse, which just sounded horrifying; and loss of control, which was obviously the most dangerous.

I wondered just how much Saoirse’s power fed to me through our Soul-Pact was inoculating me from these eventualities, but it was probably best not to experiment with it until I had a better idea of what handling six Pacts would do to me. Not to mention, I had several Possessed Items as well, which, although not Pacts, were still taxing in similar ways.

Slowly, I pushed the breath out through my nostrils.