

165 – Aftermath

Our group arrived in Noblehome early morning, with the clear sky above stained by the sun’s light, though the city was still warming to its glow. People were only slowly beginning to rouse and start their day.

Everyone except my familiars were looking rather sluggish and tired by now, which was a given, since none of us had taken a rest. Oliver carried his sister on his back and Elye had convinced Renji to carry her as well, though she was moving about so much that he constantly seemed on the verge of tripping.

“How did it feel, your first Backlash?” I asked him.

“Horrible,” he said, adjusting his muscular arms to better hold onto the squirming Elfin. “It seems the Backlash for my Vibration Affinity affects equilibrium and balance, as well as my stomach. It might also give me nerve damage if I overdo it, but I’m not sure. Basically, not a fun time.”

“No Backlash is,” Kally commented, coming closer to join in on the conversation. “Mist Affinity Backlash is uniquely-cruel, making me lightheaded at the best of times, and giving me issues like Narcolepsy if its really bad. Imagine just falling asleep in the middle of a fight...”

“I’m glad Exorcists don’t have to deal with that,” I said, “Although I have passed out from overusing my energy before.”

“It’s the only thing about you that is lucky,” Kally replied. It seemed a scathing retort, although I took it as her pointing out a silver lining, since her aura didn’t show any hostility. Often her worlds seemed meaner than they really were meant to be, although the way she talked to Elye was usually entirely mean-spirited, which I didn’t like.

The Elfin, who was currently holding on to Renji’s forehead with her hands, seemed excited about finally going to Redmoss Enclave, although I had nothing but bad feelings bubbling in my stomach. The Elfin of Skovslot made a big show out of giving hospitality to Exorcists and similar Otherworlders who dealt with the dead and their spirits, and I was sure that Redmoss was no different. But I couldn’t stop wondering about what the Demonologist was planning there. He seemed an endless schemer and I felt certain we were still in store for some massive calamity, like what had happened in Helmstatter.

It was fortunate for us that Carmine’s F-Tier Luck manifested as incompetence or distrust from his henchmen, since otherwise he would surely have been unstoppable. After all, if the Dullahan’s

head hadn't been sold to the man in Sacramento, then I would never have been Soul-Pacted with Saoirse; if I hadn't been Pacted with Saoirse, the Genius in Evergreen would have gotten the Music Box *and* the headless Dullahan would have wrought havoc across the city; furthermore, if I hadn't gotten to know Saoirse, I might never have learnt to use Reforge Spirit, and we'd all have died to the Capgras Demon. And that was even ignoring the fact that so many more people could've died from the ambush by Fortress Major, if the Dullahan hadn't brought us there with haste. Plus, without her, I wouldn't have been able to get Armen back, at least not easily.

I was fairly sure that, if not for her, everything would've gone seriously-wrong. Even if my life was owed to her, I probably wouldn't have survived without her. And all that was thanks to the selfish greed of the Demonologist's henchmen, no doubt spurred on by his unique flavour of misfortune. It made me wonder if his own familiars were likewise affected.

Somehow I was glad that my misfortune wasn't like his, nor like Potts' for that matter. I still had no idea what sort of bad luck Ludwig suffered, but it sounded personal and distressing, at least if Potts' comments on the matter could be trusted. I was fairly sure Owl, with the benefit of hindsight, had a misfortune that was similar to that of Kumi, i.e. everyone mistrusted them.

As our destination, the bridge to Founding district that lay in the centre of Sanctum Island, came into view, I told my familiars: *When the Demonologist is dealt and done with, I need your help for saving Kumi.*

“**She may be beyond saving,**” Armen commented, not to be mean but perhaps to save me from a heartbreaking disappointment.

If you can manifest Carmine Anabello's downfall, I will let you have your way, Saoirse said. Consider it a favour in exchange for a favour. I hold no ill will towards those who manage to avoid my blade, though they are of course destined for death. The Demonologist, on the other hand, sought to abuse me like a weapon, and that cannot be forgiven. I will allow you a fragment of my power when the time comes, such that cleaving the life from him will pose no challenge.

Our party halted at the start of the bridge, where tall plate-clad knights awaited us. From their auras, they were clearly Otherworlders, with Roles such as Vanguard, Paladin, and Brawler. In total, there were eight of them.

Hother waved to them, a very child-like gesture of recognition. One of the knights returned the wave, while another told a guard to alert the Princess that her brother had returned.

“We can walk across,” Hother told us. “It's okay since you're with me.”

The young Prince led the way, and the rest of us followed behind. Oliver had roused Emily and they were now walking side-by-side. Renji had somehow convinced Elye to get off his back as well, such that he could retain some dignity.

As we walked past the knights, Hother told us, “My sister will offer you a place to rest. Make sure to decline the offer.”

I wondered why, but he didn’t elaborate.

The bridge we walked across spanned a small moat of sorts and was built of gleaming white bricks that looked newly-polished. At the other side of the bridge was a gate, with an additional four Otherworlder knights. A tall wall surrounded the Founding district as well, and archers and mages patrolled along them. Given how hard it was to reach Sanctum Island in the first place, it seemed somewhat overkill to have this many guards on standby, but I could tell that they all viewed their station with pride.

We passed under the gate with similar ease, thanks to Hother skipping along in front of our group and waving to the guards. I wondered how Potts felt to be pretending in such an embarrassing manner. It also struck me now just how immature Hother was for his age. Renji had said he was almost fourteen, and his sister couldn’t be much older, and yet she was cool and composed, while he was the kind of kid that was held back several years in school. It was even possible there was something wrong with him, in terms of intelligence.

Past the gate to Founding was an open plaza with beautiful sculptures and hundreds of flowers, hedges, and trees in full bloom. Beyond it lay the Evergreen Castle.

Even seen from afar it was a feat of supernatural architecture that looked like it blended a fairytale castle with a holy cathedral, but up close it was a towering creation that took my breath away from the pure scale of it. Towers soared upwards from a central core of tall windows and elaborate arches, and these towers were interconnected with curling walkways that were so high in the air that a single misstep would send one falling for a while before the ground caught you.

From either side the core of the castle were two wings, and two smaller ones behind, that each curved slightly towards us. The two wings at the front each contained at least eight floors within, arrayed in steps of a sort, and these too had walkways crisscrossing them, as well as fancy balconies.

The sheer scale was difficult to process, and I thought that there might be rooms enough to house thousands within the building, and yet it was reserved solely for the Royal family. It seemed a perfect representation of their position with Mondus and the Hallem continent.

In the Plaza, seated under a pearl-white stone gazebo, was Princess Freja. She was attended to by eight servants and it seemed she was eating breakfast. As we drew near, following behind Hother, who immediately took a seat opposite her and began eating the food with not a care in the world, she dismissed the attendants with a single gesture.

Amusing, Saoirse commented. I wondered if she was fascinated with the way the uppermost echelon of humans lived, but she then added: *The guards are only facing outwards, as though the castle itself needs no protection.*

It was definitely peculiar, but, given the fact that the castle was where the strongest family in the world lived, it made quite a lot of sense I thought.

We all paused just outside the shade of the gazebo and the Princess looked at us each in turn. I sensed how everyone squirmed under her gaze, but she did not draw out a spontaneous confession from anyone. I didn't think Oliver had deployed his magic-nullifying skill yet, so it seemed that Freja herself wasn't actually utilising her gaze to Compel Truth from us.

“You are missing a person,” she commented.

“Samuel Potts died,” I told her, and her eyes switched to me. I felt a weak pressure settle on me and guessed that it was the sensation of her truth-revealing power. As though to make her believe I was under its influence, I immediately added, “We cornered the Demon in an old chapel known as Lady of Hope within Jewelsmith, and a struggle followed, wherein he lost his life in order to aid me in exorcising the monster.”

Freja turned her gaze on her brother, and I felt Oliver shift uncomfortably next to me, as he hadn't considered a scenario where Potts disguised as Hother wouldn't be near us while his sister interrogated him. ***“And what of the new Spellfist?”*** she asked him.

The boy, who was in the middle of stuffing a bacon-wrapped sausage down his gullet, said, without looking up, “He punched the Demon really hard, before throwing up. It wasn't very fun to watch. The tournament would've been better.”

The Princess looked to Renji. ***“It seems my brother is disappointed in your performance.”***

He lowered his head. “I will become more proficient with my new skills and return to make a proper showcase of them.”

“Excellent idea, wouldn't you say, Hother?”

“Mhmm.”

“This Demon,” she said, looking back to me. ***“What kind of Demon was it?”***

Oliver was the one to answer this time, “A Capgras Demon my Lady. It was disguised as a member of my Order, whose name was Clarissa.”

“Davidé already told me as much previously, although he attempted to lie about the problems in your Order.” I realised she was talking about the Witch Hunter who had been in attendance during Renji’s Advancement.

Oliver nodded. “As you are aware, I am doing my best as the new Master Inquisitor. I will make sure he is properly sanctioned for attempting to mislead you. Our Order is infected with a cancer, and I have reasons to believe that the Demonologist was the one to spread this sickness within.”

“Have you found a way to get to his hiding place? My father is eager to see him and his schemes put to an end.”

“We have in fact just secured such a means,” he revealed, and I knew exactly what he would say next. “Exorcist Ryūta and his Elfin companion, as well as the Savant Ludwig Pawn have expressed their ability to offer us the vengeance we are seeking, by opening the way into the Redmoss Enclave.”