

173 – Rematch

We passed the next two weeks spending every waking moment preparing for what we had to do. I met up with Ludwig to research the best ways to counteract Kumi’s powers, while Renji worked his ass off to attain some modicum of control over his new Affinity.

Mortl left her Second Vessel in the Necromancy Guild during that time, in order to return and oversee the trouble brewing in Arley. It was an issue we’d known was coming, but it was destabilising the Principality nonetheless.

With the Realm Gate shifting to a new location, Arley had lost its never-ending stream of disposable labour, and Prince Torvalder had enacted new laws to up the pay that Otherworlders would receive, as well as seeking to improve their chances of survival by restricting how new Ranks were handed out within the Adventurers’ Guild. But the result was that there were less people to tackle the more dangerous quests. None of these laws were very popular with the Natives there, and, as such, the tensions were high between them and the Otherworlders.

Lacksmey was in a better position to handle the Realm Gate shifting, as its economy and industries didn’t rely solely on Otherworlders. They had gone through the same upheaval several centuries in the past and survived the fallout, but it seemed uncertain that Arley would cope as well.

Many new quests were created in Evergreen by the different Guilds, in order to send people to the Principality to shore up the most immediate issues. One of these was that monsters, including the semi-intelligent creatures like Goblins, were exploiting the sudden disarray and many villages and towns were being overrun. Helmstatter was also facing several protests and violent clashes from anti-Otherworlder groups of Natives, who saw the sudden elevation of these outsiders as unfair, while also blaming them for not doing enough to protect them.

Evergreen had a small exodus of Otherworlders returning to Arley thanks to all of this, while many Natives were immigrating here from Arley to protect their families and find stability. The atmosphere of the great city was mostly unchanged though, but Ludwig had told me that the Peacekeepers were working overtime to maintain order, and the queues at Main Gate stretched for nearly a kilometre down the road to the city.

Ludwig and I were watching Renji and Emily practicing together in the Adventurers’ Guild Courtyard, and the Spellfist had already found a way to utilise his new Affinity without slowing him down or

sustaining any Backlash. Elye was practicing trick-shots with her bow alongside them, which by itself drew a crowd of people, though all three of them were quite a spectacle when combined.

Emily had finally cracked open the Caged Spell-Tome, but she was only using one of the many spells within its pages. According to Ludwig, the Tome understood its wielder and reformed the spells within to suit her Affinity, but he had strongly advised her to not use any spell unless she knew she could handle its power. Therefore, she was sticking with just one of them, but it was a terrifying thing to behold.

The pages of the Spell-Tome flipped by until the specific page was reached, then she drew the incantation from within and used it to form a block of condensed air, before smashing it into her target. It flattened anything she used it against, whether a suit of resilient metal plate, a pillar of stone, or a stationary barrier spell. Not to mention, its area of effect was huge. But she didn't use it often during her practice sessions, as it drained a lot of energy from her.

When she wasn't using the Crushing spell, she would dance around with the Quicksilver Brush in her left hand, quickly building up a wind around herself and whipping it forward in a lance-shape that tore fist-sized holes in every target she hit.

“She's gotten so much faster,” I muttered in awe. She was truly a natural talent.

I wondered what Kally would think. Unfortunately, the Sorceress had been absent for the past two weeks. Renji said that her Party was dealing with a Drake incident in the far north of Lacksmey, and it was possibly the same Earth Drake, which Ludwig had mentioned on the way to Redmoss Enclave.

“What are those two idiots doing?” Ludwig said as he saw Armen and Renji talk to each other in the middle of the courtyard. Emily and Elye had stopped their own practice to give them space. Gauging their auras, it was pretty obvious what they were planning: a rematch.

“A hundred Gold on the Crusader,” said Saoirse.

Ludwig coughed in surprise. “Are you mad!?”

“I'll bet a couple gold,” I said. “I think Renji will win.”

“I'll match you and bet on the Crusader as well,” Ludwig said, glancing to the Dullahan and shaking his head. “A hundred gold... Someone needs to teach you the concept of moderation.”

Saoirse was grinning at his expense, while I was just wondering when she'd had time to turn the Gleeful Hoarder's stolen goods into coins.

Wait, you weren't planning on using your creation power to fabricate money, right?

Of course I was.

...You can't do that.

Why not?

I think that messes with the intrinsic value of all coins in circulation.

Fine...

“I will bet two gold then,” she said.

A second later the sparring match between Armen and Renji kicked off. Emily was using her wind power to create an arena around them, keeping spectators safe while also reigning in their powers. Elye was confusingly rooting for both of them to win.

The air was filled with the sound of a tolling bell, as Renji's armoured fist struck Armen's shield and released a surge of vibration into it. His magic couldn't pierce it though, and the Crusader immediately retorted by swiping his mace into the side of Renji's knee with enough power to knock him to the ground, and yet gentle enough to not destroy his leg.

As Armen swung his mace down at Renji's stomach, the Spellfist met the head of the mace with his gauntlet and released a condensed vibration into it, sending it flying out of the Crusader's hand.

Unperturbed, Armen put both hands on his shield and swung it down, but Renji quickly spun his body such that he got back onto his feet in two quick movements, while avoiding the attack. He leapt forward to exploit the opening in Armen's defence, but was met with a shield-bash that he only narrowly sidestepped, before swinging his left fist into the Crusader's flank.

Armen grunted in pain, then feinted with his shield to get Renji to move into the right position, before headbutting him with his helmet. The Spellfist stumbled back a step, looking like he was one hit away from knockout, but when the Crusader surged forward with his right gauntlet wreathed in golden light, Renji crouched under the swinging arm and drove both of his fists into Armen's stomach.

“Shockwave!”

A heavy tremor rolled through the ground, making several of the spectators stumble back a step, while dust was raised dramatically from the ground. Emily waved her wand once and the ring of air forming the arena dispersed and drove away the obscuring cloud, revealing Armen down on one knee, while Renji stood with his arm lifted into the air victoriously.

Ludwig and Saoirse both glanced at me.

“How the hell did you figure that Renji'd win?” the Incarnate asked.

“They've sparred before, and Renji lost, but he's really competitive with things like this, so he has practiced for this match for a while.”

“Insider knowledge... I see how it is.”

I shrugged.

Elye came over to us. “*Did Yuuta win again?*” she asked.

“Hold up, how often do you win your bets?” Ludwig asked, growing more suspicious by the second.

I reached out my palm to him. “Pay up.”

He grumbled something under his breath, while fishing out two golden coins and placing them in my hand. Saoirse pulled out the dimensional bag created from the Hoarder and extracted two coins as well. Before I could take them from her, Elye napped them both and ran off while laughing maniacally.

“I’m not helping you with that,” Saoirse said.

“Me neither,” added Ludwig.

I pulled Jules out of his front pocket seat and threw him after the Elfin. “Catch her and get my money back!”

“As you command, my Liege!” he replied while sailing through the air, growing larger with every moment.

The Elfin laughed even more as the wooden puppet started chasing after her.