

164 – Memories

Emily was staring a hole in the back of Hother’s head. Her, Renji, and I were at the rear of the group, with the Prince at the front next to Oliver and Kally.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“I’ve been trying to figure out the sign that reveals he isn’t who he looks like,” she muttered cryptically.

“Maybe there is none,” Renji suggested.

I realised she was talking about her uncanny ability to see things others couldn’t, such as incorporeal spirits, as well as the trails and auras that possessed items had.

“I don’t think it works on the Demon,” I told her. “It isn’t using magic. It’s warping reality and its own body, becoming the thing it has consumed. Perhaps if it was less powerful you’d be able to see some hints of its power at work, but I doubt it.”

“It’s scary,” she said. “I wanted to learn what to look for so that I might discover other Demons like it in the future.”

I shook my head. “Please leave the Demons to those best suited for fighting them.”

Exorcists were obviously meant to tackle Demons, usually alongside Crusaders with their holy powers, but even then we weren’t a perfect match against their might. After all, if not for my Reforge Spirit ability, it was highly unlikely we would’ve been able to defeat the Capgras Demon.

I thought back to the one Owl had dragged me along to deal with in Ochre. Even *he* hadn’t been able to defeat it, only managing to seal it within its vessel. It made me curious about the Demon that Ludwig was Pacted with and I planned to ask him about it. I still hadn’t decided if I should reveal to him the outcome of this battle though, but it seemed prudent to inform Mortl.

Hother was leading us to the place where he and Freja had agreed to meet up, after he was done playing around with the Demon Quest and Renji.

Kally rightly asked, “How do you plan to avoid someone spilling the truth in front of the Princess?”

“I can counter it, if necessary,” Oliver said.

“You can do that?” Emily asked, surprised.

“Witch Hunters are great at cancelling out magic,” he said. “Besides, the power she is using is similar to one that some with my Role unlock at Rank IV or V. It’s called ‘Compel Truth’ and is often used for interrogations. Her version seems to have the same flaw to it.”

“What flaw?” Renji asked.

Oliver lifted a finger in front of his mouth. “Trade secret.”

“**You can intentionally hurt yourself to break out of it,**” Armen answered.

Oliver looked at him, surprise on his face. “I’d appreciate if *that* didn’t become public knowledge, but you’re right. However, my counter is a magic-nullification field, which will protect all of us. She will no doubt realise I’m using it, but I don’t think she’ll say anything, as the Royalty tend to obscure the fact that they’ve got powers like Otherworlders.”

“You shouldn’t talk too openly about stuff like that,” Kally warned him.

“We’re all tied together by this deception. What’s the harm in a little treason?” he joked, though nobody laughed.

I frowned as I remembered what Saoirse had revealed to me. The fact that the Royal family were in essence Otherworlders, but made all such mentions forbidden, while barring everyone else from ascending to the same heights as them... it made me angry. If more Otherworlders could reach their lofty heights, then not only would Mondus become a safer place, but the mistreatment of Exorcists would likely change for the better. The Gyldenrose family was holding back the key to a prosperous future, all for their own personal gain. It was wrong.

“This mask is a trove of memories,” Hother muttered at the front of our group.

As one, we all looked at him, as he continued to talk, though not directing his words at anyone in particular.

“There are so many faces inside it. So much knowledge from those the Demon consumed. And when I became Hother, I immediately knew everything about his life. It feels natural to move in the way that he did and talk like he talked.”

The fact that he was saying it in the boy’s voice, with no one except Saoirse able to distinguish him from the real Prince, was deeply unsettling.

You cannot let him keep the mask for too long, the Dullahan warned.

“**I agree,**” Armen added, his voice only for the two of us to hear. “**His mind is being warped by it.**”

Do you think it is corrupting him?

“**Not in the traditional sense, but a mind is not made to fit so much within, and his sense of self will erode like a stone in the ocean, until none of his original personhood remains.**”

“I also know the memories of the Demon,” Hother went on to reveal. “The experiences it had while pretending to be someone else, and how it felt to devour the very essence of a person. I know

now why it always spent a day after each kidnapping, before returning to replace the person it had become. It was getting used to wearing its new body, while combing through the entirety of its victim’s life, trying to find the next link that could lead it further up the social ladder of Evergreen.

“It was planning on devouring Freja within the next few days, for she is the only one to whom Hother is tolerable, even though she is cold and dismissive of him. Once it had eaten and become the Princess, it was intending to wait for the King to die and then succeed him.”

“But why even aim for the King?” Oliver asked before I could. “It is a creature that wants to live in hiding, and replacing powerful people surely raises too much attention.”

“It had made a deal with a man. An Otherworlder named Carmine Anabello. He was the second person to discover its existence after Savant Mary-Ann, and, in exchange for helping the Demon evade detection by slaying the Exorcist Savant and burying all the evidence by bribing a member of the Witch Hunter’s Order, the Demon would become the Princess and subsequently the Queen, before ending a long-held rule of the Gyldenrose family.”

“What rule is that?” Renji asked.

I gritted my teeth, predicting what his next words would be.

“No longer would Librarians be barred from ascending to the Roles of Herald, Adjudicator, and Anointer.”

Everyone looked at each other in confusion, except for Elye and Emily who had no idea why it was a big deal, and Saoirse, Armen, and I who already knew.

“Why did he want to lift that rule?” Kally asked.

“And why was it even a rule in the first place?” Renji added.

Hother shook his head. “Neither the Demon nor Hother knows the answers within their memories.”

“To know that Anabello was involved with this Demon... That man is the most determined lunatic imaginable,” Oliver commented.

The fact that Carmine had tried to get Saoirse to invade Evergreen in search of her head, which was likely meant to have marked the Royal Family for Death; had tasked the Genius Kasbar with stealing the Music Box; *and* had made a deal with the Capgras Demon... it was all impressively-obsessive and paranoid in terms of the depth of planning involved. And all to reach the same outcome, more-or-less, with each plan working towards that end even if the others failed.

“The Demonologist won’t stop, no matter how many of his plans we foil,” I told Oliver. “I doubt this is the last of his schemes to ruin the Gyldenrose Family.”

“You’re right about that,” he told me. “The reason I returned to Evergreen was to muster up support from the King to invade the sovereign territory of the Redmoss Enclave where he has fled to.”

Elye’s ears immediately perked up at that. “*Yuuta! We have to go there!*”

Oliver looked at the Elfin with newfound interest. “Are you able to get us into Redmoss?”

“*Andasangare Luuvig will take us,*” she insisted.

Perhaps I should’ve heeded her request to go there earlier, I considered, as I realised that if I’d indulged her earlier, I might’ve managed to deal with the Demonologist already.

“Ludwig *did* say he had a way of introducing us to the Enclave,” I agreed.

Oliver looked very serious all of a sudden. “Then our next course of action is decided.”

“Why couldn’t you get in there before?” Renji asked.

“The Redmoss Elfin protect their home with ancient magic and gruesome monstrosities, and they retain the sovereignty of the lands their Enclave occupies, thanks to very old treaties that the Gyldenrose family has never once violated.”

“**He’s incorrect,**” Armen stated through our secret bond.

“Even if Ludwig has a way of getting us in, I don’t think they’d allow for many outsiders to enter,” I told him.

“You’re unfortunately right about that. So my suggestion is that you, the Elfin, and Ludwig enter through amiable means and then open the way for my Order, so that we can at last put an end to the Demonologist’s acts of evil.”

“*No!*” Elye shouted. “*Yuuta, do not listen to his words!*”

I nodded. “I will enter with as many people as I can, but I don’t think it would be possible for me to ‘open the way’ for your Order. And you’re wrong about the Gyldenrose family never having violated the sanctity of an Elfin Enclave. In the past they have put them to the torch for their own political reasons.”

Oliver stared at me, and the rest of our group had stopped. Then he said, without so much as a sour note or irritation in his voice, “We will speak to Ludwig once we have handed off the Prince. I’m certain he will be willing to indulge my request. That man has killed scores of my people, either directly or through proxies. I *will* have my revenge.”

“All of us wish to see him dead,” Saoirse said.

“You are not the only one whom he has taken from,” Armen added.

—Patreon-exclusive Copy—
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka “Dosei”)—

“Revenge is a dead-end pursuit,” Hother then interjected. “Now, let’s not tarry any longer. *My sister* might start to grow suspicious. And look, the sun is already rising.”