

## 128 – Quicksilver Brush

I was the second person to awake amongst us all, as Elye was already flitting about outside, while talking loudly and excitedly with someone who only occasionally made a sound to indicate they were paying attention.

Ludwig had brought out a small tent yesterday night, when it was clear that the bottommost halls of Fortress Major were bursting with impromptu residents following the ambush and ensuing chaos. The tent looked like it could only fit one person, but on the inside was enough room for twelve, with partitions to give everyone privacy. Against her wishes, or so it seemed, Elye had slept next to Emily, and now that the Elfin was up-and-about, the Spellhand was finally able to get some proper rest.

The Incarnate was snoring up a storm, and even Renji seemed to sleep deeper than normal. As I walked down through the reality-warping interior of the tent and outside, I saw that Armen was standing with an arm stretched up into the air, upon which Elye was balancing one of her hands, while keeping the rest of her body splayed out like an acrobat.

Nearby sat Saoirse, watching the two of them play.

“I am ready to depart from here,” the Dullahan said.

“We’ll wait for the rest to wake up,” I told her.

“*Yuuta! We should make breakfast! I can hunt and you can cook!*”

“**Plenty of merchants have brought their stalls and shops back into working order,**” Armen commented.

“I don’t think you want to taste my cooking,” I told the energetic Elfin, “So let’s buy it from one of the shops.”

“*I want meat!*”

“**Bread,**” Armen added to the list.

“You don’t suppose they sell cakes here?” Saoirse asked.

I looked at her in surprise. “Didn’t realise you had a sweet tooth. But come along, we’ll look.”

“You’re treating me?” she said with a smile in her voice. She was back to wearing her green summer’s dress, and, despite knowing her true nature, her faux beauty almost got to me for a moment.

I cleared my throat. “Sure, whatever. Come on.”

After eating breakfast with everyone and spending fifteen silver crowns just on cakes for Saoirse, we wandered around the marketplace for a bit. I was curious about Possessed Items and knowledge similar to that contained in my Encyclopaedias, so I had Emily accompany me and point out anything that caught her eye, while Karasumany followed me above to help verify.

We ended up buying a beige-and-green replacement tunic for her, since her other one had a hole in it now and was stained with blood. I likewise also found a new robe-coat that was a bit less dense in the fabric than my current and would allow air to circulate better, as I was long over-due for a change.

Renji ended up buying some loungewear that were of quite high-quality cotton thread, and his purchase made Emily and I both want our own as well. Before long, our bags were stuffed with new clothes, as well as a few random trinkets.

It was surprising just how quickly the denizens of Fortress Major recovered from the events of the day before, but it seemed that they were an extraordinarily tough sort of people, though I supposed that it came with the kind of business many of them dealt in.

“Where did you find this new armour for Armen?” Renji suddenly asked as we were walking towards an area that was supposed to have mainly magical items, baubles, books, and tools. “It looks very expensive.”

“It’s eh...”

“I gave it to him,” Saoirse answered.

“That’s why you’re so similar-looking,” my friend replied. Then he blinked and a ripple flowed through his aura, as he no doubt remembered Saoirse’s true nature.

Ludwig cast Armen a glance, then asked, “What kind of entity was it you were again?”

“Guardian Wraith,” I answered.

“And yet he wasn’t listed as an Armour-Bound on your Guild Card,” he replied, astutely.

*Crap, I should’ve had you fix that...* I said to Saoirse.

*Too late now. Lie. It is what you do best.*

“It’s complicated,” I answered.

*That’s not a lie, that’s just inviting more questions,* she said.

“How so?”

*See, I told you.*

*Fine, fine, I’ve got this!*

“Because he’s not a Guardian Wraith anymore.”

*I don't think it's advisable to tell him that he has become a True Undead.*

*I'm not going to tell him that. Obviously.*

“**You two sure like to scheme,**” Armen said, joining the conversation in my head.

Next to me, Emily chuckled, no doubt picking up on the fact that I was talking to my familiars.

“He was changed by the destruction of his first vessel, and when he came back he had turned into a different kind of wraith.”

Ludwig nodded, as I had apparently bullshitted hard enough to reach some possible outcome that he understood. “He's become an Armour Rider, right?”

I'd read about that entity before, and it was a kind of Shade-Wraith mix that could possess armour and thus interact with the real world. According to my Encyclopaedia, they really only showed up in castles, and were generally harmless, as they were the souls of diligent knights who had died in their sleep and whose persisting spirit still continued the daily routine of standing guard in full plate.

“That's my guess,” I replied vaguely.

“Fascinating. I've heard of it happening before, but it's supposed to be pretty rare. I suppose that a traumatic event such as losing a vessel could be the right kind of catalyst for an entity to undergo a significant change.”

*I feel bad for lying about this...*

“**This is how falsehoods and rumours begin,**” Armen commented in my head.

Emily, perhaps sensing my discomfort about the topic and knowing the actual facts, quickly pointed to a stall, “Let's look over there! They have a lot of books!”

I cast her a thankful smile when Ludwig and Renji looked away, and she replied with a mischievous one of her own.

We browsed the tomes, books, scrolls, loose pages, and such for probably an hour. There was an incredible amount of information to peruse between just three vendors who seemed to collect the stuff. While Ludwig and I looked through it for anything of worth, Renji, Elye, and Emily looked at magical tools, staves, foci, and spell-tomes.

In the end, I bought a stack of loose pages from an old Exorcist's handbook, which, to the vendor, were entirely illegible as they were written in Chthonic, as it seemed to only be understood by Otherworlders and a few Native scholars in Mondus. Still, he knew they were worth something, so after some haggling I paid four gold for the bunch. With the money from dealing with the Larder Keeper, as well as what I would get from dealing with the Gleeful Hoarder, I had an excess of money

to spend. That being said, I had strongly considered getting an actual place to stay, rather than flitting around between temporary residences. I had no idea what it'd cost to buy something outright, but Ludwig had mentioned that he'd help me look.

The Incarnate ended up buying some schematics and blueprints that he said he'd use for inspiration, dropping twenty gold for the bunch without blinking an eye. It was clear that Mortl paid him very well for his service, and he likely had other streams of income besides working on behalf of the Necromancy Guild.

When we linked back up with the others, Emily was looking at a glass wand with some sort of liquid metal inside, possibly mercury. It was sculpted like a coiled horn and fit perfectly in her hand.

“How much is it?” I asked.

Armen and Saoirse were standing a bit away from the rest of us, looking like hired guards. Several of the vendors cast them wary looks, since they were all still on edge from yesterday's traumatic experiences.

“Seventy gold,” answered Renji and I couldn't help but cringe a bit.

“It's okay, I don't need it,” Emily protested, but I could tell by her aura that she was a bit sad to let it go.

Ludwig walked over and took the wand out of her hand, swishing it around a bit. Then he said, knowingly, “It's a Quicksilver Brush. A real one too. Lots of fakes out there.”

No one else seemed to have heard of it, but then Armen walked forward, taking the wand into his gauntlet and studying it briefly.

**“These are worth two-hundred gold, easily.”**

Ludwig nodded.

The merchant, a woman in her sixties perhaps, grinned at this proclamation.

Then Ludwig said, “But we'll pay thirty for it, isn't that right?”

The woman looked confused for a second, until he continued, “This was taken from one of the Adventurers that was killed yesterday. I know that Fortress Major has a bad reputation, but even you must know that your Lord frowns upon grave-robbing and theft within his domain.”

Her head sank a bit. Ludwig immediately handed her the payment for the wand, which she took without complaint.

Shortly after we all moved on, the mood soured by the revelation.

As we neared the end of the shops in this area, Emily asked, “How did you know it was stolen?”

“I saw the Priest who had this wand die. He had received the wand from his mentor, or so he told me a few days ago, so I took note of it.”

**“Quicksilver Brushes are rare and no longer being crafted. If not for certain laws that protect the Adventurers’ Guild and its members from the Crown, all of these wands would have been confiscated by the King’s men.”**

“Why are they so expensive? Is it just because of the rarity?”

Emily was holding her hand over the bag wherein her new wand lay, clearly worried about anyone taking it from her. Knowing her, she’d work hard to repay Ludwig’s gift.

**“They are excellent for controlling water, fire, and air-based magic, and can absorb some of the Backlash from spells, making them potent in the right hands as it means its wielder can take calculated risks.”**

“And they’re good at precision,” Ludwig added. “The quicksilver inside is quite unique, as it has been harvested from a strange depth-dwelling creature that supposedly bleeds the stuff and is itself a master of magic.”

“What kind of creature is that?”

“A Silver-Scaled Drake,” Renji said, realising what the Incarnate was talking about. He sounded very eager as he spoke. “I’ve always wanted to fight one. Amongst Monster Hunters, it’s said to be one of the biggest challenges, aside from True Dragons of course.”

“Bad idea,” Ludwig told him.

**“I concur.”**

“You take good care of that wand, Emily,” Ludwig said.

“Of course, ser! Thank you for purchasing it on my behalf!” she answered eagerly and in a polite tone I’d never heard her use before. “I will pay you back as soon as possible!”

The Incarnate waved his hand dismissively. “Don’t worry about it. I will say though, between the Caged Spell-Tome and this Quicksilver Brush you’ve got one hell of a setup. Add onto that your Exorcist buddy here,” he said, pointing at me with a thumb, “and his strange set of abilities I’ve never seen before, and you guys already have a crazy Party going on. There’s of course also your Elfin who’s terrifying with a bow, plus Renji who has the best reaction speed and battlefield awareness I’ve ever seen.”

“You sound a bit jealous,” I remarked.

“Yeah well, it’s just very exciting.”

“What about me?” asked Saoirse.

**“I was also not included.”**

“For starters,” Ludwig replied, “One of you is a familiar, sentient sure, but a familiar nonetheless, and you, Blademaster, I can’t really wrap my head around you yet. I honestly thought you were just a temporary acquisition.”

“Six people is quite a lot for a Party,” Renji remarked. It made me happy that he was including Armen in this count, since he was definitely his own person and not just my ‘familiar’.

“Normally, I would agree,” Ludwig said, “But with what you’re up to, it’s hard to say. Your biggest squabbles will probably end up being about how to split quest rewards, if I had to guess. That’s always what eventually breaks up big Parties.”

*Somehow I don’t think that’ll be a problem.*

“*Can we leave now?*” Elye asked, tired of Fortress Major already. “*I want to go to Redmoss Enclave!*”

“We ought to head to Evergreen first,” I told her.

“I’d appreciate if you did,” the Incarnate said. “Mortl has already been appraised of the situation here, but a formal report at the Adventurers’ Guild Hall in Evergreen is required, plus there are things you said you wanted from there, right?”

“I mostly need new familiars, to be honest. But we do need to go there for Renji’s Advancement.”

“Then let’s get going. Should be an eight-day journey from here if we take just a few breaks along the way.”

“If we take my carriage, we can arrive in two days,” Saoirse said.

Ludwig grinned. “How can I say no to that?”