

## 154 – Advancement III

It felt *wrong* to be leaving the inner island gate checkpoint and the Demon in disguise behind as we made it for the Academy district, once more within our carriage. Potts and Saoirse were following close behind us in their own.

I’d written down the name that Saoirse had said, and I was staring at it while we bumbled over the much older cobblestone-lain streets that led from the Sanctum Gate, as it was called, to the illustrious district of aspiring Mages.

Potts and I had agreed to keep an eye on the Witch Hunters and their movements within the secluded heart of Evergreen, while waiting for Oliver Smile to come find us and aid in the investigation. He had also sent one of his rat Scouts off to find Ludwig, carrying a brief message about the discovery and the urgent need for assistance.

Our carriage was following the white wall that surrounded the island from the circular river on its left and on the right were large manors and mansions, similar to Noble Quarter in Helmstatter, but just more expensive-looking somehow. In all ways, at least outwardly, Evergreen was a city that outdid all other cities. It was more populated than Lundia, fancier than Helmstatter, and more advanced than Ochre. However, it felt less like it had its own identity in my opinion, as if it was trying to be everything and thereby failing to be something. I had no doubt that the King, and Royal Family by extension, were the sorts of people who aimed to outdo all their contemporaries, and it wouldn’t surprise me to find a district that mirrored Ochre’s Comfort District, with its quaint restaurants and relaxing bathhouses.

I looked over to Renji, who was rubbing shoulders with Armen. He was reading something that the lead Witch Hunter had given him before we were allowed to leave.

“What does it say?” Emily asked before I could.

“It says that the King’s son and daughter will be in attendance at my Advancement.”

“**Quite an honour,**” Armen commented.

Kally looked slighted. “Why?” she asked, her voice tense. It seemed this was far from a normality.

“It doesn’t say.” He then added, “They want me to practice my new abilities on prisoners of the city...”

I frowned. That seemed cruel and something that Renji would be very much against. “Can you refuse?”

He shook his head. “You don’t refuse an order from the King.” When he flipped the letter around, there was an elaborate seal at the bottom of the page. I couldn’t tell exactly what it was meant to be, but it looked like there were some sigils mixed into the affair.

A dour mood overcame the carriage, until Elye asked, “*What hats do the Evergreen Heart’s offspring wear!?*”

“Hats?” Kally asked.

“*Do they not wear hats in your cities to distinguish their hierarchical superiority??*”

“You mean crowns?” I asked her.

“*Yes!*”

“Neither of them are in line for the throne, so neither are allowed to display such objects of power,” Kally told her.

“The King’s daughter, Freja, is quite an accomplished Mage with an unusual Metal Affinity,” Renji said, “So she often wears ceremonial-looking armour that is constantly in motion due to her flawless control of her Affinity.”

*I bet her aura is the same as Torvalder’s, and no doubt she too has a voice that cannot be denied.*

*It is fortunate that the Siren bestowed her blessing upon you then, Saoirse replied in my mind.*

*The ‘Siren’s Kiss’? I did not realise it was a blessing. What does it do?*

*Lyssalynne told me that it makes you immune to anyone’s charms but hers.*

*... Wait, it’s not a weird wedding thing, is it?*

*I told her you were claimed.*

I didn’t like the implications there, but, then again, a Soul-Pact was perhaps similar to some kind of insane ritual wedding...

“**What about the son? Is he of unique distinction?**” Armen asked. Part of me wondered if he was doing it to cut off the uncomfortable conversation taking place in my head.

“Hother has reportedly not excelled in anything particular, despite being almost fourteen,” Renji said. “But it seems he likes to hear the tales of Otherworlders, particularly taking an interest in Adventurers.”

“**Perhaps it is for his sake that they have come to watch you and set up a show fight,**” Armen guessed.

“I have heard that many famous and infamous Adventurers were commanded to tell him their stories,” Kally added. “It would not be beyond the Royal Family to do such a thing, although it is in bad taste.”

“Do you have to kill anyone?” Emily asked, sounding worried on Renji’s behalf.  
He frowned, and the dour mood remained in the carriage until we arrived.

Our white carriage, and Saoirse’s black one, rolled through a large gate, before coming to a stop in a large open courtyard. The wall of the island stretched out to our left, and on our right was now a vast set of twenty-one steep steps that led up to a large wooden double door. The door itself was set into a vast structure that occupied almost the entire district we were in, with vast halls flung out to either side, large dorm buildings within, towers placed here-and-there as though by random, and large inner gardens and courtyards that Kally said were some of the best in the entire city.

Every part of the giant Academy was like small districts onto themselves, denoted by their various types and colours of brickwork and architectural styles. Kally said that the Mage Aspirants of the great school were divided into factions based on several factors, such as Affinities, social stature, and specialities.

I was surprised to learn that there were those amongst them who were akin to Priests, as well as those who had powers almost like Summoners and Exorcists, though the vast majority were those with powers like Spellhands. Of course, they weren’t anywhere near Otherworlders in terms of power or breadth of skills.

As we followed behind the two Paladins wearing the King’s colours, we went up the steep steps, with Saoirse basically having to carry Potts on her back, while I managed the climb without fully exhausting myself. The double door was opened just wide enough for two people to enter while walking side-by-side, and as we entered, we were greeted by the fancy hand-painted tiles of a vast corridor that ran far down to the left and right of us, while also featuring spiralling wooden staircases to upper floors.

There were a few Peacekeepers overseeing contingents of guards, and these men and women were placed at even intervals down either side. Our guides walked straight across the centre of the floor, their boots resounding loudly on the tiles. Scores of Aspirants moved around us, although they gave our party a wide berth, and murmured loudly about us.

Emily, Elye, and I were busy looking around at the walls and floor, marvelling at the many paintings that adorned the walls, as well as the silk banners that hung down from above and bore various colours and emblems. The Elfin wanted to explore the upper floors, but Emily managed to persuade her to stay with the group, which I thought was impressive.

“Never thought I’d set foot here,” muttered Potts behind us.

“It’s more impressive than when last I was here,” commented Saoirse.

The Paladins led us through a smaller set of doors and we came out into a vast courtyard with well-tended flowerbeds, and we walked straight across, aiming for another double door at the far end.

Nearby, on a long green lawn, a shrill-voiced professor was explaining something to a group of twelve Aspirants. All of them had baby-blue auras, but they were vague like those belonging to Natives. It made me wonder what made them special, and I slowed down to watch curiously, as the man finished his lecture and then took up a wide stance. After a long moment of concentration, he sent forth a fireball the size of my fist. It was smaller than the Repulse I was capable of casting.

I couldn’t help but scoff, yet the students seemed utterly mesmerised by this puny display of power.

*Is that professor the upper limit of the power they can expect to wield?*

Saoirse walked up next to me and said, “This is what magic looks like to most Natives.”

“It’s rather disappointing,” I replied.

She cast me a grin. “Makes sense why they fear your kind, doesn’t it?”

After we left the courtyard, we entered into another massive hallway, but this one was connected on the left and right to the corridors that ran along the outside of the courtyard, and had another that ran straight ahead. As we walked down through it, something akin to classrooms were connected on either side, and spiralling staircases led to an upper floor with narrow walkways with more classrooms accessible through tall doors.

This hallway ran for what felt like kilometres before we reached the end, where double doors in front led to, presumably, another courtyard, although our guides took us down the right-going corridor. After following it for a while, we then went left, before going right into a smaller corridor that meandered like a drunken serpent, until it reached a large gate made of black wood and adorned with silver inlays, which depicted various mystical creatures. Some of them were obviously meant to be dragons, others were like serpents, and a few looked like Demons. There were also humans depicted, as well as celestial bodies.

“We have arrived at the Chamber of Ascension,” said one of the Paladins.