

118 – The Forlorn Redoubt

We left Dusk Hill camp in our carriage dragged by the two black steeds. Many soldiers, and the two officers we’d dealt with, came to watch our departure. In my mind I liked to believe I’d earned some respect with them and maybe changed their minds slightly about Exorcists, although it was most definitely wishful thinking. As with anything, progress was slow. One generation would not so easily forget, so it was up to their children to adopt the change, and all the while, one tragedy or villainous Exorcist could undo the goodwill accumulated over decades.

Our carriage climbed up out of the bowl-shaped camp, before taking the road that’d brought us here and following it out through the forest that ringed the area. We were taking a massive detour to go around the Mossbloom Woods, simply because the forest was so densely-packed with trees that the only way through was on foot, which might take a week if not longer.

No sooner had we broken away from the treeline than Saoirse willed the horses to shoot down the road with lightning haste. While all four of us were seated within and the vehicle hurled towards our destination, I closed my eyes and sought out the crows that trailed Renji and his company.

My vision was replaced by the vista of a vast castle town built atop a strangely-smooth mountain, with no external entrances and at the foot of which was a pine forest. Meanwhile, my ears were filled with the rushing of wind and the distant shouts of people.

I drove the crow towards the top of the castle, where stone turrets and walls were hewn from the mountain itself and in the centre of which was a great marketplace divided into sections, with guards and soldiers everywhere. Even without the ability to see their auras, I could tell that Otherworlders were over-represented here, as there had to be at least fifty of them all scattered around. The vendors, both shady and legitimate, shouted out their wares and haggled loudly at impromptu auctions.

After a few minutes of scanning the crowd from a perch atop the central support of a colourful tent, which I was fairly sure housed a small euphorics den, I spotted Renji and Elye moving through the crowd, the Elfin looking around excitedly, while the Brawler seemed to be searching for someone. If the Demonologist’s men were here, they would obviously do their best to blend in.

As I continued to watch the movements of the people, I also noticed some of the other Adventurers from Altar, one of whom seemed to be a Hunter, as he was accompanied by a squirrel-rat thing. It was clear they had their work cut out for them, and, given Fortress Major’s unique outside-the-Crown’s-law status, they couldn’t take any obvious measures. Hopefully, I could find them before

they sprang their trap, but, given that Witch Hunters were accompanying them, it seemed like it could happen any moment. They were, after all, not beholden to subtlety.

That’s enough for now, Karasumany, I said and cut the connection with my Observer.

I let out a sigh and leaned back in my seat, deciding to take a small nap before we arrived.

My eyes shot open as *something* woke me up. The sound of Armen and Emily’s conversation filled the interior of the carriage.

A beat of silence passed, as Emily noticed I’d awoken, then Saoirse said, “We have arrived.”

Karasumany, send forth some clones from here, but keep yourself outside the Redoubt’s territory, since I don’t know what we’re up against.

“Armen, you’ll be Vanguard. Emily, you’ll stay with the carriage.”

The Spellhand looked upset about this, but I didn’t think we’d have the ability to protect her, not in a place that had claimed so many lives and been abandoned due to its danger.

“And me?” Saoirse asked.

I thought about it. “Since you can conjure steeds with your power, can you create some kind of bodyguard for Emily while we’re away? Otherwise I’ll have you stay here as well.”

The Crusader exited out the carriage and I followed after him, Emily came out with Saoirse a second later.

“I will definitely go,” Saoirse asserted. “Do not think you can order me around.”

I sighed. I’d hoped that, despite the lack of subservience in our Pact, she would still heed my words as a matter of respect, but, then again, she had saved my ass with the Hoarder, so perhaps I was being overly controlling.

“I wasn’t meaning to tell you what to do,” I said, “But leaving Emily by herself is dangerous.”

The Dullahan grinned at my concession, then clenched her right gauntlet and let a drop of black smoke spill from the palm and onto the ground, where it rapidly grew into the shape of an armoured warrior, not too distinct from what Armen already looked like.

Emily gave the dark construct a wary look.

“It will keep you safe,” Saoirse said certainly.

I nodded. “You have rations, so you should be fine,” I told her. “But I’ll leave some of my crows here, just in case.”

“How long will you be gone?” she asked.

“Hopefully no more than a few hours. This sounds way too dangerous for me to handle, so we’ll just take a look, that’s all.”

“I’ll try and practice my magic a bit while you’re gone,” she decided.

“I will hear anything you say to my construct, you may also use it for testing your strength, if you so decide,” Saoirse told her.

What’s the point of me even having an Observer if you can do that and so much more?

CAW!! said the crow above me, offended.

I agree with the bird, Saoirse said, And I am not your servant, such work is beneath me.

Then why do it at all?

Because it upsets you to leave this girl alone.

I blinked in surprise. I hadn’t thought a Dullahan capable of that sort of empathy, but perhaps, in the same way that her nature was rubbing off on me, so too was my humanity infecting her. At any rate I didn’t question it, afraid she might have a sudden change of heart when she realised.

“Let’s get going then,” I said.

The sun was hovering above the mountains on the horizon and within a couple hours it would be too dark to see things clearly.

We didn’t have to walk far from where our carriage had stopped, but the place had not been kept by gardeners or other skilled workers for a long time, so the approaching road that diverted from the main one we’d followed was covered in wild bushes, fallen rotten trees, and other such obstacles.

I’d scouted the area head of us with Karasu already, but other than one hell of an ominous vista, there were no overt signs of danger.

We passed through the difficult terrain with Armen’s help, as Saoirse conveniently transformed his flanged mace into a sword that he used to slice through the bushes and branches with ease. After traversing through it for what might’ve been an hour, we came to the beginning of an area where everything was just... dead.

Perhaps dead was not the right word, for it still seemed to grow, but the grass was a pale grey, the trees looked sick and gangly, as though malnourished, and the earth was almost like sand when stepped upon, because it crumbled and shifted with hardly any weight applied to it.

In the distance was compacted earth which formed the outer sloped walls of the Redoubt, and a moat full of sludge surrounding it, though it was currently only visible from my crow’s vantage. An unsettling atmosphere radiated off the very ground itself, as though it was toxic or radioactive in some

way. Whatever Haunted this place, it had to be of calamitous strength, with the fact that it was out of the way and stayed put in the Redoubt the only reason why it hadn't already been dealt with by an Exorcist like Owl or Ludwig. This strength was best seen from high above, because, around the Redoubt and its moat, the area of 'dead' plants and earth stretched outward for at least half a kilometre in every direction.

“I have never before seen something like this,” Armen said.

“I have,” Saoirse replied with a frown.

Through our bond I felt a tinge of a particular emotion.

Indignation.

“Do you know what's at play here?” I asked her.

“Yes. I have once hunted and brought death to this person. I am dismayed to find my will denied. Those marked for death will die by my hand. To cheat death is the greatest affront to the Absolutes who birthed me and gave me purpose.”

I had a realisation just then. She wasn't going to let this go. There was no way she'd be okay with leaving now.

A sigh escaped my lips. “Though I am loathe to ask this, can you handle this particular entity?”

“Are you making a trade of a life for another?” she asked.

“What? No! But don't you want to get this guy who cheated you?”

“Certainly. Her death by mine hand is an assured and inescapable fate, but, in this current state, I cannot harm her.”

“Really? Why not?”

“For my power to function, I need to strike at the soul of the marked. Such is not a possibility with a fiend like this, for their soul has been cleft from their vessel, and is now housed elsewhere.”

“I thought you were omnipotent.”

“There is no such thing. Potency is not without limitation. Even the Absolutes know this.”

“If you know what sort of entity this is, please tell me.”

“Does it not spoil the fun?”

“Is everything a game to you?” Armen asked.

“Yes,” she answered him truthfully.

I thought about what she'd said and the notes from the Quest flier, then had a sudden epiphany. I pulled the time-worn Encyclopaedia from my bag and began leafing through it, before coming to an entry I'd already looked at a few times by now.

“It’s a Lich,” I said, a ball of anxiety forming in my chest. The Encyclopaedia explicitly warned against dealing with an entity like this, for they were like Demons, but had the cunning of a human, as they could still recall their mortal lives. It seemed they were created by a powerful mage performing a life-prolonging ritual that split their soul into fragments and artificially extended their lives, before letting themselves be killed. The splitting of their soul meant that death was not final for them, but it would clearly take a deranged individual to do something like that.

The writer of the entry posited that, in theory, it should be possible to get rid of a Lich by collecting each fragment of their split soul and exorcising them as a whole, but it was an arduous ordeal, as each of the fragments would first require their own individual ritual to obtain, whatever that meant. Liches were known to lay traps, utilise illusions, summon undead, and more-or-less utterly decimate anyone who invaded the territory they had laid claim to, which meant that performing several unique rituals and then a complicated exorcism was basically impossible without a team of Exorcists and an army of Paladins, Priests, and Crusaders backing them up. Naturally, such an endeavour would be sponsored by the local Lord, as in the case of Demon Galleon in Ochre, but only if the place was of great significance.

Saoirse made a *tsk* sound with her mouth, as though annoyed that I’d figured it out already. Then she said, “She was an Exorcist Necromancer from the same world as you.”