

158 – For the Prince

“I don’t understand why we aren’t leading an army against this Demon,” Renji commented. “Does the Princess not see the danger inherent in our small group?”

“This kind of creature is not something that can easily be taken down with sheer numbers,” I replied, although I understood his sentiment.

“My hound has its scent locked in,” Potts commented. His Church Grim was in front of him, sniffing loudly while moving its head around to keep track of the Demon’s trail.

I was holding the Scenting Whistle and could see what his familiar was detecting, as well as two dark-red trails that followed it. All three were bright, indicating just how fresh the trails still were, and it was clear that they’d gone down the road only about half an hour earlier.

I couldn’t stop thinking about the Demon’s true nature.

“The Demon might be the final evolution of a Mimic,” I told the group.

Potts looked confused, while Renji was clearly troubled by it.

“I knew there was an evolution past Mimic Knights,” he replied. “I just didn’t think I’d ever encounter one in the middle of a city...”

The trail led us through an arch and into the Jewelsmith district. Stores with fancy clothes, accessories, and everything necessary for a lavish lifestyle lined the streets, but our path took us to an area with restaurants, hotels, and taverns. The streets were relatively-empty, though the occasional carriage rolled past us as we went. Those few who were out-and-about, while the sun was at its zenith, all stared in surprise at seeing the young Prince walking around amongst them.

My bet was that, despite being allowed in Academy, Jewelsmith, and Noblehome, he probably stayed in the innermost Founding district at his family’s castle. Fortunately, no one here were foolish enough to get in our way and interrupt us, but I chalked that up to the serious atmosphere that surrounded us, not to mention that Armen, Renji, and Saoirse were all quite intimidating to any Native’s eyes.

We stopped in front of a tall tavern that a sign said was the ‘Roosting Rooster’. Its bottom two floors were an eatery, while the third and fourth floors were for temporary residents. Almost as soon as we entered, the trail we were following pointed us to a table where two Witch Hunters in the King’s colours were seated, enjoying their lunch.

When we approached, I noticed that the Demon’s trail was pointing towards the backdoor, while also seemingly getting ‘choppy’. It’d been an unbroken line from the gate to the tavern, but now it was as though snippets of its trail were just gone.

“What do you want?” asked one of the two Witch Hunters, but then he noticed Hother and his tone quickly changed. “My Lord, what can we do for you!?”

“We’re looking for Clarissa,” Renji said.

“Clarissa? Why? Did she do something?” The man looked to his comrade, a woman, and she shrugged, ignorant.

“She went out the backdoor, didn’t she?” I asked. “When did she leave?”

“Eh... Just a few moments ago. She said she had forgotten an errand she needed to run in Noblehome.”

I led my group along the trail through the tavern, while the two Witch Hunters quickly abandoned their meal and fell in behind us. “We’re coming along,” said the guy and none of us argued.

With our two new members, we moved out into a small alley that ran parallel to the street on the other side of the building, with the Demon’s trail becoming choppy and choppy as we went.

“My hound is having difficulty tracking her,” Potts said.

“It’s like the scent is breaking apart,” I told him.

Armen and Renji moved up in front again, the two Witch Hunters falling in around Hother.

“Why did you bring the Prince with you?” he asked Potts, for some reason singling him out.

“Didn’t have a choice,” he shot back with a ‘don’t talk to me’ glare in his eyes.

Now that we were getting close to finding the monster that he’d been tracking alone for all this time, his aura had become a sea of spiky waves.

We broke out through the mouth of the alley and into a street, and I had to lead us along the rapidly-dying trail, since Potts’ Church Grim was starting to do circles as it kept losing the scent.

“Something up ahead,” Renji said, picking up on voices before the rest of us.

We followed the sounds up along a street until we reached a T-section, where a cart stacked with boxes in the back had crashed into a stone streetlamp. From just a quick glance, it was clear that someone had severed the reins of the horse that’d been dragging it along. An angry looking woman was yelling down an alleyway, and though I didn’t fully grasp what she was saying, I saw that the trail passed by her and knew she’d run into the Demon.

We all moved past her, and as a precaution, the two Witch Hunters stayed by the entrance of the alley to keep Hother out of the way.

The trail was becoming harder-and-harder to track, until it just vanished.

“There’s a bend in the alley up ahead!” Renji yelled, as he and Armen ran out in front of us. Saoirse stuck with me, as did Potts, and I threw Jules out in front of me where he grew to his full height, before we followed on the heels of our vanguard.

The alley led to a dead end, though there were some backdoors to the stores that boxed us in, but none of them were open. I initially thought that the Demon must’ve scaled the wall and escaped us that way, but there was no trail to follow, and Armen and Renji were standing in front of a body.

Blood was still running out of the hole that pierced all the way through the man’s head, and from his clothes he just looked like any ordinary Native worker. Kind of like the ones I often saw bringing goods back-and-forth.

I blinked, as some realisation set in.

“Where’s Hother?” I asked and everyone looked at me in horror.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

We all spun around and ran back the way we’d come. As we rounded the corner and the mouth of the alley came into sight, I saw something I’d never assumed possible.

On the ground lay two dead Witch Hunters, a hole piercing all the way through their heads and their blood running eagerly along the cracks in the stones under them.

Without a sound, and without any of us being the wiser, the Demon had crept up behind them and killed them both. Two Advanced Roles snuffed out, in an instant. It was unthinkable.

I swallowed repeatedly, trying to quell the urge to throw up.

Renji grabbed my shoulders, “Where’s the trail, Ryūta!? Where did it go!?”

“It’s gone,” I told him. “The Demon erased its own trail. I can’t even see the Prince’s anymore.”

“That’s not possible, is it!?”

“I didn’t think so,” I said, as Armen and Jules ran out of the alley and in opposite directions.

Renji made a loud sound of frustration, before jumping onto the crashed cart and climbing up onto the roof of a nearby building. He looked around, scanning the district, then picked a direction and ran off.

“That woman by the cart,” Potts said. “That was the Demon, wasn’t it?”

I gritted my teeth.

“I am surprised to not have noticed,” Saoirse said, a curious smile on her face. “Perhaps I will take a more active role in this hunt after all. To believe *I* could be outwitted so easily.” She laughed.

“Even on the run, the Demon managed to lay a trap for us and kill two Witch Hunters...” I muttered, blown away by this overt display of power.

“All to get its hands on the Prince,” Potts added, and I realised he was right.

“What do we do?” I asked him.

“I have no idea, but we need help.”