

157 – A Prince’s Wish

“*Explain,*” said the Princess, and it was as though her voice sent a shock through Potts’ body, making him unable to disobey.

He began to recount everything he’d told me, culminating with our discovery that the Demon was impersonating a Witch Hunter. My friends looked shocked, though Elye, as usual, wasn’t paying much attention.

Princess Freja turned to look at the lead Witch Hunter in the room. “*Who is this woman whom he speaks of?*”

“It sounds like Clarissa,” he replied, his aura tense and his face marked with concern. “She went missing two days ago, and reappeared yesterday before a search for her could get underway. It matches the pattern that Seeker Potts has observed. But, with all due respect to the Exorcist, it would be impossible for a Demon to infiltrate our order.”

I knew that was a lie, and so did he, from the look of his aura, and yet he was able to deliver the falsehood to the Princess, despite the appearance that her voice was working on him.

“**It is folly to lie to a member of the Royal family,**” Armen observed, surprising me with his decision to be candid.

Freja smiled, and I realised what Armen had meant, because, if her aura was anything to go by, she would have facets of the different powers that Otherworlders possessed, amongst which was Spirit Sight. “*The Crusader is right. I see through your lies. I know that your Order is not as sacrosanct as you would claim.*”

“My lady, with all due—”

“*Enough. Clearly your Order is incompetent to the point of endangering this fair city. The Exorcists, who dutifully tracked this monster here, will be given a mandate to handle it. I suggest you return to the leader of your Order and relay the message that all Witch Hunters in Evergreen are to assist them in their eradication of it.*”

I suppressed a sigh. Whether I liked it or not, I’d now been roped into this mess thanks to Potts. Though I couldn’t blame him. It seemed like this was his first time standing in front of a member of the Gyldenrose family, so he hadn’t been prepared for the effect of their powers of manipulation and honesty.

The Prince, Hother, seemed very excited by this new development, and quickly whispered something into his sister’s ear. She shook her head, but then relayed his words to us.

“Eminent Skrald, my brother has expressed his desire to witness you do battle with this Demon.”

“Of course, my Lady,” Renji obeyed, although I could tell from his aura that he was very concerned.

I raised my voice. “I would like to ask that the rest of my Party be exempt from this undertaking. Demons are dangerous adversaries and not something that most people can handle.”

“Very well. Every tool has its purpose, and to misuse a tool for the wrong purpose is wasteful.”

I lowered my head. “Thank you. Additionally, I would like to ask that this revelation about the Demon be kept secret. It seems extremely adept at avoiding being caught, and it has already claimed the life of at least one veteran Exorcist.”

“A prudent caution.” She looked across the assembled people and gave the order. **“What you have heard from the lips of Seeker Potts is to remain unspoken.”**

Everyone except Armen, Saoirse, and myself immediately responded with a loud, “Yes, my Lady!”

This was not how I expected this to go... I remarked, as I considered our group.

Armen was leading the fore; Saoirse and I were bringing up the rear; and Renji, Potts and Hother were in the middle.

It seems they do not care much for the life of a talentless Royal spawn, Saoirse replied.

The Prince seemed ignorant to the potential danger he was in and the smile on his face was like that of a child in an amusement park.

“What is the strongest monster you’ve fought?” he asked Renji. It was the seventh question he’d asked him in the last five minutes, but fortunately my friend was patient with him and answered truthfully.

“It would either be a Mimic Knight or an Ogre Lord, though they were very different opponents.”

“I heard about the Ogre Lord you slayed!” he announced excitedly. “It was the one that ruled over the northern mountain dale fortress, right!?”

Renji nodded. “It was. But I wasn’t alone. I had a really strong Party with me. The Sharpshooter Klein; the Sorceress Kally, who you met earlier; and the Priest Nicole.”

“Is it true that the Ogre Lord could destroy a building with a single strike?”

“Not quite, but it was definitely very strong. But that strength also became its undoing, as we defeated it by luring it into collapsing its own fortress down onto itself.”

We arrived by the Sanctum Gate and the Prince suddenly said, “I have never been outside before. My Father says I am not allowed.”

“**Perhaps when you get older, he will let you,**” Armen said.

“It is unfair that Freja always gets to go where she pleases.”

To be born powerless in the most powerful family on the continent must be quite a burden, I guessed.

He does not benefit from being coddled, Saoirse said. But Royals do love to spoil their young, even though it leaves them damaged and unfit to rule.

Since when did you care about such things?

I just find it amusing. Humans are the only animals that seem intent on setting up their offspring for failure.

We stopped by the guard post near the closed gate, and the Peacekeepers, guards, and King’s men on duty all saluted when they saw that Hother was with us.

“My Lord, what brings thee to this place?” asked the lead Peacekeeper.

He smiled. “We are on a hunt for a Demon.”

It seemed the man, who looked like he was in his late forties, at first assumed it was some elaborate joke, but then he took in the appearance of the rest of us and realised the gravity of the situation.

“...I see. How can I assist you?”

“We are looking for a Witch Hunter named Clarissa,” I said. “Do you know where we can find her?”

“She left with two others of her Order when the guard change happened. They will be heading for Jewelsmith where they are lodging.”

I nodded. “A Witch Hunter by name of Oliver Smile may come this way. The Exorcist Savant Pawn may also show up. If either of them show up, please send them there as well.”

The man saluted, before spreading the information amongst his men.

“The more people who are made aware of our Demon problem, the harder it will be for us to get the jump on her,” I said, as we were walking in the direction of Jewelsmith. We’d intentionally opted to not using horses or carriages, since there was the possibility of the Demon ambushing us.

I stopped in the middle of the road, while my party moved ahead, then pulled out the Scenting Whistle and blew a note in it. The air came alive with coloured ribbons, but I immediately spotted the one that was wrong.

It was a thick trail like black smoke, and it was full of red swirls.

The sight of it sparked familiarity.

“It has the same scent as a mimic...” I muttered to myself, not understanding the connection.

Then I recalled Renji’s words about Mimic Knights: *They only evolve into humanoid shapes after eating a lot and living long lives. Eventually, they become true Mimics that can easily take on any humanoid shape and have enough power to wipe out an experienced party of Adventurers.*

Is this Demon the step above Mimic Knights?

Is it the natural evolution of a monster that has perfected imitation?

Saoirse stopped and returned to where I stood, then said, “I was wondering when you would figure it out.”

The grin on her face was sinister.