

159 – Faceless I

After six hours of scouring the district, we had to come to terms with the fact that we had no trail nor lead to follow. Potts’ Church Grim was hopelessly lost, doing panicked circles as it tried to regain the trail. Renji and Armen must’ve run up-and-down every individual street at least three times, and even Saoirse had made an effort to locate the missing Prince and his abductor. I wasn’t able to do much myself, as every clone of my Observer was shot down before it could fly over the walls of Evergreen’s inner island, so instead I consulted my Encyclopaedias in hopes of finding an answer.

Eventually we had to give up and regroup.

We returned to the Roosting Rooster, with a new goal of trying to trace the path that the Demon, disguised as Clarissa, might’ve taken just after she returned. If it was possible to know where she’d appeared from, it would make our search for the Demon’s hideout more manageable, although we couldn’t just search through every house and store without help from the city officials.

It was dinner time when we arrived, and though no one was in the mood for it, we ended up having something to eat, before continuing with our search later. The tavern only had a few people within, most of them Natives, except for a three-man group of Witch Hunters on the second floor. We were able to get a corner for ourselves where we could speak in peace, but I still put up a ward with the Inverted Ear sigil on it to prevent eavesdropping.

“It must have a nest somewhere,” Potts insisted. “It always takes it about a day to assume someone’s identity, based on its previous pattern, so it probably needs a quiet place where no one will disturb it.”

“And we are sure it wouldn’t try to leave the inner part of Evergreen to do it?” I asked.

“That wouldn’t be possible, unless it can teleport,” Renji said. “The place is too well-guarded for anyone to slip in or out, especially not while having a captive.”

“This is presuming the Prince is still alive,” Potts commented.

Everyone went silent.

“What?”

“**He has a point,**” Armen said. “**It might have already killed him or eaten him or whatever it does to its victims.**”

“I’d prefer to treat this as a rescue operation,” Renji said.

Someone plopped down on a chair behind him and asked, “Who are we rescuing?”

We all turned to look at the newcomer. His hair was dark and shoulder-length, his brown eyes were almond-shaped and tired-looking, and he shared a lot of similarities with Emily, which I only now noticed.

“Oliver!” I said, amazed that he’d actually arrived this quickly. I’d managed to locate him with a clone of Karasumany and gotten his attention. Afterwards I’d ordered the familiar to return to Sanctum Gate, hoping he’d follow it there, but then I had forgotten to check in on it during the frantic search for Hother.

“I followed your bird until one of the archers on Sanctum Gate shot it down. Managed to nab it before it hit the bridge, but it turned to smoke in my hands.”

“We’ve got a problem and need your help,” I told him.

“I figured it was something important.”

A black carriage came to a halt outside of the tavern a second later.

This is the last time I play coachman... Saoirse commented sourly, even though she’d volunteered the previous times.

“So, out with it,” Oliver urged, having easily picked up on the tense mood between the four of us seated by the table.

Boots thumped on the wooden floor by the entrance, and, despite it all, I couldn’t help but smile a little.

“There’s someone you should meet first.”

Oliver turned to take in Elye, Kally, Saoirse, and Emily. His eyes lingered on the Dullahan for a moment, before the Spellhand made a pained sound, like a startled cry.

Then Emily ran across the floor and grabbed him in a powerful hug.

The Witch Hunter was completely frozen, though his aura was a jumbled mess of emotions, like pain, confusion, horror, and joy.

“Oliver! It’s really you!” Emily cried.

“Emmy...?”

She let go for a moment and gave him a scrutinising look. “You’ve gotten old,” she then said, laughing as tears streamed down her face.

“Why are you...?”

He moved forward and lifted her off the ground, easily carrying her weight.

“I looked for you after you disappeared,” he said. “One day you were just gone. Everyone feared the worst, but I never stopped looking. When I was transported to this world, I realised that you must’ve come here too, but I couldn’t find you.”

“I’m so happy to see you!” she exclaimed, squeezing him tighter.

Potts and Kally were the only two in our party who had no idea what was going on, and though the moment was awkward given its timing, I felt it was important as I had no idea what lay ahead.

“*Yuuta, did you find the Demon?*” Elye asked.

At the utterance of that one word, Oliver placed his sister back down and looked at me. “A Demon? Here? In Jewelsmith?”

I nodded.

“Where’s the Prince?” Kally rightly wondered.

Renji let out a sigh and said, “The Demon took him.”

“It also killed two Witch Hunters,” Potts added. “After already killing one and impersonating her.”

Oliver flexed his jaw muscles. “I’d heard about the disappearance and reappearance of Clarissa, and it troubled me because of something my Master once told me, as well as the report Savant Mary-Ann left with the Order last year. Are we dealing with a Capgras Demon?”

I saw a spike of anger shoot through Potts’ aura.

“Your Order knew!?”

“We get dozens of reports every day,” he replied evenly. “Savant Mary-Ann’s report was submitted to us a few weeks before her disappearance, and due to internal... conflicts... no one followed up on them. I do not bear the sins of my Order alone, but I will atone for them by aiding you in this.”

“You could’ve prevented her death!” Potts shot back, and it was hard to disagree with him. I wondered if the internal conflicts were connected to the euphorics problem amongst Witch Hunters perhaps.

“You called it a Capgras Demon,” Renji remarked, getting back on track. “Does that mean the Witch Hunters have encountered its kind before?”

He nodded. “They are exceedingly-rare nowadays, but, based on the Order’s historical texts, they were not uncommon in large cities of the past. Countermeasures were taken in order to prevent their evolution and the art of exorcising them is now largely-forgotten.”

I wanted to ask if his Order still retained their methods of exorcism, but before I could get a word in, Renji asked, “So, the fact that Hunters and Trackers are taught to pick up the scent of Mimics is to keep these Demons from appearing?”

“Indeed. As you know, even normal Mimics are rare to encounter in cities, unless someone brought them there like with what happened in Helmstatter. It leads me to believe that the one you’ve encountered must be rather ancient and capable of obscuring its scent somehow.”

I nodded. “It was able to lead us into a trap by using its scent. I have no idea how it was able to know that we were following it.”

“I was quite fascinated with this type of Demon in the past,” Oliver started, while he was holding Emily’s hand tightly, as though afraid she’d vanish again if he let go of her for even a moment. “I have read everything that the Order knows about them, and there are quite a lot of theories to explain this power of theirs.”

“Who came up with the name?” Potts asked, his anger slightly abated, now that it was obvious Oliver was here to help and quite knowledgeable about our foe. The Exorcist seemed like a very pragmatic person, given how quickly he could put aside his anger, though from his aura I could tell it was still bubbling below the surface.

“I cannot say, but it was based on some mental affliction supposedly.”

“Capgras Syndrome,” Potts replied. “A delusional mental disorder wherein you believe those closest to you have been replaced by something other.”

Oliver nodded. “I am surprised you know it.”

“My brother was a psychiatrist,” he replied.

Saoirse stepped forward and asked, “Witch Hunter, do you possess the means of tracking an entity whose name is known?”

“I do, it involves three rituals to triangulate its location, but... Don’t tell me you know its name??”

She grinned.

The fact that Saoirse was taking this seriously made alarm bells ring in my head.

How powerful must a Demon be to cause a Dullahan to take an interest?

“**Have you considered that the Demonologist is behind this?**” Armen asked. “**We know he already planted Mimics in Helmstatter.**”

Oliver looked to the Crusader, seeming a bit confused as to how he knew. “It did cross my mind, but Demonologists do not control the Demons they parley with, just ask Savant Ludwig. They invoke

and let loose these horrific entities, but this Demon predates his actions against the Royal Family, and it does not seem possible to summon a Capgras Demon.”

“It’s just a coincidence that it went straight for the Prince then? That seems unlikely, given the timing,” Saoirse argued. She still had a bone to pick with Carmine Anabello, and if the Capgras Demon we hunted was brought here by his hand, she might take an even more active role in hunting it down.

“It is possible that he nudged it in the right direction,” Oliver admitted, “Though, at the moment, his focus seems to be on subverting the King’s reign by turning his men against him.”

Like Kasbar, I thought, but did not say.

“We shall vanquish this Demon and then find its master,” Saoirse said, clearly having decided that the Demonologist was behind it. “Now, show me the ritual to track it.”