

## 91 – Backlash

Emily rested her head on my legs after I’d managed to return her to consciousness, following the blackout after casting her incredible ‘Wind Arrow’, the aftermath of which was still visible in the Troll Spire tree, where a tiny hole pierced all the way through its metres’ thick trunk.

I knew how horrible the exhaustion following a full depletion of one’s energy could be, but the way she looked, as I stared down at her, was not just explainable by exhaustion. It was almost like she had a fever and I could tell that her heartrate had dropped a lot.

*Sera, if you know anything about Spellhands, please answer.*

The Ifrit appeared behind my shoulder out of the thin air. She’d no doubt been trailing after Elye, who was accompanying Renji in the extermination of the Black Hound den, which he had decided to undertake.

**“What is this!? Have you finally embraced a life of sin, Exorcist!?”**

*Alright, first, it’s not what it seems like, okay? I met this girl and helped her train her magical powers, but after casting a really powerful spell she suddenly fainted and now she’s like this. Also, weren’t you listening to my thoughts?*

**“Why would I pay attention to your monologuing!?”**

I sighed. *Whatever. Can you help?*

**“I am no Priest, but it looks like magical Backlash.”**

*What’s that?*

The Ifrit did a *tsk-tsk* sound as she floated around to sit in front of me, closer to Emily. Though she was on the brink of what looked like sleep, the girl tracked Sera’s movements with her eyes, almost as if she could see her, though that clearly wasn’t possible.

**“You say she wields magic, but which Affinity? Many Elfin are naturally born with an Affinity for Earth and use it to work the soil and plants.”**

I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant by that, but I answered, *Wind*.

**“I am unfamiliar with Wind Affinity Backlash.”**

*What is a Backlash though? Is it different from when I exhaust my energy?*

**“Exorcists are lucky they do not have to deal with it because of their cursed Affinity. A Backlash is a price that must be paid, a balance of the forces. Give and take. Evened scales. For those of the Earth Affinity, short-term Backlash means stiffened limbs and joints, and weakened**

*hearts; long-term means gangrenous limbs, loss of hair, discolouration of teeth and nails, and paralysis.”*

I swallowed as I took in this information. *That* seemed an exorbitant price to pay for magical powers, especially when I could use my Repel and wield Familiars with hardly any side-effects. I hadn't heard Armen talk about Backlash for his abilities, so I assumed it might be specific to Spellhands. It also begged the question of whether Renji would have to deal with something like that, should he advance to a magic-wielding Role.

*Is there anything I can do for her?*

***“There may be a way to staunch the Backlash, but most will end up experiencing it, even if they are careful..”***

I thought about how she'd been able to send forth small gusts without seeming any worse for wear. *Is the Backlash proportional to the spell used?* I guessed.

***“Trakys sare can easily wield their power over plants with no Backlash, since they are not forcing a change into them that is unnatural. Once I saw an Elfin split open the earth to swallow a group of the accursed Witch Hunters, but afterward he lost the use of his legs permanently.”***

*So it is not proportional to the strength of the spell, but its alteration of the natural flow?* That seemed to make sense, as Emily's initial spell had just mimicked the forest's breeze, while her Wind Arrow had forced a change into the breeze that condensed it into a hard-hitting projectile.

*Does the source of the element make a difference too? Like, can you still use wind magic if you're underwater?*

***“Why are you asking me all these questions!?! I am no mage!”***

*But you wield fire?*

***“In this form, I do, but of no intention of my own! In life, my only skill was Cursebreaking.”***

*So you don't have to worry about Backlash as an Ifrit?*

***“Is experiencing excruciating pain and the memories of being burnt to death not toll enough for you!?”***

*Sorry, I didn't mean it like that.*

The Ifrit grumbled and got back to her feet, before taking a step back. Emily's half-awake eyes tracked her movements, which worried and surprised me.

Seramosa reached up with her charred hand to the only source of fire on her body: her hair. With a finger, she teased a small flame onto the back of her hand, where it danced around and changed shape.

*Does that hurt? Playing with your own fire like that?*

***“I have grown used to pain like this.”***

I grimaced, it was not something I thought anyone ought to ‘get used to’.

“Ryūta, who is that?”

I froze as Emily shifted on my lap to look at Sera, who was playing around with the tiny flame in her hand.

“Can you see her?”

“Of course. But why does she look like that? And why is she see-through?”

***“The Child can see me? Peculiar.”***

“Can you hear her as well?” I asked, dreading the answer.

“No. Why? Is she speaking to me?”

“I’m not sure why, because you’re not supposed to be able to see her in this form, but you’re looking at a familiar of mine. She’s erm... a Demon. But she’s benign. Sort of.”

***“Do not test me, Exorcist!”***

*How else would you like to be introduced!?*

***“Lover of Elfin, prosecutor of the tainted, conflagration of justice!”***

*That’s ridiculous, I’m not telling her that!*

“Are you speaking to her?” Emily asked.

I looked down and saw that she was staring up at me. “You can tell?”

“Your face was moving weirdly, like you were frowning just now and raising your eyebrows.”

*Wait... have I been doing that the entire time??*

***“Yes. It is odd.”***

*Why didn’t you say anything!?*

***“The Wraith told me not to. He found it amusing.”***

*I have a bone to pick with him once he gets back!*

Emily began trying to sit up and I did my best to support her, though I was careful about where I put my hands.

“I think I’m better now,” she said. “Thank you.”

“How do you feel?”

“Cold. And my head hurts. It also feels like I fell from a tree and landed on my stomach.”

I frowned. “I think we should table your training until we can find you a proper mentor, because there’s a lot I don’t know about Spellhands, and you could’ve been seriously harmed because of my ignorance.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said. “But what *was* that?”

“My familiar told me it’s something called a Backlash. If I’m understanding it correctly, the severity increases with how much you bend the natural flow of the elements.”

“So if I redirect the wind I’ll experience it?”

“I don’t know. Sorry.”

“Even if that was really scary, I do feel that I understand my powers a bit better now.”

I nodded. “That’s good. Hopefully my friend Renji can help you more than me. He’s pretty knowledgeable about this world.”

“Where is he right now?”

“Him and Elye went off to exterminate the den of Black Hounds that attacked the village.” I looked at the sunlight coming through the canopies of the trees, trying to judge the angle of the sun. “They should hopefully be back soon, but I’m gonna check on them.”

“I’ll come with you,” she said.

“Oh, I was just going to use my familiar to do it.”

*Karasumany, give me one of your clones.*

**CAW!** said the bird from above, where it hung sideways from a large tree. Emily looked up in surprise, then her eyes widened as she saw a second bird split from the original crow.

As I gained control over this duplicate, I brought it down to earth near us and told her, “This is another familiar of mine.”

Emily reached out and poked its beak.

**CAW!** it yelled, offended.

“Sorry,” she said to the clone.

I smiled at the interaction, before sending the crow off in the direction my friends had gone. It was still such a strange feeling to be experiencing the wind and sounds and sight through the bond with the clone, as it manoeuvred around the large trees, while simultaneously experiencing those same feelings through my real body. Fortunately, I’d gotten a lot better at dealing with the dual inputs, and hardly suffered any headaches from it anymore.

After only a few minutes of flying, I spotted Elye and Renji walking back towards the village. The Brawler was holding the Huntsman in his arms, though the Native didn’t seem greatly injured,

which was good. A lot of Renji’s body was covered in gore, which I assumed meant they had fulfilled their task.

“They’re already on the way back,” I relayed to Emily, who was in the middle of waving at Seramosa. The Ifrit mimicked the gesture in turn, before walking closer to the girl, though carefully, as though dealing with a skittish animal.

I sent the crow lower to catch my friends’ attention, and Elye leapt into the air, catching it and immediately talking directly at it, her voice amplified into my right ear. It was quite an intense feeling.

*“Yuuta! We did it! We killed all those ugly wolves! Renji was all like pow and blam! While my arrows were like woosh and thwack!”*

“Ryūta, we’re on our way back. Were you just checking in on us?”

Since the crow was locked firmly in Elye’s grip, I just opened and closed its beak to answer.

My friend nodded, seeming to get the gist. “And don’t worry about the Huntsman here, he just tripped and hurt his ankle, it’s just a sprain.”

“I already told you that you don’t need to carry me,” the man complained.

“This is faster,” Renji replied.

I shook my head and broke the connection with the crow, before turning to look at Sera who was trying to touch Emily’s out-stretched hand.

*“She can see me, but she cannot touch me,”* remarked the Ifrit, sounding disappointed.

“I can’t touch her,” echoed Emily.

“She’s not manifested into physicality,” I explained. “To do so would be dangerous, as she is a being born of fire.”

“That’s a shame. She looks nice.”

*“I will die for this Child!”* Seramosa pledged, unbeknownst to Emily.

*I’d prefer if you focused on protecting me, to be honest with you.*

*“Do not ruin this moment, Exorcist! I’ll turn you into ash!”*