

## 169 – Redmoss Enclave

With the bramble wall at our backs, the five of us stared straight at the Enclave that rose before us within what might’ve once been a massive clearing. Although shrubbery and smaller trees were gone, there were Troll Spires growing out of the wide hill upon which the Enclave was built. These were far larger than all the ones in the surrounding forest, both in girth and height, with canopies sheltering most of the Enclave.

Each of these titans were wrapped in brambles and thorns, with various kinds of buildings and walkways protruding from their sides like barnacles or dug into their thick bark like wooden caves. Countless smaller versions of the Gatekeeper parkoured around these elevated platforms, and a contingent of them were already heading towards us.

“We wait here for them to approach us. Just because we have been allowed entry, it doesn’t mean we’re totally in the clear,” Ludwig said.

Saoirse stood tall and proud, with her head still cupped in her left arm. Elye seemed excited but also hesitant, which I thought was a worrying sign.

“**Has it always been like this?**” Armen asked. “**Other Enclaves are less overtly hostile.**”

“They *really* like thorns...” the Incarnate responded awkwardly. “But yeah, it has always been this way.”

“How many times have you been here?”

“Three. They’ve got a pretty serious issue with Phantasms spawned from pain.”

I was about to ask why, when the thorn-lizard men arrived in front of us and arranged themselves in a half-moon, effectively boxing us in against the wall. Their leader stood in the middle, and he was a ‘normal’ Elfin, rather than the twisted monstrosities that served as guards, though his appearance was unsettling.

His skin was ashen-grey and his horns went almost completely straight into the air from where they sprouted. His fiery-red hair was lifted in a top-bun and his hooded eyes were black like soot. A choker made of thorns dug into the skin of his neck, and his attire consisted of Redmoss attached to a harness of brambles woven around his torso, arms, and legs. Surprisingly, neither blood nor infections surrounded the many places where the thorns pierced his skin.

“*Honoured Guests,*” he stated. “*The Great Bramble Drake has seen fit to allow you entry, but what is your purpose within Redmoss Enclave?*”

Ludwig stepped forward and said, “We are after the Demonologist known as Carmine Anabello. We know he is hiding within your territory.”

The Elfin raised the long nails of his right hand and pressed them into the skin at the centre of his chest. I wasn’t sure what the gesture was meant to portray, but it seemed an open display of something. *“Andasangare Luuvig, we do not contend ourselves with the agendas of humans. Andasangare Carmine is an Honoured Guest of ours.”*

As he spoke, the Bramble Drakes, as I assumed the monstrosities of roots, thorns, and moss were called, watched us with scrutinising looks, though their heads had no eyes and I couldn’t figure out how they perceived the world. They were an unnerving bunch and had clearly been transformed by some dark ritual and were no doubt former Elfin themselves. I hadn’t ever read about them in my Encyclopaedias, but it seemed Ludwig knew them well, which might come in handy, should we need to face off against them. In a way they reminded me of the Welin monsters that the Skovslot Enclave used as guardians, but they were clearly faster and nimbler.

“We would like to see him, as we fear he is bringing the agendas of humans to your very Enclave,” Ludwig argued.

The Elfin leader pressed his nails deeper into the skin of his chest, before responding, *“We will allow you to speak to him, but we will not condone violence against our Honoured Guest.”*

This was what we’d already prepared for, so it was little surprise.

## **LEAD THE WAY.**

The Elfin lowered his head to the Dullahan, before turning on his heel and striding towards the centre of the Enclave. We all quietly fell in behind him.

*Don’t do anything rash,* I told Saoirse.

*He will die his promised death,* she replied ominously.

Our entourage of familiars and undead servants orbited around us as we came to the first of the towering trees. Jules was walking in a spirited gait akin to that of a child on the way to a candy store, while the Drowned Nami was basically dragging his dead legs forward in a bizarre way that could hardly be called walking. Meigetsu was circling around me, performing quite a few spins that swished the fabric of its body around in a fanciful display, and Karasumany was sitting on my shoulder, observing our surroundings with snappy movements of its head.

Armen was stoic as ever, and, for some reason, Ludwig’s Succubus was clinging to his arm and grinning at his obvious discomfort. The Incarnate kept glancing her way and I wondered if he was jealous or concerned for the Crusader’s wellbeing.

Mortl waved a hand through the air and all her skeletons and zombies began sinking into the ground, except for the little cat on her head and tall brute she’d crafted earlier. Ludwig followed her example and dismissed the bony Finger Collector trudging along behind him. I decided to keep my Drowned Caster on hand, since it would be the best counter to the Demonologist, while also maintaining a swirl of energy in my chest, ready to blast him with the disrupting power of my Death’s Hand.

As the canopy of the giant tree covered us in shadow, I looked up in surprise at the red-glowing fungus that sprouted on every building, cave entrance, and walkway above. It was the only bit of decoration on display besides the thorns and brambles however, and it served quite a utilitarian purpose. This gave me the impression that, unlike Elye’s home, the ashen Elfin of Redmoss were more spartan in their lifestyles and outward expressions.

“*Skovslot is prettier,*” Elye murmured, agreeing with my thoughts.

“Each tree has its own Elfin family ruling it,” Ludwig explained, unprompted. “Unlike Skovslot, there is no Spire where the Elders gather, instead they are spread throughout the Enclave in their respective families. Their rules differ from tree to tree, and only a couple of the families value the appearance of their homes.”

The Elfin that lived in the tree we walked past were much like our Guide, but after some minutes we passed another tree, where the buildings attached to the sides were longer than the first’s, seemingly comprised of many floors, and where the Elfin were clad in outfits made only of roots and moss.

The third tree we reached was almost identical to the first, but the one we finally stopped in front of was draped exclusively in moss, with none of the hostile thorns or brambles adorning its builds nor its walkways that connected it to the other trees.

The Elfin that inhabited this tree all wore headdresses formed of brambles, which were attached to their heads by weaving their red hair in-between the thorns. It looked like an absolute mess to untangle. Their clothes were made of moss and roots, but they all had the same choker as our Guide.

“*Andasangare Carmine is residing in the topmost room, where he is overseen by our foremost Healers,*” said the Elfin.

“**Healers?**” Armen asked. “**Why?**”

“*He is dying from his injuries and they are easing his passing.*”