

## 170 – Promised Death

I couldn't help but feel *wrong*, as we walked into the bottom floor of the enormous Troll Spire and began ascending the internal ramp that spiralled upwards. My whole body felt as though it was just operating according to a puppet master's strings, while the people around me seemed similarly dispirited.

Our Guide had left us, as though trusting us to not violate the rule he had stated.

But there was no way we would leave this place with Carmine still alive.

*Did you know he was dying?* I asked the Dullahan.

*All humans are in the process of dying, some faster than others,* Saoirse replied frustratingly.

*You know what I mean.*

*I did not know he was dying imminently, no.*

We walked up the spiral until reaching a point where we had to go out through a hole in the bark wall of the tree. From there walkways shaped from roots and covered in red moss led to the structures above, while allowing a minimal view of the ground below and the other giant trees in the distance.

As we followed the walkway to the top of the tree, we passed by many of the buildings that were stuck to the side of it, and many curious Elfin watched us silently, with most of them looking at Saoirse. It was such a different atmosphere from Skovslot and I wondered why Elye's father had wanted her to travel here, but perhaps it was to teach her some lesson.

She didn't seem to be enjoying this place very much, despite having wanted to visit here for a long time. Whenever we crossed paths with other Elfin, she would look at them expectantly, but they would just ignore her presence, which clearly broke her heart.

***“Pain and lust intermingle well within the walls of this forest,”*** said the Succubus who was still clinging to Armen.

“Don't get any funny ideas,” Ludwig told her.

She made a kissing sound in his direction, but he ignored her.

**“Is it a good idea to bring a Demon before a Demonologist?”** asked Armen.

***“I'm not so easily swayed,”*** she replied. ***“Ludwig dearest and I have something of an accord.”***

The Incarnate sighed and waved his hand in a dismissive gesture, making the Succubus disappear.

“Sorry about that, Armen.”

**“Do not apologise. Though I wonder why she preferred my company?”**

“Succubi like the thrill of the hunt. If someone seems unbreakable, they will try their hardest to break them.”

“**I see,**” Armen replied, not skipping a beat.

“Focus,” Mortl said. “Even if Carmine is injured, you should not let your guard down.”

“Do you think he would attack us?” I asked her.

“Who can say.”

“*I will kill him,*” Elye promised.

I put a hand on her arm. “You don’t need to.”

“*It was my honoured promise to Lukas,*” she replied seriously.

“He wouldn’t want you to become outcast by your kind for something like revenge.”

“*These are not my kind. They are twisted and strange, and their tongues make foreign sounds.*”

Just then I realised that she was right. The Redmoss Elfin didn’t actually speak in the same language as the Elfin of Skovslot, although some terms like ‘Andasangare’ were the same.

“Why did your father send you here?”

“*He wanted me to get to know other Elfin and their lives. He wanted me to realise there is only one home for me.*”

I chewed my lip. “Are you going to return to Skovslot?”

“*No.*”

The answer was a relief, but I also felt bad. Elye never seemed much at ease, no matter where we were. I wondered if she would ever get used to being in cities, but hopefully her bonds with Emily and Renji, as well as me, would help her feel at home no matter where we ended up together.

The walkway snaked around the tree’s fluffy red-brown bark, before leading back into a tunnel that spiralled upwards again. Instead of leading out into yet another exterior path, the spiralling ramp led out into a bulbous building with internal ladders that we had to climb to reach higher.

The rooms we passed through were like common living areas, kitchens, and workshops. Elfin were seated around, talking in hushed voices, and our passing through their midst seemed accepted, though their eyes watched us intently.

In any other place, their living arrangements would’ve seemed weird, as even the Elfin of Skovslot had their separate buildings and homes, but it made sense when I considered that each tree consisted of just one family. These were all brothers, sisters, parents, uncles, grandparents, and so forth.

After moving through the bulbous building growing on the trees side, we once again had to move up around the core of the Troll Spire, following a spiralling ramp. At its exit it led out into a walkway, but this one quickly opened up into a vast floor formed of roots and covered with moss, and which had walls and a ceiling. Standing there, it was impossible to see just how far above ground we were, but I was willing to guess it was more than twenty stories.

In this open space were a lot more Elfin. Some were practicing with needle-swords that looked like giant thorns with a handle at the end, while others were partaking in a dance lesson or engaging in meditation. The area was like a half-ring around the tree and akin to the Adventurers’ Guild Hall in size, with ladders here-and-there leading to suspended spherical rooms attached to the ceiling that might be for sleeping.

Again, the Redmoss Elfin watched us silently. Their auras didn’t indicate anything except curiosity and they all had a strangely-identical flow to their auras, as though they were all synchronised. Also, it was just hitting me now, but they all had auras that were reddish in hue, representing Vanguard, Brawlers, Blademasters, and other physically-oriented Roles. The Skovslot Elfin had been far less uniform, and I wondered why.

We moved up a ramp and into an exterior tunnel that led to a building growing around the side of the tree and elevated higher than the large floor. Where the tunnel deposited us out into the building was like the lobby, and other short tunnels led to rooms that each had a privacy-curtain made of moss in front of them.

In the middle of this lobby were a trio of Elfin, who looked older than the rest we’d seen up until now. None of them wore the thorn choker or tangled headdresses, instead they had robes of Redmoss and red-glowing paint on their horns and the exposed skin of their arms, legs, faces, and necks.

“*You are here to see Andasangare Carmine,*” said one of them. It wasn’t a question, but rather a confirmation. I wondered how they’d known, as we hadn’t seen any Elfin run in advance to warn them.

The Elfin, whom I assumed was a Healer, began moving towards one of the curtained-off rooms and we followed after him. Saoirse went at the front of our group and moved past the curtain the moment the Healer pushed it aside.

When we followed her in, we were met with a fairly-large round chamber, within which was a bed of sorts, some furniture, simple decorations, and a single hole in the wall as a window. Seated on a moss-covered chair was a man in a dark vest, shirt, and neat dress pants.

The man looked up from the meal of dried and smoked meats he’d been consuming. He washed it down leisurely with a glass of some kind of pulpy crimson juice, then looked at us in turn with red eyes sunken into his face. His lips were slim, his teeth seemed bigger than normal, and the black hair on his head was swept back, missing bits here-and-there. Surprisingly, his entire body was gaunt and thin, making him outwardly a lot less intimidating than what I’d imagined. Age-wise, he was maybe forty, although he could easily be sixty.

What stood out to me the most was the black veins visible everywhere on his ashen-grey skin. There was a sheen of perspiration on his face as well, and from his rust-black aura I could tell he was in a lot of pain.

“The Immortal Mortl, the Succubus Incarnate, the Dullahan, the boy with the Music Box, an Undead Crusader, and a Skovslot Elfin. Truly an honour to have you all attend my bedside like this.”

Saoirse took a step forward, but then stopped as the man’s shadow lengthened and slid off his body, becoming its own *thing*. It was some kind of sentient darkness, as though carved from a starless night sky, though it had no features except two round holes where its eyes should be and a cutout of a vicious toothy grin. It exuded a pressure that made me certain it was not an elemental, but I wasn’t sure if it was a Demon or a Visitor.

“Oliver will be glad to hear that his poison is what killed you,” Ludwig commented, and I realised the black veins on Carmine’s body was from the Witch Hunter’s Possessed Weapon.

“**I could cure it,**” Armen stated.”

“Don’t bother,” replied the man. “My reasons for living are all exhausted and gone now.”

“Why did you do it?” Mortl asked him. Her voice was completely flat. “Why did you go to so much trouble and kill all those people?”

“You know why. Don’t pretend that you haven’t figured it out. The Gyldenrose Family are a blight upon Mondus and I wish to see them stripped of power.”

“You failed,” I said.

“Did I really?” he asked with a self-satisfied grin.

“Evergreen and Redmoss Enclave won’t become sites of calamity for your great ritual,” Mortl replied.

“It’s true that my original plan fails without Evergreen, but it will work for another purpose that is just as good. This Enclave is a den of pain and it has long been a scar of blood. In fact, it is the linchpin upon which the entire ritual is made possible. Have you heard the story of how the Redmoss

came to be? A True Dragon spilled its powerful Heartblood here once, forever tainting the land. There is power inherent in such a site.”

I gritted my teeth. I had no idea if he was right, but, in some way, I could understand the logic. Ludwig and Mortl didn’t seem sure either.

Carmine looked between us. “Perhaps you were not as clever as I thought, since you did not realise. But it doesn’t matter. My death will trigger the ritual, and Mondus will be forever altered, my bedside companion has made sure of that.”

I looked to the living shadow with its wide toothy grin. It was hardly moving, but I could feel that it was dangerous.

“You made a Suicide Pact with a Visitor?” Mortl said, not so much a question as it was a realisation.

“A dead man’s trigger...” Ludwig muttered in disbelief.

“Why? What is it?” I asked, unable to take my eyes off of it.

“An Envoy of the Keening,” Mortl answered.

“I do wish you would kill me and let it run rampant, it would be a great way to end my ‘reign of terror’. But if I meet my end in peace, it will spare this Enclave further bloodshed.”

I frowned, realising this was the same as Leopold’s messed up Envoy Soul-Pact.

*Saoirse, do you know its name?*

*Of course.*

*Give it to me. Let me banish it so that he can meet his promised death without taking anyone else with him.*

*In exchange for a life, it is yours to have. However, your banishment cannot compel it to leave.*

My frown deepened, but then a different idea entered my mind. I reached out a hand towards her back, touching her black armour ever so gently.

*What are you doing?*

*I am taking your power for myself.*

I activated Infuse Spirit and quickly picked through the overwhelming furnace of her soul for what I was sure was her Truesight. As soon as I’d grasped it, I let go of her and moved the power into my left eye.

The power took hold.

A glare like a thousand suns and the heat of a roaring flame licked my eye, making me clench my jaw against the pain.

For an instant.

Just the briefest of moments.

I saw *everything*.

Every name, every origin, every reason, every answer, of every thing, plant, and person within the room. The roots that made up the walls, the moss lain atop the bed, the meat on Carmine’s platter and the deer it had come from, the juiced fluorescent mushroom in his cup, his true name, age, and time of promised death counted in seconds.

I saw Mortl’s true name, and three-digit age, with a promised death counted in negative centuries.

Ludwig as well. His promised death was not so far away, but would still be enough for him to live to his fullest.

I saw Saoirse too... though there was nothing to glean except a knowledge of the incomprehensible power that’d given birth to her.

And I saw the Visitor Envoy.

It had no age nor promised death, but it had a name.

*Reverberating Scream of a Dying Star.*

Instinctively, I shut my left eye, just as blood began to leak out of my tear duct.

Mortl seemed to notice.

“Are you okay?” she asked. Ludwig and Carmine looked to me as well.

*That was foolish,* said Saoirse.

“**I agree,**” Armen replied in my thoughts as well. “**This is not an injury I can heal with ease.**”

*It had to be done,* I told them.

“I’m fine,” I said, then aimed my right hand at the Envoy.

A silver light emerged from my palm and struck the thing, warping its surface.

In my mind I spoke a brief command:

*Reverberating Scream of a Dying Star, be reforge by mine power into nothingness.*

The Visitor Envoy was swallowed into itself like an imploding star, but there came no following explosion. It just vanished entirely, its soul erased by my power.

For the first time since our arrival, Carmine blinked.

“How did you do that?”

“Your contingency is gone,” I told him, while my eyeball felt as though it was melting in its socket.

“I had no idea you could use it *that* way,” Ludwig said. He looked horrified.

*Me neither*, I wanted to tell him.

**YOUR RITUAL, ITS PURPOSE IS TO SHIFT THE REALM GATE IS IT NOT?** Saoirse asked, bringing the conversation back to Carmine’s ultimate scheme, which she seemed to have figured out. Or perhaps she had known all along. It was impossible to tell with her.

“Shift the Realm Gate?” Mortl asked. “...That makes a lot of sense actually.”

“You did all this, just to punish the Royal Family?” Ludwig wondered in disbelief.

Carmine seemed to still be wondering how I’d deleted his Soul-Pacted familiar from existence.

Meanwhile, I was having a hard time focusing on anything except the pain in my eye.

Seeing my struggle, Elye came over to me, rubbing my back gently for some reason. Armen began delivering his healing power as well, but it didn’t erase the pain, even though I could feel it healing me slowly.

Truesight was truly not a power meant for a mortal to wield. In the merest of instants that I’d used it, I’d destroyed my eye and nearly overloaded my brain with information. Fortunately, the human brain was good at adapting, and I had already lost my brief grasp on the mountain of knowledge I’d gleaned, though, eerily, I still remembered the date of Ludwig’s promised death.

“Don’t you wish to punish them as well, Ludwig!?” Carmine said, raising his voice, though not by much, as though he was incapable of yelling. “Instead of aiding us in this world, into which we all were dumped as if nothing more than disposable power, they sought to abuse us at every turn and confine our movements within their playgrounds!”

“They’re definitely scummy,” Ludwig said, “But you could just move to a different continent, if you didn’t want to deal with them.”

Carmine’s eyes darkened. “I was doing this for the good of all of us! Can you even fathom how many the Gyldenrose Family have disposed of, in order to cling to their fragile power!?! Do you even comprehend the weight of sin carried on their shoulders!?”

“Your ritual wouldn’t stop the suffering of Otherworlders,” Mortl told him. “Even if the Realm Gate shifts to the furthest continent, it will still drag people screaming and crying from their true worlds, and a new power will rise to exploit them.”

“People like you won’t allow that to happen a second time. I’ve already prepared a Librarian for Ascension into the Role of Anointer. You could take his power and raise yourself up to the same Demi-God status as the Gyldenroses and become the ultimate bulwark against their predations! All you need to do is obtain the Ritual of Ascension and Ascend him, then he will use his power for the good of all Otherworlders.”

Ludwig massaged the bridge of his nose. “I really thought that no one would have a worse set of ethics than Owl, but you’ve really taken the cake with this. Your argument for killing hundreds of Otherworlders is that you were doing it *on behalf* of Otherworlders!?! You’re out of your fucking mind, you absolute—”

“Ludwig,” Mortl said, stopping him from going into a full-on rampage of words.

“Of course you wouldn’t understand,” Carmine replied evenly, his voice turning phlegmier than before and beads of sweat rolling down his forehead. “Everyone I killed served a higher purpose. Their sacrifices are the fuel for the fire from which the new world order will be forged!”

Elye moved her hand away from me and walked towards the chair he was sitting in.

Before anyone really noticed her movements, she had closed the distance and jammed a long slender knife into Carmine’s chest.

She took a step back and yanked out the blade, spattering black blood on the floor.

I saw the look of her aura, as did Mortl and Ludwig.

She said some words I couldn’t hear.

“Stop!” I yelled, raising my black hand towards her, right as she spun the blade around and hammered it into her own heart.