

## 163 – The Deception

Saoirse, Armen, Potts, and Kally came over to look at the mask I’d turned the Demon into.

“How did you do that?” Kally asked. She hid it well, but her aura displayed shock, suspicion, and fear.

“Didn’t look like any Contain Spirit I’ve ever seen,” Potts chimed in, equally appalled.

“It’s a unique ability I have,” I revealed to them.

“What does it do?” the Sorceress asked, sceptically.

“It contains the Demon’s power of transformation, leashed to my command. What I have made is a Possessed Item, except it is formed of its very own body.”

“That sounds dangerous,” she rightly replied.

I nodded. “And that’s why you won’t tell anybody.”

Saoirse walked over, her body healed and her armour back in place miraculously. No one seemed to notice it though.

“Excuse me?” Kally asked, offended that I would order her around.

“You heard him,” said the Dullahan. Her voice carried far more danger and authority than mine ever could. And she knew why I had made the mask. “If not for Ryūta, you would have died. He has contained the Demon and provided the means for you to avoid the Executioner’s axe.”

She blinked in surprise, until Armen put into words what Saoirse was saying: **“You wish to use the Demon’s powers to mislead the Royal Family and avoid our group being blamed for the death of Prince Hother?”**

“Do you see any other way out of this mess?” I asked him.

Saoirse stooped to pick up the mask. Then, with a grin, she placed it over her face and it immediately snapped firmly to her skin, before spreading out like rapidly-dripping candlewax across her figure and turning her into a small boy. Her aura became a facsimile of Hother’s weak Native one, and I pulled out the whistle to test her scent, only to find that it was an identical match.

It was literally the perfect disguise, and the astounding power it promised was not lost on me.

“Amusing,” she said in Hother’s voice, his face moving along with the words.

“That’s…” Kally was speechless.

Potts clenched his jaw, before asking, “Does it contain other transformations within?”

“Countless,” Not-Hother replied. At the sound of his voice, the rest of our group came over, although the Spellfist looked like he wasn’t quite done throwing up yet.

“What the…” Renji muttered.

“*Ghoul!*!” Elye exclaimed, raising her bow so quickly that everyone was caught off-guard.

Armen quickly grabbed the arrow she’d nocked, before she could pierce Not-Hother through the forehead with it.

With a sound like rushing water and trickling sand, the reverse of the transformation followed, Saoirse’s human form reappearing as the mask peeled off her face.

Renji looked at me. “Did *you* make *that*?”

“I did. We’re going to use it to fool the Royal Family.”

“I won’t take part in that,” he immediately said, outraged that I would suggest something like that.

“You don’t have a choice,” I replied bluntly, eliciting an expression from him which I’d never seen directed at me before: righteous anger. “Like it or not, we are responsible for Hother’s death, and—”

“And we should own up to our mistake!” he interrupted.

“It’s the axe for the lot of us then,” Potts muttered quietly. “Ryūta is right, there is no other option.”

Emily was stunned, looking between us. I could tell by her aura that she didn’t know whether to back up Renji, who had helped mentor her and whom she was infatuated with; or me, who had found her in that village and put her on the path that reunited her with her brother.

Oliver spoke up for the first time then. He was nursing his right wrist and Armen immediately started tending to him with his healing powers. “To pull the rug over the Royals is a tough proposition. They all possess eyes that pierce falsehoods and encourage honesty.”

I was glad he wasn’t openly against it, as I had been convinced that he would be the hardest person to get on board with the plan. He could easily have just decided to frame us, and I wondered how much of his decision was based on wanting to protect his sister versus doing the right thing.

“That won’t be an issue,” Saoirse said. “The deception created by the mask is total.”

I nodded. “Neither the scent, aura, nor appearance can be detected.”

“**I could sense its false interior,**” Armen noted. “**Though it may be able to fool most inspections if the false interior is also human and not the core of a brainless Demon.**”

“The question then is: who will assume the boy’s position?” asked Oliver.

Everyone seemed horrified by the question and it was obvious why. Not only would they have to pretend to be someone else: someone whose family was quite literally the most dangerous and powerful people that existed in this world; but they would also be giving up their own life and identity to accomplish it. I didn't know exactly what Prince Hother's life had entailed in the past, but it was clear that he couldn't sneak out or go somewhere without tight security. Even his relinquishing to my Party had only been because we wouldn't leave the Sanctum Island and were considered competent enough to care for his life.

I looked across everyone's faces, reading their answers in their aura without them even needing to utter it, while they looked at the dark mask in Saoirse's hands. Even she, fascinated by humans as she were, would reject the task. It was looking increasingly like Renji would be the one to accept the onus, driven by his own sense of justice and responsibility for the loss of the boy.

But then Potts spoke up, “I'll do it. It was my fault that he was even placed into our care to begin with.”

“You didn't have a choice though,” I told him. “We couldn't have known that the Princess would pull the truth out of you.”

“It's fine,” he replied. “The Demon is no more. At last my mentor can find rest, knowing she was proven right and that her killer cannot harm another soul ever again.”

I wanted to tell him that the Demon was very much still alive, but it felt like an admission of my own failure. And besides, there was no way it could break from the bonds I had placed on it. Although...

**“Won't your misfortune break the mask?”** Armen rightly asked.

“It was formed of the Demon's soul. It will not break so easily,” Saoirse answered, knowledgeable about these things as she were, although her knowledge obviously confused Oliver and Kally, who knew nothing of the Dullahan's true nature.

I hoped she was right, although I considered that if Potts' misfortune could indeed break the Demon's soul, now that it had become a ‘thing’, it would only serve to harm the Demon and potentially destroy it for good, so long as the breaking didn't include the bonds which I had placed on it.

Saoirse extended the mask towards Potts.

“What shall we tell them about your disappearance?” Oliver asked, considering something I had missed.

Potts didn't look up from the mask, as he said, “Tell them that Samuel Potts was killed and eaten by the Demon, heroically sacrificing himself for the greater good of Evergreen.”

I frowned at his words, but before I could say anything, he took the proffered mask and lifted it to his face. With a gasp, it stuck to his skin.

“There is so much...” he muttered, his voice clear despite the dark liquid metal clinging to his face. “All these memories...”

Then it began to expand out over his body. Before it reached his belt-pouch, he reached in and brought out a crumbled and torn quest flier, handing it to me. I took it just as his arms and hands grew smaller.

“You should look into *that*,” he told me, as the last bit of his body was turned into that of the Prince.

Unfolding the flier, I saw that it was an Investigation Quest titled: ‘The Shadow over Serenity’. I immediately knew what it was about, thanks to Renji and Kally's prior conversation about the district and its dark unsolved mystery.

“I neglected my duty as an Adventurer in exchange for seeking my revenge,” he said regretfully, his voice now that of Hother. “Perhaps you can put this mystery to rest and give the victim's families the closure they deserve.”

His tone was sad, and it was strange hearing it in the young boy's voice. Part of me wondered if I would ever hear Potts' true voice ever again, though I made a secret promise that I wouldn't leave him to this fate.