

131 – Evergreen

Renji and Elye were sitting atop the carriage, while Ludwig, Emily, and I were staying on the inside. The Spellhand had found a corner to practice and Saoirse was kind enough to find an armour stand with black platemail similar to hers that she could practice with.

The Incarnate was snoring in one of the comfortable chairs, while I was sitting in a different one, watching the world outside, while looking through the loose pages I’d bought in Fortress Major. Emily had also given me the Caged Spell-Tome for safe-keeping, since she wasn’t comfortable carrying it around just yet. I could feel the energy that emanated from it, but she could actually see it, which I supposed was why she was wary.

There was quite a bit of overlap in entities described within the notes I’d bought, which was a shame, but it was fortunately still full of new information about apparitions listed in my tomes already, and I dutifully transcribed these over. Much of the additional information were extra clues about some entities or new exorcism methods. The most unique of these new techniques was to utilise a censer and fill it with Blessed wood chips, Gravebloom, or a type of incense I’d never read about being used before called Azalea. I was vaguely familiar with the flower, but had no idea it had special properties when dealing with entities.

Given the many entries in the loose pages of the old Exorcist’s notebook, it was clear he or she had been a fan of using censers, and there were three whole pages with tight script dedicated to explaining exactly why he favoured it. The main reason seemed to boil down to: it required the least hands-on approach, as the censer could be set down at a Haunting and would passively do its work to either fully exorcise the entity or at the very least weaken it to the point of making the exorcism trivial. It was a careful approach, but, looking back at my own exorcisms, I could understand the desire for such a thing.

As I flipped through the notes, I came upon a new type of Revenant & Elemental mix that I’d not heard about before. It was called ‘The Drowned’ or simply ‘Drowned’. It only appeared in areas with a coastline, and seemed to be caused by someone who drowned at sea and washed up on the shore or who were dragged out to sea by a riptide and drowned. Either way, the cause was, like many Revenants, the lack of a proper burial, although this cause extended beyond just their apparition type.

The description, though there were no drawings in any of the notes, was that they looked like a half-bloated pale-blue corpse with seaweed and barnacles growing from their bodies. They possessed

a minor elemental attribute in that they could control water, though they were unable to summon it out of nowhere. This meant that dealing with them was as simple as drawing them away from any source of water. Additionally, they were capable of inflicting a debilitating non-lethal sickness in any they touched, which, most prominently, had the effect of cutting off the energy that all people possessed and which in turn meant that any magic-wielder afflicted with this were unable to utilise their powers.

I knew immediately that I wanted it as a familiar, since affliction types were rare. Part of my mind was also focused on gathering familiars that could aid me for when I returned to Mossbloom Redoubt.

The fragment of Kumi’s soul was still stuck in my Singing Branch, but had fallen dormant, since it seemed being so far removed from its ‘heart’ made it too weak to fight against the staff’s own vague sentience.

I wonder if it’s possible to somehow reforge Kumi’s spirit and save her. Maybe I could return her to normal if I learn how to properly use this power?

You would deny me my justice? Saoirse asked in my head.

Is your reaping justice or simply your duty? I responded.

My mandate given to me by the Old Ones is beyond your comprehension. I carry out their will. That alone is justice, for their desire is what drives this world and countless others. Without their potent might, Mondus would be a barren rock in the vastness of the cosmos.

I blinked, surprised that she knew about outer space, though her way of phrasing it seemed to give some intelligence to what scientists of earth ascribed to random occurrence, such as the Big Bang. It was a terrifying idea I thought, but then, would it not require a reality-bending power to create magic and gates between realms?

What if she falls under the same contract as me? I finally asked.

Very well, if you can accomplish it, I will allow it.

That’s very lenient of you.

Armen, who had been like a statue this whole time, standing in the corner of the lounge room and staring out at the landscape zooming by, remarked in my mind, **“She does not believe you can accomplish such a thing. Frankly, nor do I. Exorcising a Lich is a monumental task few are capable of, or so it seems. Reversing their self-inflicted curse is orders of magnitude more challenging.”**

With a loud yawn and an exaggerated stretch, Ludwig suddenly woke up.

“We’re arriving shortly,” he then told me.

I looked at him in surprise, then glanced out the windows to see the thing that lay ahead of us down the Greenroad. It was still too far to pick out much detail, but it looked incredibly vast.

“**How did you know?**” asked Armen.

Ludwig jumped in surprise. “Fuckin’ hell, didn’t see ya there!”

“**My apologies,**” he replied, though I could hear the smile in his voice.

He took a deep breath to calm his nerves, then answered, “I’ve got a lil birdie that informed me.”

“Your Obsessive Stalker?” I asked, recalling the Watcher he used.

“Not quite. It’s a servant of my Succubus called the Red Haze. It’s a kind of Phantasm subservient to her, with a strange sort of hivemind. She always leaves bits of it around wherever we go, and it helps with keeping track of our location. Although, it has no eyes, ears, or mouth. Picture it like demonic mould.”

“Is it the same thing I saw in Fortress Major? The strange mist?”

“That’s right.”

“Is your Succubus the reason why you became an Incarnate?”

He grinned. “Do you know how to form a contract with a Succubus?”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Ludwig’s grin widened. “She’s the reason, yeah.”

“I would like to know how you form a contract with a Succubus,” Saoirse said, coming closer.

His grin faltered slightly. “Well, you know... they’re a Lust Demon and, eh... well.”

“**His spirit seems to have left him,**” Armen remarked dryly.

“I can’t go explaining this in front of a woman without seeming like a lecher!”

“Look!” Emily suddenly exclaimed, interrupting the awkward exchange.

We all looked to where she was pointing. The carriage was following a slaloming road that flowed down a hill with a slight incline. Through the windows on the right side of the carriage’s strange interior, we could see a massive city of white stone that spread from one end of the horizon to the other, as though there would never be a time of day when the sun didn’t hit its territory.

“No matter how many times I see it, it’s always striking, wouldn’t you say?”

“**Indeed,**” agreed Armen.

“I’ve seen grander,” Saoirse boasted.

I was speechless.

From its vantage in the sky far above our carriage, Karasumany lent me its vision. Seen from this high up, the visage was no less astounding. Maybe a kilometre before the capital the treeline simply ended, the forested land around it cut away to give it room to continue growing. Although there was a coherence in style from the white stones and spires that dotted the vast city, it was easy to distinguish areas or ‘districts’ from the rest.

As I watched it through my familiars eyes, Ludwig was telling Emily and I about the Lacksmey capital.

‘Founding’ was the district at the very centre from which the rest of it grew outward. The spires and structures there showed its prominence, indicating that it was the seat of power. A vast moat surrounded the giant island with enormous walls upon which sat a mix between a castle and cathedral that reached upwards towards the heavens, attaining a height that would be impossible under normal circumstances. But Evergreen was a city that defied such limitations it seemed.

Three districts surrounded Founding: Jewelsmith, Noblehome, and Academy.

The largest was Academy, which was essentially just one school that took up the entire district, where gifted magicians and aspiring talents learnt to master their powers. It was a mix of stone and wood, sporting the banners of various fraternities or houses on the outside.

Noblehome and Jewelsmith were roughly the same size, each about half the territory of Academy. The latter was, as its name suggested, a district for only the finest of crafters in the land, the majority of which focused on elaborate jewellery or magical weapons. Noblehome was a bit more nebulous, as it was not just a residential area for the high-and-mighty, but also seemed to have many unique stores and a few select Guilds residing there. Interestingly, the Adventurers’ Guild was not amongst the chosen few.

Beyond this inner sanctum of the Aristocracy were districts with a lot less intentional city-planning behind them. These were separated from the three inner districts by large walls again, essentially making the core of the capital inaccessible to all but the ‘chosen’. That being said, these were still leagues beyond Lundia, Ochre, and Helmstatter.

The reason was that the architecture made even the most normally-uninteresting areas into works of art, and, coupled with the gardens and parks and churches scattered around, as well as the raised bridges and giant arcs, not to mention the aqueducts that transported water around, the result was truly breathtaking. It seemed the work of millennia, but if history was to be believed, the city had only begun construction roughly four-hundred years back.

“Off near Main Gate you have the Great Marketplace district, and next to that is the Guild district, where we’re heading,” Ludwig said. My hearing was still my own, so while he continued to tell me about the city, I soared across it from the sky.

I was still so overwhelmed that I was at a loss for what to say, so I just kept looking. Perhaps one day I would find the visage ordinary, but it would not be anytime soon.