

## 168 – The Bramble Wall

From where Karasumany perched atop the roof of the dark carriage, I saw the world fly past through its eyes. We rolled off the side of a wide road that cut through a large forest, before shooting past trees that were immediately familiar to me: Troll Spires.

Beneath these furry giants were shrubbery and small trees that they seemed to shelter, as well as large fungal growths and carpets of dark-green moss here-and-there. Almost as soon as our rapid carriage began moving into the forest, a redness began to build on the horizon we were heading towards.

I knew that Ludwig, Elye, and the others were watching from within at the same time, as the Incarnate began to explain the story of the Redmoss Wilds:

“If you look at the forest from far above, there is a large red stain in the middle of it. It spans many kilometres in diameter and at its heart is the Enclave we are heading towards. According to their oral traditions, the reason behind the red moss that grows in abundance is that this is where a Greater True Dragon was slain.

“Their story does not make any mention of what slayed this mighty creature, but it describes at length how, in the aftermath of its death, its blood washed across the barren landscape and served as the basis for an entire ecosystem to flourish. Its enormous bones became the irregular mountains in the area; its flesh and organs became the sustenance for the animals that moved here from the south; and its impenetrable hide became the plants that then birthed the Elfin. I’m not quite sure how this last one makes sense, but I never asked too deeply about it.”

*“In Skovslot, our storytellers say that we were created from the fruits of a giant tree.”*

I shifted my shared vision with Karasumany, such that it only took up my right eye, and looked at Elye, who was sitting atop the backrest of the booth couch.

“There’s no telling if these myths are true or not,” Mortl commented, sitting in a booth of her own, with a small disassembled skeleton arrayed on the table in front of her. “Elfin have existed in Mondus for as long as humans, and there are ancient myths and murals in places like Azra that indicate a similar origin story for the Natives.”

“Nowadays, such things are considered treasonous to talk openly about,” Ludwig muttered.

“One thing I appreciate about the Elfin,” Saoirse said, joining in on the conversation, “Is that I have never had to hunt one down for attempting to violate the sanctity of death.”

Mortl paused her work on the skeleton, before saying, “Elfin are blessed with long lives and I believe they find their life’s meaning long before they reach a point where death might claim them. Humans are not as fortunate.”

“Humans are dissatisfied no matter what lot in life they are given,” Saoirse replied. “No matter the quality of their lives, they always want more. They want everything they don’t have and are willing to forsake all that they do have to obtain it.”

*“I want to see a True Dragon, Ryūta!”* Elye suddenly exclaimed.

**“There aren’t any more left in Hallem,”** Armen told her.

*“Where have they gone?”* she asked, a sad note in her voice.

**“The Royal Families made a sport of hunting them,”** Armen replied.

“The Harbingers were known for this, but the Gyldenroses have just inherited their ancient weapons and armour crafted from their prey,” the Necromancer noted.

“Harbingers?” Ludwig wondered.

**“The former Royal Family,”** Armen explained.

“What happened to them?” I asked.

Armen also seemed interested to know as well. He had first told me about the Harbinger Family when I’d visited Skovslot Enclave and the conversation had shifted to the talk of dragon-hunting.

“Nothing grand,” Mortl noted, sounding like she had intimate knowledge of the transition, which, given her long life, she probably did. “The Harbinger family were not a close-knit family, but rather a faction of the strongest Otherworlders that existed. New family members were chosen through opulent tournaments and insane trials, and then given the power that we now know as a second Advancement Ritual. But all that was before my time.”

**“Mine as well,”** Armen said. **“But I have heard the stories. Thousands would enter their trials, but only one or two would be chosen, with many dying in the process.”**

Mortl nodded. “They had closed off the influx of new family members and tightened up the knowledge about the origins of their powers around the time I came to this world. It seems that, as a result of this secrecy, a schism broke out, though it was at the time reported as a coup by a smaller faction of the family, the Gyldenroses.

“I don’t know how they managed it, but they steadily purged all their rivals within the family one-by-one, until the next matter of succession led to two potential candidates. A public duel to the death was then set up and it was believed that Crown Princess Freya Gyldenrose, also known as the Flowing Sword, would lose to the Crown Prince Hasthur Harbinger.

“It obviously didn’t turn out that way, and when Freya became the Queen of the Royal Family, she decided that they would henceforth be known as the Gyldenroses instead of Harbingers. There followed a decade of infighting, but afterwards, only those in her faction remained.”

“I recall Reaping a man who wore Harbinger as his second name,” Saoirse commented. “I have never had the pleasure of ending the life of a Gyldenrose Royal. They lead lives that are far too short and yet seem uninterested in artificially prolonging them through rituals.”

“I *had* noticed that,” Ludwig said. “The average lifespan of a Gyldenrose Royal is only forty. Many Otherworlders live into their sixties, so it always stood out to me.”

Mortl seemed as though she was about to go into another explanation, but then turned to look out of the window. I’d been watching through Karasumany’s eyes while listening, so I’d noticed as well.

A hundred metres ahead of us lay a wall within the forest. Each of the towering red-brown Troll Spires were like anchor points of an enormous barrier of brambles, thorns, and writhing serpent-like roots that were woven together. The wall spanned as far as I could see to the left and right of our carriage, and its top reached all the way below the canopies of the towering trees.

*Is that the Enclave? It looks so inhospitable and... evil.* It wasn’t anything like Skovslot, though the red moss that filled the area and climbed up the trees didn’t help its image in any way.

What’s more, there were tents not too far away from where we’d slowed to a stop. The colours and banners of those that patrolled around these tents were unmistakable.

“It looks like the Witch Hunters and King’s champions have set down roots here,” I told them all, once again allowing Karasu’s vision to take hold in both of my eyes.

“I guess that’s how Oliver was so sure that the Demonologist hadn’t left the Enclave in all this time,” Ludwig commented. “Anyway, we should disembark and walk the rest of the way. Their Gatekeeper is trained to attack anything bigger than a horse charging for the wall.”

“Gatekeeper?” I asked, just in time to see a creature similar to one of the Rotmaker’s forms crawl across the bramble wall from the right.

It had the long neck of a serpent, its head was eyeless but had a large mouth full of teeth like sharp rocks, its body had four arms or legs and a long tail, but, most unnervingly, it was five stories long and crafted from the same material as the enormous wall. The brambles and thorns that made up its body gave the illusion of scales, and when it stopped on the wall almost directly in front of us and aimed its head in our direction, I felt my bowels clench in fear.

*“It is so enormous! Father did not lie!”* Elye exclaimed excitedly. Before she could take off full-tilt towards the monstrous ‘Gatekeeper’, Armen put a hand on her shoulder.

“What’s the procedure for being allowed entry?” Mortl asked Ludwig. She had finished the skeleton she’d been toying with on the table in a hurry and it now resembled a little cat, which lounged atop her hood, its bone claws draping down onto the forehead of her skull face.

“Manifest all your summons!” Ludwig told us. “The Gatekeeper won’t attack Andasangare like us if it’s clear that’s what we are, but once we pass the wall, be ready for anything.”

I quickly got to work pulling Jules out of my front pocket, while letting my Drowned Caster and Meigetsu turn corporeal. I also had Karasumany alight on my shoulder with its true body, which it rarely did, perhaps because it was afraid of Elye trying to shoot it again.

**“I will slay this dragon for you, my Liege! My honour depends on it!”**

“Don’t you even dare,” I told him.

**“Of course, my Liege, I would not dream of it!”**

Armen made a sound of disapproval at seeing the Revenant, but neither Ludwig nor Mortl even blinked, which was what I’d figured to be honest. Mortl did glance at Jules though, no doubt because he could speak. I could’ve sworn I heard her chuckling as she turned away to cast a spell of her own.

A sickening black-stained green energy shone through the eyes of her skull and blossomed to life in her hands. The ground under us began to rumble in response to her magic, before zombies and skeletons of various forest creatures crawled up and out of the dirt. There were deer, large birds, small critters, and even a few humans and Elfins among the mix.

Ludwig brought his Finger Collector into corporeality, alongside a white lady with long black hair and overlong limbs that I figured was his Obsessive Stalker, and lastly the Succubus. She was a figure that could pass for a woman if not for the purple-red skin, two soft-looking horns sprouting from her forehead, and the tail that swished around. She wore clothes that I would consider rather modest for something that was a literal incarnation of Lust, and appeared holding a silver pipe to her lips, from which dripped the Red Haze Phantasm that was subservient to her.

“Is everyone re—?” Ludwig was about to ask as he turned around to face us.

“Well, that’s not something you see every day,” Mortl commented upon noticing Saoirse’s wardrobe change.

I frowned.

*What if the Witch Hunters or King’s men see you!?*

The Dullahan didn’t reply, but instead just strode ahead of our band of familiars, freaks, and Exorcists. Elye didn’t seem overly perturbed by her true appearance being revealed, but instead just bounded after the Dullahan excitedly, leaving the rest of us to catch up.

Saoirse had returned to the state that I’d originally seen her in: a two-and-a-half-metre tall night-black armour-clad giant, which had a small wisp of dark smoke billowing from its severed neck, as it held its red-haired head in a tucked hold of its left arm and a whip made of its own spine in its right hand.

The enormous Gatekeeper watched her approach with rapt attention, crawling down the bramble wall to stand on all fours in front of it like a protective guard dog. Even in this posture it towered over the Dullahan by several metres.

Saoirse’s voice rang out across the forest and I cringed with the knowledge that the nearest Witch Hunters would connect this back to me.

**I AM SEEKING THE MAN KNOWN AS CARMINE ANABELLO. NOTHING CAN STAND IN THE WAY OF MY WRATH. NOT EVEN ONE SUCH AS YOU.**

Amazingly, the Gatekeeper obeyed her dutifully, moving aside while using one of its clawed hands to tear an opening in the bramble wall. The rest of us were quick to catch up to her and move through the barrier. As I moved past the enormous guardian, I did my best to pretend it wasn’t there, although gooseflesh rippled across my skin.

The moment we all crossed the boundary into Redmoss Enclave, the Gatekeeper swiped its massive hand over the opening, making the roots and brambles slither around to close the rift.

There was no way back now.