

124 – Hidden in the Crowd

Many of the people at the foot of Fortress Major’s mountain were staring at us as we exited the carriage. Armen and Saoirse drew the most attention by far.

“**Should we head straight for the Fortress market?**” Armen asked.

I thought about it briefly, but then considered the possibility that there might be some of the Demonologist’s cronies hiding in the large crowd of Fortress Major guards, merchants, crafters, and clientele.

“How about we start our search here?” the Dullahan asked, following my line of thinking. She then held her hand out to me.

I looked at the black gauntlet uncomprehending for a moment, before pulling out the Scenting Whistle and giving it to her.

“Unleash,” she said, omitting the Possessed Item’s true name.

The vague non-shape appeared in front of us, before she told it. “Find those with the scent of a Demonologist on them.”

All around us, the plants, trees, and countless people, let off coloured ribbons, but it was impossible for my brain to sift through all the information and locate anyone that might’ve been in contact with Carmine Anabello. Armen stepped forward, as the echo of the Scenting Tongue began smelling the air and the many trails present.

“Those who are here on behalf of the Demonologist known as Carmine Anabello, step forward! You cannot hide!”

I wondered if many of the people here really knew that *this* was the reason for the chaos unfolding above. Even from down here, spells lit up the dark sky over the marketplace, and the sounds of blades striking metal, along with shouts of exertion and cries of pain, could be easily heard.

From the sea of auras, I saw that most people were surprised by Armen’s declaration. I also noticed several people from Altar, as well as two three-man groups of Witch Hunters. Suddenly, the memories of Kumi’s past came to the front of my mind and I felt my mood sour.

Emily stayed with me, while Saoirse and Armen followed the unleashed Scenting Whistle’s vague presence. The Crusader was doing a good job of intimidating all the people he passed.

“Exorcist Ryūta,” said a woman joined by two other Witch Hunters. I recognised her as one of Oliver Smile’s former team members.

“Merlisse?” I said, surprised. “I did not expect to see you here.”

She nodded. “I have been given a new team to lead and offered my services to Savant Ludwig for this operation.”

I watched as Armen and Saoirse moved through the crowd. She was watching them out of the corner of her eye as well. “What are your companions up to?”

“I have a way of detecting those who have been in contact with the Demonologist,” I told her, though I actually had no clue if it worked.

“Such a tool would have been useful here,” she said, an annoyed look on her face.

“I take it things went off the rails?”

“Indeed. We managed to apprehend six of the Demonologist’s people, but then we were ambushed by hired Assassins.”

“Assassins?”

She nodded gravely. “It seems that their guild was swayed to Anabello’s cause. We lost many people to their surprise attack. The two leaders of the Demonologist’s men are still engaged in a fight in the marketplace above, but we believe that the rest of them are in hiding. There may also be some Assassins laying low amongst this crowd.”

“How come everyone is out here?”

“The Lord of Fortress Major deemed it the safest choice, although many are upset at leaving their wares behind, even if only temporarily. For now, however, they are cooperating. The Lord, despite disagreeing with the Crown and its laws, is no fan of seditionists.”

“That’s good to know.”

I scanned the crowd again.

“Would you accompany me as I have a look at the people here?” I asked Merlisse.

“We have already been thorough in investigating everyone, but if you believe you can do better, by all means lead the way.”

She was, of course, wary of me as an Exorcist, but it seemed more that she found it rude of me to insinuate that I could outdo her and her team.

“Stay close,” I whispered to Emily. She had pulled her wand out and I could feel how she was carefully manipulating the air around us. It would do well as a precaution against ranged projectiles.

Meigetsu was orbiting me closely already, but it was still invisible to all but me and Emily, since the moon wasn’t currently out.

As I walked in the footsteps of Armen and Saoirse, I felt the need to have more familiars that were entirely beholden to my command, like the Moonlight Dancer and the Many that hovered in the sky above. Armen and Saoirse were strong, but they were capable of independent action and thus less like weapons that I wielded, and more like companions with their own agendas.

Hopefully, with this debacle concluded, Ludwig could aid me in acquiring more familiars. I always wondered what his comments on the Lich situation would be. A fragment of Kumi’s soul was still trapped in my Singing Branch, but it had seemingly fallen dormant, as it no longer writhed and bucked in my hands.

“Do you notice anything?” I asked Emily, as we walked through the crowd of people.

“No,” she said.

A second later, a scuffle from nearby broke out, as Armen lifted and then slammed a guy onto the ground. The Witch Hunters next to me immediately moved over to help restrain the man, who, from the look of him, had been pretending to be a merchant. But you could tell by his physique and the look in his eyes that he wasn’t the sort who dealt with people a lot.

Saoirse continued following the unleashed Scenting Whistle around, while I watched the scuffle unfold.

“Watch out!” someone suddenly yelled, and I turned just in time to see a man break out of the crowd near me.

In the torchlit darkness, it was hard to see much, so I relied on my Spirit Sight instead. The aura he possessed was grey and his clothes were nondescript, yet could conceal many weapons. His facial expression was bored and his eyes lacked any spark of life, but he moved with the skill of a trained killer.

His dagger went straight for my neck, before I could even act to defend myself, but it was quickly sideswept by Meigetsu. Undeterred, he followed up with a slash to my abdomen, and then a kick to my kneecap, but all his attacks were pushed aside.

Then a rush of air exploded out from Emily’s wand and the guy was sent airborne. She stumbled back a step, clearly having overdone it, but she hadn’t collapsed, which was important.

“Don’t overextend yourself,” I warned her, then swung my staff up to aim at the man who was gracefully falling back down to earth, having reoriented himself mid-air. “Also, stay close.”

I moved forward and, before he could land, reached out my Singing Branch and said, “Drain Spirit!”

Red-coloured light tainted with black splotches flowed like tendrils from the crystal at the end of the staff, making everyone nearby back away in horror. The tendrils immediately grasped onto the Assassin, who, in surprise, landed poorly on his legs, twisting his right ankle, but nonetheless surged straight for me again. This time there was a desperation in his eyes.

He made it within four metres of me before his body was reduced to a wrinkled corpse that face-planted the ground. The grey light of his aura seeped into my staff and I felt how it began to writhe, as though a coiled serpent coming to life and baying for blood.

Armen, come to me. There are Assassins in the crowd! I told the Crusader. I now noticed that there were grey auras all around me. Moments before, they had been hidden, as though by some ability, since I highly doubted I would’ve missed such an obvious sign.

As I looked around, more-and-more grey auras began appearing.

A shout filled the air, then a scream, and then all hell broke loose.