

Chapter 21: The Scent of Fear

“Every idiot out there thinks it would be great to directly control a big bad monster like the Axtail you saw Markus fight - but I’m sure you saw its controller. The man might as well have been a vegetable. Completely defenseless; it would be far too easy to take him out, rather than wasting time trying to tangle with the beast itself. Remember: if the controller is dead, the Risen is too. Morons trying to do the same without **[Unity]** are even worse; they only need to lose consciousness to become completely ineffective. No commands, no problem.”

For someone who so often played the role of a fool, Jack had a poor opinion of those he deemed unintelligent. Then again, people were almost always complicated. It should hardly be surprising to me.

“The direct combat applications of small Risen under **[Unity]** are reduced, but information is often far more important - especially when working in a group.”

I spoke up at that, agreeing with the sentiment. Besides, I mentioned, the focus on bigger Risen was almost comical. Hell, you could probably even kill someone like Katrina with enough bugs at hand.

That remark earned me a few strange looks, so I hastened to explain.

“Well, the way I understand it, enough bugs could work to just suffocate Katrina continuously. Even with the healing from Bloodbond, the connections in her brain probably wouldn’t be perfectly recreated. It might be enough to make her a living vegetable despite the constant healing.”

For some reason, the strange looks increased.

“What?” I asked, feeling defensive. “I know somebody who had that happen before.” The case of Haelan, a regenerator who suffered brain-death in a similar situation, had been quite famous during my childhood.

If anything, they looked at me even more worriedly after that explanation.

“Obviously don’t do that to anyone!” I felt the need to say. “I just thought it was a pertinent example.” I looked towards Katrina, whose conduit-warped arms were nervously rubbing against one another. She looked distinctly uncomfortable.

“You know I wouldn’t actually do that, right?”

Roy’s training was a bit more awkward for the remainder of the afternoon.



In return for their consideration of Roy as a trainee mercenary, I had agreed to tag along as an extra on a contract that Katrina’s Killers had received. Earlier that day, they had been approached by a liaison of the High Market. According to the mercenaries, there had been a spate of robberies within the past few months - all committed by unnaturally powerful men with gray-tinged skin. Dusters, based on what Roy had told me. Thus far, the Spectral Guard had been less than effective in catching them despite their constant efforts. Most of the time, they simply arrived too late. Other times, the criminals simply disappeared into thin air. There were suspicions that they were escaping via dimensional transfers, but little to actually prove it beyond their ability to get away reliably.

In order to protect their threatened wares, the Merchant's Association of the High Market had banded together to purchase the services of some of the more reputable mercenaries of Dihaim for a time. Surprisingly enough, Katrina's Killers was one of them. I was surprised, at least.

Apparently, the Guard was in a bit of a silent uproar over something that had happened the night before. Though there was little knowledge regarding the reason, many had noted the increased wariness exhibited by the day's patrols, especially within the Low District. Something was worrying them. Unfortunately, it seemed to be pulling some of the patrols away from the comparatively peaceful High and Temple Districts.

Roy shot me an accusing look at that, though I was almost certain the others didn't notice.

The job, however, would wait until the morrow. I recommended that Roy bunk with his newfound comrades for the time being. I was extremely leery of the idea of the youth returning to his father's home, given their history. Fortunately, everyone involved agreed with that decision.

Just as before, I was thwarted by something that millions before me had desperately wished for: I had far too much time on my hands, lacking the need to sleep. With that in mind, and remembering our prior conversations, I asked Roy for recommendations on where to patrol for the night. Though my previous night's patrol had been successful in a manner of speaking - and a dismal failure in others - I could not rely on simply stumbling into trouble every time I decided to step outside. Perhaps when Roy was more established, he could help direct me to crime using his Unified Risen. For now, though, I was stuck with good old-fashioned word of mouth.

Fortunately, word of mouth came through in this instance.

The tired youth, with his intense dislike of gray dust addicts, had kept a watchful eye and open ears in regards to their whereabouts. Whether his knowledge came from the streets or from his own Guard father, I didn't quite care.

I had a lead. Hopefully, it would bear fruit.

I left my pack and coin purse with the mercenaries, trusting that they would be safe in their hands. It certainly wouldn't be safe where I was going.

Still, that was exactly what I wanted.



The northwest corner of Dihaim was less maze than the southern reaches of the Low District. That, however, was not due to some sort of additional affluence; nor was it the result of expertly planned streets. The simple truth was that, should one become lost, there was an easy solution.

Just follow your nose.

You might be surprised at how well smell can be used as a navigation method. I was, as well. So much so, that when Roy told me that I might be able to find Dusters wandering around somewhere a few minutes west of the cluster of tanneries and just a few blocks north of the slaughterhouse, I had balked.

It was nighttime, and I knew that asking for directions would be a difficult task. Despite that, Roy assured me that I wouldn't lose my way. He was right. Truthfully, the greatest difficulty had been not filtering out the plethora of unwelcome scents that assaulted my nostrils.

While the southern portion of the Low District was a labyrinth of housing mixed with the bustling crowd of the Pits, the northern section was home to very few. Instead, it was the domain of undesirable businesses and dingy warehouses. Some made their home within its boundaries, but only the homeless. They slunk in the shadows, eyeing me as I walked with the sort of desperation that only prey forced to become a predator might have. Were I anyone else, I might have pulled back, pushed away by the eyes that stared at me from the darkness. Were I anyone else, I might have been frightened by the numerous Risen that scuttled and scurried in the night.

I was not. Consoled by my relative immortality, I was only saddened by the sights. In some ways, that was worse - for it made me question. What had I truly accomplished, in my short return to Rothel? What *could* I truly accomplish?

It was the persistent question that came with heroism: Have I really done enough? While the answer to that was obvious, it was its follow-up that was far more damning: Can I ever do enough?

The sights and smells of the northern section pierced me to my core. I was struck by the desolate conditions that the truly poor of Dihaim were subjected to. I could only hope that it was a temporary condition, the result of an unbearable influx of refugees fleeing from their homes near the Veil.

Regardless, it had all the appearances of a bomb ready to blow.

Humans, no matter their background, could only take so much before they lashed out.

"*You can save them, my love,*" I heard a voice whisper its encouragement. "*It will just take time - and we have all of the time in the world.*"

Easier said than done, I knew. Regardless, I whispered back my appreciation for the sentiment.

Though the instructions I had been given had been easier to follow than expected, that did not mean the night went entirely smoothly. It was only a general area, after all; I did not know exactly where to find the Dusters. Instead, I simply knew where I *could* have found them in the past, had I been there at the time. I was forced to wander the streets, soaking in the repulsive aroma of humanity's industry and filth melded into one. It was not a pleasant experience.

With that in mind, it might be less than surprising that I chose the tactics that I did.

What do you do when looking for a number of unscrupulous, unsavory characters? You most certainly don't skulk about, hoping to - against all odds - miraculously stumble upon the very people you're searching for. Not only does that sort of behavior make it extremely obvious to any outside observer that something is going on, but it also relies far too much on the ability to actually *identify* the group you are looking for with a passing glance.

After all, the descriptive characteristics of sickly and shady did not cross many off my list, here in the northwestern edges of the city. The squatting population championed both of those qualities to rather astounding degrees.

No, there was a better way. A positively *stupid* way, perhaps, but effective nonetheless. I just walked around, talking to everyone that I met. The way I saw it, if I kicked up enough fuss

asking around about gray dust, my prey would come to me. It was like the old saying: ask around incessantly enough, and they will come. That wasn't quite right, I think. Still, the spirit of the saying remained - as did its veracity.

For come, he finally did.

The moon had long reached its zenith; my patience had long since outrun it, tumbling from the peaks at which it had begun. The faces had begun to run together; the voices had done the same. Even so, I had managed to piece together a modicum of information despite my failures.

The people were afraid, that much was clear.

The fear was hidden behind eyes gone near-feral with hunger and despair, lost beneath the despondency and the hardships; yet, for all of that, it was no less. They were not frightened of me - not at first, at least. No, it was the mention of Dusters that they feared. They feared them with the meekness of chattel, beaten and hopeless. They feared them with the powerlessness of the defeated, unable to envision better days. They feared them to a degree that I found truly bewildering.

After all, this was not the world I had grown up in. These homeless were not *weak*, despite their weakness. They were not powerless, despite their submission. They were Marked, and thus they were strong. They were powerful. They should have hope.

Why, then, had it disappeared?

My question had not yet been answered by the time he finally arrived.

Despite that, it soon would be.



He was the image of nondescript, when he finally approached. Not in the normal sense of the word, for he was anything but - rather, he was nondescript in the same fashion that a wolf clad in sheep's clothing was nondescript.

He wore the clothes of the hopeless masses; he wore their sickness, too. Were it not for his eyes, I would have had difficulty pointing him out amongst a field of beggars. Perhaps it was for that very reason he had settled here. Here, amongst the destitute, a dust addict's sweat and filth merely became a passing thought. Here, they could silently reign.

He couldn't hide his eyes, though. They were focused; predatory in the way that only the violently unscrupulous could be. They were eyes that sized you up, stripped you down, took your measure.

He coughed as he approached, a sickly, hacking fit that made me concerned for his health. The man turned to the side, spitting a wad of gray onto the street, before bringing his attention back to me.

"What do you want?" he asked, belligerent and combative. From the way that he was hiding one hand within his pocket, I had a feeling that my answer might very well determine how many holes I left with.

Fortunately, that was no longer an overly concerning thought. Acting became far easier when fear no longer concealed the script.

I licked my lips, affecting the characteristics of one of the many men that I had spoken to that night. My clothes weren't exactly up to par - or, rather, down to it - but I hoped that would matter little. It was the mannerisms that I needed, not anything else.

I crawled upwards, past rings of cartilage. I crawled back down again, nestling myself within my new home. The shelter expanded, inflating with an inrush of air that whistled past my form.

I exhaled, the sound coming out mangled and worrisome around the Risen that now infested my lungs.

My mouth opened to reply.