

## 152 – Advancement I

Our carriage drawn by two white horses and built from grey-white wood bumbled through the streets towards the heart of Evergreen. It had arrived with quite a lot of pomp and circumstance at the door of Renji’s apartment building a couple of hours earlier, and now the six of us sat within, while two Paladin’s working directly under the King sat up front, one of them wielding the reins.

Through the windows in the large carriage, it was possible for me to see a bit of the streets that we passed. It was clear that our route had taken us back through Taverna and into Great Marketplace, such that we could drive along the city’s main thoroughfare that went in a line from Main Gate to the inner ‘island’ that surrounded the King’s castle in Founding district.

Going north from Great Market, we rolled through a district called Serenity and which featured one giant manicured forest through which were many paths, great and small, and three different cemeteries for those wealthy enough to afford a grave here.

“I wonder if they ever found the serial killer that dumped all his victim’s bodies in this place,” Renji remarked as he looked out.

“Still at large, from what I understand,” Kally said. “I believe there is a high-ranked Investigation quest for it at the Guild.”

I looked out at the trees, lawns, and hedges. It seemed so idyllic, and yet somehow it wasn’t that surprising to me that there was some lunatic that would use the place as their personal hunting grounds. Granted, my current pessimism about this world was heavily influenced by the recent exorcism I’d undertook, as well as Potts’ reveal to me about how many people went missing in the city every day.

“Maybe I should take a look at it,” I said.

“A lot of people would be able to sleep easier at night if you did,” Kally replied.

From the forest park of Serenity we passed into the Journeyman district, where crafters of countless varieties had their shops. It was, according to Renji, bordered by two different residential districts on either side. Passing through led us to a small district filled with statues and fountains, and which seemed like a different sort of park than the forested one of Serenity.

From there we hit Barracks, which was where the guards had their headquarters. It was quite a cheerful place despite that, and the way all the buildings looked like small forts was kind of quaint in

a way. The Peacekeepers also had their largest base here, though they seemed to have several locations throughout the city.

When we rolled through, many of the guards came out to holler and cheer. I couldn't tell if it was because they were excited to see an Otherworlder Advance, or due to the carriage we were travelling in.

**“In my time, there were parades through several districts when famous Otherworlders were ascended.”**

The way he talked about Role Specialisation as an Ascension was something I'd vaguely noticed several times before, but for some reason it stood out to me today. In my mind, Ascension implied something grander, like a mortal becoming a God. I supposed that in a way, Otherworlders were fairly close to minor demi-Gods when they advanced, and could, theoretically, be lifted even higher if an Anointer performed a second Ascension ritual. Of course, I only had Saoirse's word on this, but it was very believable.

“You keep saying ‘in my time’,” Kally pointed out and everyone besides her, Elye, and Armen drew in a breath simultaneously. “You don't look that old to me,” she added.

**“Looks can be deceiving,”** Armen replied vaguely. He wasn't one for vagueness, so the response surprised me.

“Look, Potts is waiting for us!” Renji exclaimed in the least natural way possible.

I looked through the window and spotted a very worn-down dark carriage drawn by a drooling horse that definitely didn't seem healthy. One of its two wheels wobbled unnervingly as the carriage began to move in an effort to follow us. Its coachman was draped in black obscuring clothes and seemed like the kind of shady person whom someone like Potts might've paid a fortune to rent for transport.

Despite its state, the dark carriage remained on the road close behind us, while Renji leaned out the door to inform the two Paladins that Potts was with our group.

When we came to the end of the Barracks district, a large river lay in front of us, circling an island of stone that was connected to the rest of Evergreen by just the one massive bridge that lay before us. The island was surrounded by a massive wall, and a gate that rivalled Main Gate awaited us at the other end of the bridge.

To the east, a large channel carved through the city and connected the ring-shaped river to the sea in the far distance. It seemed that most goods used within the secluded island were delivered by

boats, as there was a small heavily-guarded port on its eastern side, with large wooden cranes capable of lifting entire vessels out of the water.

As we came to the start of the bridge, our carriage slowed down and thirty guards flanked us on either side, following us like some fancy procession as we casually rolled to the island.

“This is quite a celebration!” Emily commented eagerly.

“They do this for all vessels crossing the bridge,” Kally told her.

“Oh... Why?”

I knew the answer but felt it was mean to tell her.

Kally didn’t seem to have such reservations, as she explained, “It is in case we turn out to be seditionists and people who wish to do the King and Aristocracy harm.”

Emily frowned at the answer, since it turned our impressive parade into something closer to a prisoner escort.

“Thirty wouldn’t be enough to take us all down,” Renji commented nonchalantly, as though he was entertaining the possibility.

“That’s why there are also mages and archers on the walls,” the Sorceress added.

“**I believe they also have several powerful Otherworlders on guard by the gate,**” Armen commented. He somehow refrained from saying his favourite line, as he’d no doubt realised how old it made him sound after Kally had pointed it out.

We eventually came to a stop and were told to disembark and prepare for an inspection.

I suppressed a frown, as I didn’t want them to see my full information and ask very uncomfortable questions about it. However, there was no way for me to avoid it without seeming suspicious, and I desperately wanted to be with my friend to witness his Advancement. There was also Potts’ theory that I wanted to find out the truth about, as it didn’t sit right with me to ignore something like that.

The six of us got out, while the thirty guards surrounded us in a half-moon shape. They allowed Potts and his cowled driver to join us, before a small door opened in the side of the larger impenetrable-looking wood-and-steel gate. Three Witch Hunters, two Vanguarders, a Spellhand, and a Librarian came out through the door and, with the two Paladins that’d driven our carriage, they numbered eight. Each of them wore the white-and-grey armour that the Peacekeeper’s also used, and which seemed emblematic of Evergreen.

*Maybe I’m just being paranoid, but this seems like the perfect excuse to get rid of two Exorcists, at the low cost of some Otherworlders that might not have much worth to the city...*

A black gauntlet landed on my shoulder and reassured me.

*It feels like I've been trained to be paranoid.*

*Paranoia is good. And if they seek to ambush us, they will find themselves short on manpower.*

I blinked, surprised by the second voice in my thoughts and unable to focus on the people walking towards us menacingly. I turned to look at the hand on my shoulder and saw that Potts' driver stood there, body clad in dark plate. Next to her was a very confused Potts.

It actually took me a second to realise it was Saoirse.

“I hear we're hunting a Demon,” she said loud enough that only Potts and I could hear.

“First we're watching Renji's Advancement.”

“It will be my first time seeing one of those.” She seemed excited about it, but I supposed there weren't many ‘firsts’ left for a being such as her.

Armen came over to where we stood. “**I thought you seemed familiar,**” he remarked.

*I didn't even notice...*

*You thought I was someone shady taking advantage of this misfortunate Exorcist.*

*Was I wrong?*

Saoirse smiled widely, making it very clear that the answer was ‘no’. She'd one-hundred-percent hoodwinked Potts into getting here in the most mysterious way possible.

“You know her?” he asked us.

“She's my Companion,” I told him.

He looked at me for a second, then to her, then back at me.

Before he could comment what I knew he was thinking, I added, “Not in *that* way.”

“He's still giving me the cold shoulder,” she joked, though Potts seemed to think she was serious based on his aura's fluctuations.

“Everyone! Come forward and prepare to show me your identification and weapons, as well as any magical tools you may be possessing.” The person who'd given the order was a tall muscular Witch Hunter with brown skin and pale-white eyes, as well as a mane of silky black hair.

“**They may be more cautious than usual,**” Armen guessed. “**Two Exorcists in one spot is possibly considered an ill omen by the Royalty and Aristocrats.**”

“Don't they keep two Spirit Callers on hand?”

“Those were Advanced up from Spellhands. Exorcists are in too short supply to use as guards, not to mention the F-tier Luck which is a big liability,” Potts said.

*Fascinating,* Saoirse said, as we walked towards the Otherworlders on the King's leash.

*What is?* I asked.

*That woman with the blue eyes.*

She was one of the three Witch Hunters, but stood behind the white-eyed man who was ostensibly in charge of the checkpoint security. Her aura was even and her eyes scanned us slowly, though I detected neither malice nor hostility from her. She was short next to the man she stood behind, but still a head taller than me and had brown shoulder-length hair. Compared to most Otherworlders she wasn't as ridiculously beautiful as many high-Attribute people were, but she wasn't ugly either. Just kind of neutral in every way imaginable.

*What's so fascinating about her? She seems fairly normal, although she looks bored.*

*That is not a human.*

...

*What? What do you mean?*

*It's something that thinks it's a human and acts like it is a human, but it isn't.*

*How can you tell?*

*All humans have true names. I can see these as I peer into your souls. It is how I mark you and bring Death. Yours is Ryūta Temaru. Armen's is Theodor Grey. Hers is ... I do not believe a human tongue could utter it.*

*So, she has a strange name? Maybe she's from some bizarre other world.*

*Would you like to hear the translation of her name in your tongue?*

The fact that Saoirse was paying this much attention to a person was definitely a warning sign.

As Kally finished showing off her wand, Spell-Tome, staff, and Guild Card, it was suddenly my turn next.

I walked towards the man, with my Card in hand, its contents warped by the Dullahan's magic, and my free hand rummaging into my belt bag for the first of my many magical tools.

*The translation would be: **The Faceless Shadow Which Collects The Masks Of People To Wear While It Pretends To Dance Amongst Them.***

My feet became leaden and slow, while the pounding of my heart seemed so loud I was sure that everyone around me could hear it.

We had found Potts' Demon.