

155 – Advancement IV

I could tell by Renji’s aura that he was nervous, but his body language and facial expression showed only confidence, as the two Paladins were pulling open the large dark wooden gate. He had naturally gotten to the front of our group and the rest of us stood behind him, waiting for him to enter first.

I heard a few muttered words and comments when the interior of the Ascension Chamber was revealed. It was less of a chamber and more like a tower, as the walls reached high up into the air and the ceiling was easily forty metres above the floor. The walls were smooth and glassy obsidian, with a faint reflection, and the floor was like hammered silver with large crimson grooves that traced some large sigil, which measured a radius of ten metres or more.

From the entrance, there were wooden steps on the left and right that led up to a raised viewing walkway that clung to the obsidian walls and allowed for two-hundred people, or perhaps even more, to observe the ritual taking place below.

Renji entered and stood at the very edge of the enormous sigil, while the rest of us filtered up the left-side steps and took up spots where we could observe him. Saoirse ran her gauntleted fingers along the obsidian walls as she caught up to us, and I could sense that she was quite impressed with the room.

The walls here serve to protect the sanctity of this chamber, and so does the door, but they are not integral for the ritual, she commented.

“When I was Ascended to Crusader, it took place outside in an amphitheatre, but the Ritual Sigil was the same,” Armen explained, his voice only for Saoirse and I to hear.

I leaned over the railing of the wooden walkway we were standing on and looked down. We were about five metres off the floor up here, and it made it easier to view the entire picture that the carvings formed.

Surprisingly, the centre of the Sigil was familiar.

It looks like the flower-thing that Ludwig taught me for discovering how to utilise my Infuse Spirit.

It’s called a Soul Compass, Saoirse explained.

It was definitely the same concept, but bigger and with more of the ‘petals’ of ellipses. Each petal represented a skill tied to your Role, as far as I understood it, and at Rank V, that meant twenty-six petals. When I’d done my meditation inside the one Ludwig had drawn, it’d had twenty-two.

There’d been a few Peacekeepers and Witch Hunters in the service of the King waiting for us as we entered. Next to the Peacekeepers, of which there were twelve, stood two diminutive figures in white obscuring cloaks. I couldn’t observe their auras, which was quite bizarre, but I had a good idea about their true identities.

One of the Witch Hunters, no doubt their leader, walked down the viewing walkway to talk to Renji. Although I couldn’t hear everything that was said, it was clear the man was taking notes about his Guild Card and the skills he had levelled, writing it all down in a leather book.

“Brawlers are rare to witness Advancements for, so I believe they are still trying to solve what determines the outcome of whichever Specialisation he acquires,” Kally explained for the benefit of us all. Out of all of us, she was the only person here to have done the Role Specialisation in this century.

“Did you have yours done here as well?” Emily asked.

“That’s right, but there were less guards back then.”

“Do you think they’re worried about his Advancement?” I wondered.

“Possibly.”

“They are here to protect those two,” Saoirse said, a gleeful grin on her face as she pointed to the two cloaked figures.

Steps echoed down the corridor that led to the chamber, and a Genius in the King’s employ, with two Priests trailing him, entered the room. Behind them came the two Paladins that’d led us here, closing the large gate with a *boom* that resounded through the vertical chamber.

The Genius shared some words with Renji, and also looked at his Guild Card. Given that he had an S-tier in Intelligence, he probably had perfect visual recall and would remember what it said, if the Witch Hunter somehow lost his notes.

Kally seemed confused by the arrival of the Genius, and said, “I thought Kasbar would be performing the Ritual today.”

“Does he normally do them?”

She nodded. “It’s kind of the thing he’s known for.”

The reveal that a potentially-seditious Genius was normally in charge of Role Advancements made me suddenly quite worried.

I wonder if he learnt the truth of Librarian’s full potential and maybe that’s why he wanted to use the Siren?

Armen let out a low grunt.

“*It begins!*” Elye then announced excitedly. She’d been clinging to Emily like an overly-attached puppy, but at least it was stopping her from doing laps of the room like I’d normally expect from her.

I looked back down below, where the Genius had stepped into a circle on the opposite side of the large Sigil and the two priests took up ones that were to his left and right, about forty-five degrees from the centre. Renji walked across the silver floor until he stood within the flower with twenty-six petals.

I looked at all the linework that surrounded the centre lotus, and it was almost like a series of random abstraction, but, if I squinted hard enough, then they sort of took on meaningful shapes. The Genius was within a circle that was directly connected to the surrounding linework, and the Priests’ placements were joined to his circle, rather than the Ritual, meaning they were likely supporting him somehow.

Do the Priests act as batteries for the Invoker? I wondered.

A ritual such as this is taxing. If not for the Priests, an abundance of special blood would have to serve as the Toll.

Will they be injured by this?

“It only drains them,” Armen replied in my mind. **“When I performed Ascension Rituals, it was very taxing, but I could handle them by myself. Archpriests should be capable of doing it alone as well, but a Genius lacks the required Energy for it. I believe that doing it this way also makes it so the Invoker doesn’t need to know the entire Ritual. It must be a precaution implemented by the Crown.”**

The King must be very paranoid to require such a thing, but surely it wouldn’t be that hard for the Genius to figure out?

“Normally, you would be right, but Geniuses are generally kept separate from the Church and its members, and if you noticed when they entered, they were not talking to each other or seemingly very friendly.”

Royalty are always so terrified of their own people, Saoirse commented, a hint of amusement in her tone.

Below, the two Priests pulled out identical staves made of some kind of white wood and adorned with a golden half-sphere at the top, within which was a round crystal. The Genius had a staff of his own, but it was a simple black rod which was shaped like a hook at the top and held a little white bell that might’ve been made of bone.

With a hollow tap of his staff into the edge of the circle he stood within, the air began to thrum and the wood under our feet started vibrating. Then the Genius began something like a singsong verse that was, surprisingly, completely incomprehensible to me. The two Priests joined in, and their verses were garbled nonsense as well. It sounded like an opera performed backwards and at constantly-varying speeds and pitches.

I was about to ask Armen what was going on, but then I noticed that each of the circles that the Invoker and his Supports stood within had some addition to it that looked like an alternate and stretched-out version of the Inverted Ear Sigil. I’d never experienced its effect before, but it was quite fascinating.

Within the centre of the Ascension Sigil, Renji was standing stock-still with his eyes closed. Next to me I heard Potts let out a gasp, and I couldn’t fault him for it, because, it was as if the Brawler’s aura had come to life.

Like a bubble surrounding Renji, his auburn aura was coating each of the petals of the flower he stood within, with some of the petals filled entirely and some only partly. It took me a moment to realise, but the degree to which a petal was full represented its Rank. Thirteen, i.e. exactly half, were full. I had no idea what skills each of them represented, but I knew that Renji had deliberately ranked up the ones he believed would give him an Advancement that wielded magic.

Then, as the verses of the Priests died down, the Genius’ voice reached a crescendo. Even though the words were garbled and in reverse, it was quite a breathtaking melody. The auras of the two Priests were fluctuating rapidly, while it seemed as if the Genius’ own was swelling. As the final word left his lips, his bloated aura rapidly deflated, but this in turn led to the full activation of the Ritual.

The linework around Renji’s flower petals lit up with a rainbow of colours, each abstract shape containing its own. From the sounds of my friends nearby, it was clear that these coloured lines were visible to the human eye, although I knew they couldn’t see how Renji’s aura was shaped, even though it was the most fascinating part to me.

His aura lifted off the petals and coiled up around him like a barrier, before the linework around him seemed to grow their own blob-like auras that began assailing his auburn one. Each of the abstract shapes jabbed his barrier with their light, staining it slightly as a result, but there was no rhyme-or-reason behind the order in which they did it, as some hit twice, and some only once or not at all.

The whole thing felt like it took forever, but it was really no more than a minute before it concluded.

As the light of the abstract shapes around the central flower died down, Renji’s own retracted back into him, no longer just auburn, but instead filled with streaks of varying shades of blue.

The Genius walked out of his circle, his steps slightly wobbling, with the Priests leaving their own a moment later and walking off to stand next to the Paladins.

Renji opened his eyes when he realised the Ritual was completed, and the lead Witch Hunter walked back down the walkway to talk to him. After inspecting his Guild Card, he proclaimed to the room: “Spellfist!”