

## 161 – Faceless III

All nine of us stood outside of the Lady of Hope’s church. The dark night sky above was dotted with white specks, but the moon had yet to rise and start its journey across the firmament. The church was honestly more akin to a small chapel and, from the sight of it, it was ill-used, perhaps due to the large cathedral in Noblehome not that far to the northwest. My best guess was that it was a remnant of an older time, with sentimentality and history being the only two reasons why it was allowed to remain.

A few grave-tenders and gardeners seemed to visit regularly, as the hedges and trees were pruned, the grass was kempt, and not a withered flower was in sight. Nevertheless, the chapel was dusty and old, requiring a proper renovation to become pristine and worthy of the Church’s image of purity.

The graveyard was fairly large, almost like a little park, and the hedges that surrounded it were sufficient to keep us hidden from the buildings beyond. In this part of Jewelsmith there were mostly residential homes, which possibly belonged to the shop owners, their apprentices, and their families.

This was where the Locating Compass had shown us we’d find Hother, and all of us were on high alert, as the fact that this Demon was capable of killing with ease and alacrity put everyone on edge. Except for Saoirse and Elye, the latter seeming incapable of fear, while the other was fear incarnate I supposed. Even brave Armen’s aura was spiky with nervousness. I couldn’t tell if it was for his own sake or that of our Party, but I guessed it was a mix of both, since, despite becoming a True Undead, he was not unkillable, but rather a tireless facsimile of someone living.

Part of me had wanted to separate our group, such that only Renji, Oliver, Saoirse, Armen, and I went inside, but I didn’t feel confident leaving the two spellcasters, Elye, and Potts out here, since we had no idea where the Demon was at, and it clearly excelled at ambush tactics.

“All of us go in together,” I said. “Armen and Oliver will be at the front, while Saoirse and Renji will stay with everyone else.”

From the expression that briefly crossed Renji’s face, I could tell that he wanted to be part of the vanguard, but his new Role was untested, and it didn’t do to leave our ranged fighters unguarded against a potential attack. My best guess was that the Capgras Demon was akin to the Mimic Knight, i.e. a formidable foe with weapons formed of its own body. The way it had killed the Witch Hunters with a single strike that left a perfect hole seemed to indicate as much, as I knew of no weapon that matched its shape. I doubted it had ranged attacks, but it was impossible to rule out.

My familiars were ready: Jules was next to me, standing to his full height and the tin weapons in his wooden hands. The putrid washed-up corpse visage of Nami-no-Musuko was to my left, though remained incorporeal for the sake of my fellows. Meigetsu orbited around me and would hopefully protect me even from the weapons of a Demon, though I wasn't keen to test it.

I looked across my large Demon-hunting Party, scanning their auras and gear for any potential weak points: Renji was wearing his powerful punch gauntlets and his armour, all of which he'd brought for the show fight that never happened; Kally had a Wand and a Spell-Tome in each hand; Potts held a Staff and a Focus, while a look of terrified determination covered his face; Saoirse was leaning her greatsword against her shoulder like it weighed nothing; Emily was holding Elye's hand and the Quicksilver Brush wand, while the Elfin balanced an arrow on the palm of her free hand; Oliver was inspecting his longsword, which was the same possessed weapon he'd used in Helmstatter; and lastly, Armen was holding a mace and a shield, after Saoirse had transformed the black sword into his weapon of choice.

I gripped the handle of my Singing Branch tightly and I felt its spark of sentience respond to me.

*I told you to get rid of the Lich's soul fragment, Saoirse said.*

Of course I knew it was the right thing to do, as I could feel how the other souls I'd drained had latched onto that fragment and made it their core. It was a blossoming sentience, a fragment of a soul that'd cheated the Reaper, and it was corrupting my weapon in the same way that draining a Demon or haunting spirit no doubt would. And yet, despite that, I couldn't relinquish it. Not until I faced Kumi again.

*Sentimental fool, Saoirse said, although there was a playfulness to her words, as they echoed in my brainpan. To her, my folly was endearing, like the stupidity of a lesser species perhaps.*

Suddenly Oliver began to speak and I noticed how Potts cringed at the words that were uttered.

*“Hunter of Cursed Foe,”*

*“Watchful Eye in the Dark,”*

*“I spark the flame,”*

*“Venator Maledictus.”*

Oliver's aura had already been fairly tempered, but upon the completion of his little oath, it flattened out and became unwaveringly-solid. I wondered if Potts had his own trauma about the Witch Hunters and their Order, based on his response.

*It's a shame that Ludwig didn't join us in time. As an Incarnate, he might have a lot more ways to handle this Demon.*

“**Put aside your regrets and focus on the matter at hand,**” Armen said in my mind.

I took a deep breath and did my best to push aside all the thoughts that filled my head.

“Let’s go,” I said, and Armen and Oliver moved towards the door immediately. The rest of us fell in behind them, with Saoirse and Renji at the back. I was surprised that the Dullahan hadn’t rushed off somewhere else, but I supposed she was playing pretend at the moment, even though half the group knew she wasn’t really a Blademaster.

The once-white stone blocks of the chapel were stained grey by weather and time. Its door was a dark wooden thing with fanciful carvings, which looked like it was held together with faith alone, since long pieces had fallen off and the shapes adorning it were impossible to discern.

Armen pressed down on the metal handle and pushed it open for Oliver, with squeaks from the hinges echoing across the graveyard and the chapel interior.

As soon as Oliver was inside, Armen followed, then Jules and I, and everyone else filtered in afterwards. We entered into a small antechamber that we quickly passed through to reach the nave, wherein all the pews were ripped off the floor and pushed against the walls on either side. A window in the back showed the star-specked sky.

*Kōtama, illuminate this room,* I asked of my Gravelight and it blossomed to life on my left hand, before expanding outward and banishing all shadows.

In the centre of the floor, within a dried-out pool of blood, lay a motionless dark shape.

I gritted my teeth when I saw it, while everyone around me took up defensive positions, watching both the entrance hall and the nave. I caught Saoirse’s expression briefly, and she was smiling in that sinister way of hers. It raised the hairs on my neck.

A faint aura surrounded the body on the floor, but I pulled out the Scenting Whistle to compare, and when I blew a note, I saw the scent of the Demon in a few different spots, while the rest of the trails belonged to the same source and led to that body.

It was, unmistakably, Hother.

“**He’s still alive,**” said Armen and began moving towards the body.

Oliver moved with him, scanning every part of the interior for threats. But there was nothing. The Demon wasn’t here.

Saoirse lowered her sword from her shoulder, as though preparing to use it, and her smile widened into a grin.

*What’s wrong?* I asked her.

Armen was standing over Hother’s body, a glow suffusing his hands as he prepared to administer healing.

Renji stepped forward, his posture one prepared for fighting. Kally also changed her stance and opened her Spell-Tome.

I looked between them, as some preternatural sense was alerting them to danger, and then swivelled my head back to what they were staring directly at: Hother.

Armen paused, just a few centimetres from applying his healing touch.

“**Something is wrong,**” he noted. “**This boy does not have a—**”

With a colossal *thud*, Armen was sent flying into the wall, his impact raising a cloud of dust and sending wooden shards of smashed church pews everywhere.

Oliver was already charging for the body, the red curling script of his longsword glowing ominously.

A dark appendage was slowly retracting itself back into Hother, while he began to push himself up off the dried blood pool on the floor.

Next to me, Kally began to utter clipped verses and I felt the air become laden with humidity, before three spheres of water collected themselves in front of her.

Emily was lifting her own wand, but seemed unsure of what to do, and Elye was knocking an arrow to her bow.

Potts just stood there, staring at the boy.

At the Demon.

The Demon that had turned into the Prince.

I was staring at the boy just like him.

We were too late.