

129 – Greenroad

Saoirse had picked up a trick from Ludwig’s special tent, such that when all seven of us got into the carriage, it was quite vast on the interior.

Each of us, even Armen, made some sound or exclamation or remark about what we saw, for it was truly astounding.

Though it was as before on the exterior of the carriage, the interior was like a cabin in the woods, built from the same black wood as the rest of the vehicle. There were three bedrooms, a kitchen, a lounge & dining room, and a little workshop. The windows of the ‘hut’ showed the outside as usual, which was quite bizarre, as the perspective was warped such that the much larger interior showed what felt like an adequate view of the outside, even though I knew that wasn’t possible.

“Only thing missing is a garden,” Ludwig joked, but I could feel that his comment wouldn’t go unheard, as part of Saoirse’s emotions spilled over into mine. It was clear that she liked to impress us with her magic.

“And a bathroom,” Renji added, though he didn’t seem to be joking.

“I don’t think running water would work for something like this,” I replied.

“Yeah, bad idea,” Ludwig remarked. “I tried to do something like that once and it always results in the interior space being filled with water.”

Isn’t this a bit too grand? I asked Saoirse.

You should have seen the Second Asran Emperor’s personal carriage, it was a palace onto itself. Of course, all his magics and tricks could not keep him from me.

“How were you able to afford something like this?” Ludwig asked Saoirse.

“I once travelled Asra and lent my aid to one of its Emperors. This was my reward.”

“Emperor? In Asra? I thought the last one died four centuries ago.”

I swallowed hard at Saoirse’s lie unravelling. Clearly she didn’t know how to lie convincingly, and Ludwig had travelled to Asra several times in the past, so she also didn’t know her audience.

“Apologies, I misspoke,” she said without skipping a beat. “Emperor is the term used in my world. I often still confuse it with terms like King and Ruler.”

“It happens,” he replied leniently. “Still, it must’ve been quite some person you helped. I’d heard tell of the Asran Emperors of the past possessing such impressive dimensional pockets, but for them to give it away to an Otherworlder.”

He paused for a moment.

“Wait... did you help the King of Mourn with the rebellion eight years ago?”

Saoirse raised a finger to her lips.

Ludwig grinned in response.

See. This is how you lie, she gloated in my thoughts.

I sighed. She seemed to enjoy getting into trouble.

While all of us were getting comfortable in the vast dimensional space of Saoirse’s black carriage, we were moving down the road towards Evergreen at breakneck speed. The Incarnate either hadn’t noticed or didn’t care, though I felt like he’d sniff out the strangeness going on sooner-or-later, similar to how Renji had figured out the Dullahan’s true nature.

I sat by one of the large windows in the wall, atop a cushioned lounge chair. I watched as dawn rolled across the world that passed by, and noticed how the terrain was evening out and the forests were becoming greener as we moved northwest to our destination. It made sense that there would be few cities built in the hilly and mountainous terrain around the parts where Altar and Fortress Major lay, and as such the biggest and most important of Lacksmey’s cities would be situated in a place where it could grow as wide as it needed, but also be central enough to cast its influence across the nation.

“You know,” Ludwig said, startling me with his sudden appearance, “this is called the Greenroad.”

He sat down next to me and watched the world fly by. His black aura offered no hint about his thoughts, as it was schooled into submission by no doubt decades of training.

“It just goes on like this, with the greenery growing ever greener the further you go. Hence the name of the city built where the greenest part of Lacksmey lays.”

“The names of this nation are quite straightforward,” I replied.

“Wherever humans go, the tendency to name things as we see them is a common trend. Only those things worthy of worship or fear are given special names. Like Gods and monsters.”

“I’ve been thinking about something,” I said, changing the subject.

He nodded patiently.

By the kitchen, Emily and Renji were practicing meditation, while Elye was bothering Armen and Saoirse who were playing some kind of boardgame.

“You said that there were three of my abilities that you had never seen before, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Is it bad?”

“Not necessarily,” he said with a grin.

“I haven’t seen a lot of other Exorcists’ abilities, so it’s possible that yours aren’t unique, but I have read a lot of texts from ages past with no mention of them in it. Of course, Exorcists are a rare breed, and rarer still are the ones who make it to their Role Specialisation like your friend. I can’t say if you’re on track towards an Advanced Role that hasn’t been seen before or if your skills are just outliers that mean nothing.

“What I can say, however, is that your ranked-up abilities, disregarding the unique ones, seem nearly identical to the ones I ranked up, and I didn’t get the same abilities as you. So there’s definitely something more to the unlocked abilities than just pure happenstance. My guess is that your ability to attract sentient familiars plays a role in it.”

“You think I might get a unique Specialisation?” I asked, confused. I hadn’t even known it was a possibility.

“Perhaps. Or maybe you’ll end up as a Spirit Caller. Though I feel like Demonologist and Incarnate aren’t off the table either.”

“I used the ‘Reforge Spirit’ once,” I admitted to him.

“How did it go?”

“It was like ‘Contain Spirit’, except it confined the entity to a vessel created from its own body.”

“Strange, but sounds useful. There is such a thing as soul-vessel mismatch that gives all Possessed Items a certain shelf-life before they kind of begin to break.”

He laughed as he saw my expression. I was immediately thinking of the Music Box and what might happen if it started to deteriorate.

“It takes decades before it happens,” he said. “But it’s an important consideration for anything you want to future proof. It’s why all the Chaplains of the Necromancy Guilds are shaped like skeletons, it’s their most natural form. Granted, that’s according to *them*, and they might be lying. Can never trust a Demon to tell the truth.”

“And you think ‘Reforge Spirit’ might prevent this mismatch issue?”

“Could be likely,” he said. “After all, our bodies are made to perfectly encapsulate our spirits, and the same is true for any corporeal entities you come across. Though who can say what would happen if you used it on an incorporeal spirit. Perhaps whatever you made would stay incorporeal?”

I nodded. It was definitely something I wanted to experiment with when we came to Evergreen.

“What about ‘Unleash’? I saw you have it ranked up.”

“It sort of unlocks the full potential of a Contained Spirit. The effects vary a lot based on the item though. I used it on Armen when he was an Armour-Bound and it made his body fill up with golden energy. But it’s very draining.”

“I see. That does sound useful though. And ‘Infuse Spirit’?”

“No idea,” I replied.

“Hm, I think I know a way that you can figure out its effect,” he said.

Ludwig was drawing out a kind of ritualistic flower around where I was seated in a meditative pose. Each of the rings were elliptical and in a way looked like petals of a lotus, though if I looked at all the linework together, it made my head hurt.

He had lit up his Gravebloom cigarette as he began, but Saoirse had quickly taken it from him and discarded it. Even though she wasn’t a Demon, it seemed that she found the smell offensive, which I could foresee creating issues for future exorcisms I’d undertake.

Instead of using a Blood Chalk, which might ruin the floor of the dimensional space, he used a dry and dusty white chalk. It was impressive how his metallic right arm was able to draw the lines with such pinpoint accuracy, and I wondered how much was muscle-memory and how much were thanks to his special limb.

“Alright, that oughta do it.”

“Do what?” I asked. “You just told me to sit like this...”

“Ah, right. My bad on that. I want you to meditate as you usually do, but slowly feed your soul into the linework, while focusing on the shape of your own soul.”

“And that’s meant to help me understand how Infuse Spirit works?”

“...Maybe.”

“You seem uncertain.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve only read about it before. But in the past it was an often-used exercise to discovering what various skills did or how to unlock them. It’s how Hymnal Magic was discovered, supposedly.”

“What do I do if I suddenly learn how to use it? It’s illegal to know, right?”

“Don’t worry about that, you won’t gain knowledge from this kind of meditative ritual, though you may attain some idea of how it functions. Just don’t go exploring the subject afterwards, trust me on that. Also, take all of this with a heavy dosage of sodium, because I’ve never tried it myself and I could in fact be full of shit here.”

I shrugged. “I’ll give it a try.”

For the next hour or so, I sat within the neatly-drawn ellipses that formed a flower of sorts, deeply immersed in a meditative state, while carefully extending my soul out to probe the chalk lines. Every time I probed the linework around me, there was a ping in response, or maybe an echo. At first I didn’t know how to interpret them, but as I continued probing the same spot, I realised it was returning a sensation similar to the one when I formed a Pact of the Familiar.

When I tested a different spot on the line-flower, it was like the feeling of Drain Spirit. Directly behind me returned a sense of my Soul Barrier. Directly in front was like when I fired off a Repulse. And as I continued to vary the spots I touched with my extended soul, I slowly mapped out my abilities, until I got to a point on the flower, which lay in front and slightly to the right, where the echo that returned was unknown to me.

The feeling was like taking in the spirit of something, as with Contain Spirit, and moving it somewhere else. But I could sense that it wasn’t the entire spirit that was moved, only a fragment or a facsimile. As I continued to probe the spot, I grew more-and-more accustomed to the sensation, until I eventually opened my eyes and said, “I think I know what it does now.”

“Then let’s give it a try,” Ludwig encouraged.