

106 – ...Cannot Hide

Saoirse’s black steed thundered down the road through the Whispering Wilds, startling some of the animals when it sped past. As we rode after the red ribbon trail, her greatsword hung from her right black gauntlet, while her left gripped the reins. Anyone seeing her on the road would think she was a demonic executioner come to collect scalps.

Meanwhile, I was holding onto the front bump of the saddle for dear life, but the back of the steed did not buck as wildly as with the mares, as though the shock of its hooves impacting the road was suppressed somehow. My guess was that it was due to the not-quite-real nature of the mount.

“Slow it down a little,” I told her. “My friends are falling behind.”

“They will catch up,” she replied, refusing to budge.

Karasumany, keep a clone on each of the horses, just in case they fall too far behind.

CAW!

“There was something I wanted to ask about,” I started.

“Your Singing Branch and how to feed it,” she replied, reading my thoughts.

“That’s right.”

“It is a type of plant that feeds on souls. You are feeding it every time you use it, but at such a rate it will take many years to evolve. It craves a full meal.”

“...You’re saying I should let it absorb the souls of living beings?”

“You already possess an ability for just such a thing. If you were to utilise your staff as the medium, it would suffice. Had you not possessed such a convenient ability, you would have to bathe the staff in blood.”

“Are you referring to my Drain Spirit?”

“Of course.”

“Would it matter what sort of souls I fed it?”

“I once heard a Glutton Demon remark, ‘*You become what you eat*’. That is to say: yes, it matters. After all, you are nurturing its growth.”

“You said it can evolve?”

“It is perhaps not the correct term, but yes, something of that nature.”

“What does it entail? Will it come to life?” I wondered, somewhat horrified.

“It is already alive. But it would manifest a sentience perhaps, though again it would depend on what souls it was fed.”

“What if I feed it the soul of a Demon?”

“You might end up with a vindictive and corrupted artefact. It would perhaps not be very conducive to producing a useful tool.”

We were moving up the slope out of the valley wherein Sacramento and the dark forest lay, the trail thus far seeming to stick to the road that’d brought us here yesterday.

“What would you recommend?”

“Your kind would believe asking someone like me for advice is tantamount to heresy,” she joked.

“Bit late to hold back when I’m literally bound to you until I die...”

“You can be amusing. I’m glad. It will be more fun this way.”

“Don’t expect me to forgive you though. You didn’t give me a choice and you took a cherished companion from me.”

“In time you will accept this fate.”

“So, do you have a recommendation? Or are you trying to change the subject to save face?”

Saoirse laughed. The sound actually made my body feel warm and fuzzy in a strange way, as though her mirth translated through our soul-bond. “My suggestion would be to let your staff feast on Otherworlders.”

I frowned, which only made Saoirse laugh more.

We tore across the Lacksmey landscape, weaving between towering pillar-like mountains and deep valleys, while heading in the direction of Altar. However, as we neared the place where a sloping road ran down into the long valley with the white city and its lake at the end, I saw that, counter to my prediction, the trail led south and not east. A look through the eyes of my Observer showed that my friends had flagged far behind, but now that we had a trail to follow, Saoirse would not allow us to slow down.

So while she followed the red floating ribbon, I manoeuvred a crow in front of my friends, guiding them.

“We can’t keep up!” Renji yelled to my familiar, through the ears of which I heard him.

There was nothing to be done about that, unfortunately. The Dullahan would not understand reason with her quarry within reach.

“I see them,” Saoirse suddenly said.

I broke off my connection to Karasumany and looked ahead, seeing what she had spotted. It was a darkwood carriage moving at a leisurely pace.

“I will kill the horses to stop it,” she said.

“Don’t do that,” I replied. “Bring us out in front, I’ll handle it.”

Meigetsu, stay close, I will be needing you for this.

Somehow, the black steed managed to pick up more speed and it caught up to the carriage, where the red ribbon of my Bone Whistle showed that the Vanguard was seated within. We swerved around the vehicle, coming out in front of it on the gravel road, before our steed skidded to a halt on its hooves.

I aimed my Singing Branch at the coachman, holding it in my right hand, then yelled, “Halt your carriage!”

The coachman leaned down to grab an arbalest next to his seat, before yelling, “You robbers won’t get none of mine!”

“We are not robbers!” I yelled back.

“Then *what* are you!?”

I thought about it for a moment, then improvised and channelled the spirit of Oliver Smile. “We come in the name of the Witch Hunter’s Order! There is a vile Seditonist aboard your vehicle! Lay down your arms or die defending a traitor to the Lacksmey Crown!”

My words seemed to hit home, as I saw the coachman’s vaguely-brown aura tremble. He quickly tossed his crossbow aside, and pulled hard on the reins to stop his horses, then got down from the seat in a hurry, coming over to where Saoirse and I still sat atop the steed.

Saoirse hopped down, her armour eerily quiet, then reached up and offered me her gauntlet. I grabbed it with my left hand, while keeping my staff ready in my right and using the saddle stirrup to get down.

“I will let you deal with this,” she told me.

I nodded.

Together we slowly approached the carriage, though its occupants still hid within. I’d put away the whistle, so I couldn’t see the scent trails anymore, but I was fairly sure there had been six signatures, two for the horses, one for the carriage itself, and three for the people aboard which included the coachman.

“I know you’re in there!” I yelled, attempting to project my voice, but not doing an amazing job of it.

“The time for hiding is over!” shouted Saoirse, backing me up.

Immediately, the doors on either side burst open and two figures ran out in opposite directions. The one coming out to the left was clearly the seller, while the one on the right was the Vanguard, and he quickly moved towards me. The other man made a futile break for a nearby copse of trees.

You take the Native, but don't kill him. We need him to give us answers.

Will you drain the soul of the Vanguard? Saoirse asked in reply.

I'd rather not have to kill anyone.

He is destined for death, regardless of your choice.

I gritted my teeth as the man charged towards me. He was clearly experienced and moved with efficient strides, shortsword in his right hand and a dagger in his left.

As soon as he came close enough to swing for me, the orbiting Moonlight Dancer swiftly intercepted and misdirected his strike, allowing me to move around him as his momentum carried him forward a few steps.

Repel! I said internally, releasing a minimally-charged spell aimed at his back.

The dark-haired man deftly sidestepped the projectile, proving himself far more experienced than I had thought. When he came in for another slash, Meigetsu misdirected him again and I swung my staff's head into his leather chestpiece, simultaneously releasing another Repel point-blank.

The combined impact of my swing and the spell knocked him onto his back, and, as he lay there, I demanded to know, “Did Carmine Anabello hire you!”

He swung for my legs, but Meigetsu once more twisted the direction of the strike, awkwardly bending his wrist to the point that he lost the grip on his sword.

Before he could push himself up, I uttered an invocation: “Drain Spirit.”

The Vanguard's eyes widened and I saw as his red aura was sucked into the crystal adorning the tip of my staff, while his body underwent a rapid aging process that pulled the colour from his skin, eyes, and hair, while his face crisped and wrinkled.

Just a moment later, he lay completely still, and not even a slight ember of his aura remained on his body.

Holy shit...

“You now understand the power of your staff,” Saoirse commented as she came up next to me, her arm held tightly around the runaway's neck. The man squirmed in her grip, but it was clearly pointless.

I gritted my teeth, then turned to our captive, while pointing to the man on the ground. “If you do not tell me about Carmine Anabello and his plans, *this* will become your fate.”

The man’s eyes widened in blatant fear and his feeble yellow-ish aura quivered. He was perhaps in his late thirties or early forties, and looked like he’d lived a rough life, his face tarnished and covered in sores. I wondered if he had been chosen because he wouldn’t be difficult to convince or because he had been offered something he could never have attained on his own. It didn’t matter though.

“I don’t know much!” he quickly prefaced, before adding, “but Kai,” his eyes fell to the dead Vanguard, “he said that Anabello’s plans would still come to fruition, because there were other schemes in play.”

“What schemes?”

“I don’t know!”

“You’re useless to me then,” I said, raising my staff towards his torso, though I didn’t have the intention of killing him.

“No, wait!”

I paused, giving him a look that was meant to convey “You have one chance to convince me”. Unbidden, my Singing Branch seemed to fight against my restraint slightly, quivering in my grip, which was unsettling.

“Anabello is careful with what he tells those he hires, but Kai said that they’re assembling in two teams at Fortress Major. We were supposed to go ahead of them and ‘deliver’ the black box.”

“Is that truly everything?”

“I know he has more schemes, but I don’t know where! Anabello always prepares for failure. Kai used to say that he was obsessive that way. I only joined them to get out of debt, I don’t know anything else! You have to believe me!”

It’s as though Carmine knows his lackeys will fail him...

It would not be the first time I have seen misfortune manifest thusly, Saoirse replied. It was still quite disturbing to have her thoughts so clearly in my mind. It was different from how I’d heard Armen’s or Seramosa’s voices, because it appeared at the very depths of my thoughts, near to the border of my subconscious mind.

“How many are at Fortress Major?”

“Kai said two teams, but I don’t know how many. Maybe two in each, maybe more?”

I nodded. Regardless of the numbers, this required immediate attention.

Suddenly Renji came running. It seemed he had left his horse behind with Emily on the other side of the carriage. Elye was close behind him.

“Ryūta! Are you okay?”

He came to a halt, then looked at the coachman who was clearly terrified to be involved in this mess, before his eyes settled on the body.

“Did you do this?”

I nodded. “He would not surrender, so I killed him.”

“And this man?” he asked, turning to look at the Native that Saoirse was holding.

“An accomplice. We’ll bring him with us to Altar.”

“Should I put him on my horse?” he asked.

“No, we’ll bring the carriage with us.”

I looked to the coachman. “Get your horses ready, you’re coming with us to the city.” He looked poised to argue, but quickly realised that he was guilty by association, so his only chance of clearing his name was to come along.

As we rode through the wax-coated gate of the white city, I was seated on the opposite bench from the Native within the carriage, while my friends were on the two mares, and Saoirse was on her steed. As far as Otherworlder escorts went, it was a pretty impressive one, and it immediately drew the attention of the pious guards of the Church.

Though they did not halt us, a contingent of six white-clad men followed us on foot to the Guild sector, where my friends dismounted, and I left the carriage with the accomplice in front of me, my staff to the small of his back. I could feel how the heartwood weapon almost squirmed to feed on his essence, but I held on tight. Clearly, feeding it a potent Otherworlder’s soul had awoken its desire to feed.

I turned back to look at the coachman and told him, “Thank you for the cooperation, you may leave with no mark to your name.”

He looked very relieved by this, and quickly turned his carriage around and began to leave, perhaps wanting to get away before I could change my mind.

Karasumany, send a few clones to follow him wherever he goes.

CAW!

I obviously hadn't ascertained if he was an unwitting bystander or involved, so sending some of my Observer's duplicates to watch him closely would quickly reveal the truth, particularly given how their attention induced paranoia and would make rational men act irrational.

One of the white-clad guards came over and asked, “We would like to know why you are escorting a prisoner into our city.”

“Are you familiar with the Demonologist?” I asked.

A sudden spike in his aura confirmed that he was, so before he could answer, I explained, “This man worked on his behalf, and as such I am bringing him to my Guild.”

“There is no need,” said the man. “We will take him off your hands.”

“You will do no such thing,” Ludwig said, coming up behind the guard and startling him.

He flashed me a grin, but I could tell how his organic eye was looking at my hand and the staff it held.