

162 – Faceless IV

Armen got up from where he’d crashed into the pews and the wall, a big dent in the front of his black armour. Upon seeing it, Saoirse grinned from ear-to-ear, then loped forward like a wolf smelling a rival in its territory. She swung her greatsword down at the boy with only one hand on its handle, moving the weapon as though it was weightless.

“Why are you hunting me?” asked Hother sadly, just as a wicked black tentacle lashed out from his neck to meet the blade in a clash of sparks and metal. Then another shot out from his stomach and speared Saoirse’s left shoulder, before flinging her aside.

Renji charged forward, a loud humming surrounding his gauntlets. The air got stuck in my lungs as I watched him join the fray, but fortunately Oliver was right behind him to back him up. For good measure, I urged Jules to assist them.

“Yes, my Liege. I shall lay waste to this great foe!”

I dismissed my Caster, as there was no nearby body of water for it to manipulate, and I was fairly sure it couldn’t get close enough to touch the Demon without being killed.

The Spellfist neatly avoided the two spike-tipped limbs with flawless movements, before a scythe came flying on a double-jointed arm sprouting from Hother’s back. Renji punched it and sent it flying into the air, then closed the distance and rammed a right hook into the boy’s face. I could see the pained expression he was wearing, as he uttered the words, “Devastation!”

Lady of Hope’s church shook to its very foundations, while every speck of dust lifted into the air and just stuck there motionlessly, as if time had frozen solid. The sound was incredible, and I felt the hairs inside my ear canals vibrate with a lingering energy, as the dust cleared and revealed a crater where Hother still stood.

The left side of his face was distorted slightly, but otherwise there were no real signs of damage.

“Why are you hurting me?” asked the boy.

Emily let out a scream, before swinging her wand and launching a spear of condensed air across the stone floor of the nave, striking the Demon in the shoulder and pushing it back a step. It looked away from Renji, who hung limply from one of its spike-arms, before tossing him aside and preparing to come to where we stood near the entrance.

Elye joined in with a few arrows, but, since they just plinked off its body, she quickly gave up and started moving towards the exit.

Armen, you’ve gotta heal him! I exclaimed internally.

Oliver went in right after Emily’s strike landed and sliced his cursed blade across the black limb that shot out to meet him, only to then backpedal several metres to avoid the follow-up jabs and slashes from the other arms.

Jules immediately replaced him, using his shield as best he could, but he was quickly speared through the head and leg, before being violently pulled apart and tossed aside. His head bounced off the chapel altar, while his body landed in a large stone bowl that might’ve been used for some kind of baptism.

“Apologies, my Liege.”

Pick yourself back up and return to the fight, I ordered.

Kally, who had been concentrated on her chanting, snapped her Spell-Tome shut and then directed her three hovering globules of swirling water towards Hother with her wand. They snaked through the air on ponderous trajectories that the Demon tried to intercept, but it only managed to destroy one of the three, before they struck its body. As soon as the water touched the boy, it instantly froze solid.

I remembered how Renji had talked about Mimics being weak to frost magic back when we’d been faced with the Mimic Knight, and it was clear that Kally believed that same weakness would extend to the Capgras Demon.

To her credit, it stopped moving for a moment.

Saoirse immediately hopped back into the fight, while blood ran eagerly from her terrible shoulder wound.

Can’t you heal yourself??

Where’s the fun in that!? she replied.

With a manic laugh, the Blademaster leapt into the air and did an honest-to-God full-body spin with the greatsword in the centre of her mass, before slamming it edge-first down onto the Demon’s head.

“Holy cow,” Potts muttered from nearby. He didn’t have any offensively-focused familiars and was just standing there, watching.

The blade cleft through the entire length of Hother’s body, separating it into two pieces. Unlike other Mimics, there was no foul blood to be seen, just a perfectly smooth somewhat-shiny interior, as though the Demon’s entire body was made of living black metal.

Small tendrils quickly reached out to reconnect the severed halves, and no sooner had Saoirse landed on her feet than two new spear-limbs sprouted from these halves and aimed for her head. She caught both against the flat of her large blade, the repeated *clang* sounds echoing through the chapel. The frozen parts of the Demon were still firmly stuck, which was a good sign.

They began exchanging blows, and she repeatedly redirected the metal tentacles and got some hits in, though it also struck her with several glancing blows that destroyed her armour piece-by-piece.

“Kally, can you do that again, but try to freeze its entire body?” I asked.

The Sorceress gave me a sidelong glare, but then nodded. Without using her hands, the Spell-Tome flung itself open and began going through the pages until stopping on the one she was looking for.

Emily had run over to where Armen was healing Renji, and though the Spellfist would be alright, it seemed that using his new ability had exhausted him or maybe caused a Backlash, as he was currently in the middle of vomiting all over a shattered wooden bench.

If he’ll be fine, you should assist the others, I told Armen.

“**Understood,**” he complied and began moving towards the Demon, while Emily stayed with Renji, trying to get him to move closer to the entrance.

Unlike the others, Oliver wasn’t throwing his powerful moves against the monster, perhaps because he knew they would not work. Instead he was doing a hit-and-run tactic with his sword, while Saoirse did a good job of occupying its arms, but it seemed that his Possessed Weapon was ineffective against it, as it had no blood to corrupt. I could tell that he came to this same realisation as well, but it didn’t stop him from continually striking the Demon, and it was possible that he was doing damage to it even if none could be seen.

However, it was hard to tell if it was actually possible to kill it this way.

I’m going to hit it with my Repel to see if that accomplishes anything. Armen, hit it with all you’ve got as soon as my spell lands.

I pointed the Singing Branch at the Demon, and it squirmed in my grip, practically begging me to use the Drain Spirit ability. I was fairly sure it would just turn my staff into an extension of its body if I did that, which would be a quick way for me to throw my life away.

Pooling a vast amount of energy in my chest, I fed it down my right arm and out through my Death’s Hand and into the Singing Branch. The gem at the end of the staff began to thrum and glow, while the wood creaked and unfurled itself, increasing its total length by a few centimetres.

“Repel!” I shouted, sending out the blast of drained auras and the Dullahan’s energy. I willed the vortex of colours surrounding a central dark shadow to bend through the air and strike the Demon in a place it couldn’t defend.

Saoirse allowed herself to be struck, in order to keep the Demon stationary, just so my spell could land.

As it hit, all the limbs flopped to the ground immediately, and Armen, who was only a few metres from its body, halted mid-step. Everyone looked as though they were on the verge of cheering, but then the visage of Hother began to melt. His face and clothes changed into liquid black metal and the severed halves began to pool together where his feet had been.

“What’s happening?” Oliver asked, backing away cautiously.

Potts went over to help Emily move Renji into the entry hall behind me, while Jules, who’d picked up and reattached his head, came in from behind the Demon, helping to box it in between himself, Saoirse, and Armen.

Kally was still focused on the verses of her spell, and it was a good thing she was, because just a moment after everyone had repositioned themselves, the melted puddle of black metal began to lift up off the floor and take on a new shape.

It became a fat mound with long whip-like arms full of rending claws and teeth, which was covered in the vague distorted faces of thousands of people on its surface. The faces began letting out sounds that, from their pleading tones and torn-up voices, must’ve been from just before the victims they belonged to were devoured by the Demon.

In just three seconds, Jules’ body was utterly destroyed, shorn to pieces by an onslaught of the limbs. Even his tin shield and sword were cut to ribbons.

“I have failed you, my Liege...”

Armen was backing away, while using his shield to absorb the hits the mound of faces and limbs kept lashing his way. At the same time, Saoirse was dancing with the greatsword swishing around, bits and pieces of the flailing tentacles getting cut apart.

But I couldn’t see any way to defeat it.

The Crusader hadn’t given up hope yet though, and I felt a chunk of my energy disappear as he started to utter an incantation, while continuing to defend himself with his shield:

“First Light, primogenitor of the soul,”

“Spark of Creation, crafter of life,”

“Judge of the Tainted Spawn,”

“Executioner of Evil,”

“Smite my foe!”

The surrounding light from Kōtama was blown out by the beams of pure energy that emerged from the countless faces covering the mound of writhing metal. The tentacles went into a frenzy of activity, tearing deep gouges in the floor, walls, and ceiling, forcing us all back into the entrance hall, though Saoirse and Armen both stayed put.

Voices like a choir of damnation resounded through the stone chapel and I was sure that the surrounding neighbourhoods were thinking that a portal to hell must’ve opened here.

It’s not working, Saoirse commented before I could see the truth for myself. You know its name. You’ve got to use it. Just wait for the Sorceress to cast her spell. If she fails, I will attempt to bind it.

I swallowed hard as I realised what she meant.

Then the light cleared and I saw that, despite its body letting off pale smoke as during an exorcism, the Capgras Demon was still alive. Worse still, it was starting to take on a shape that’d allow it to move around more aggressively, rather than stand its ground to defend itself.

I considered hitting it with another Repel, but there was no telling if it would melt back down again or have some other reaction.

As the Demon reformed itself into an overly-tall and gangly humanoid shape, Kally was reaching the end of her spell.

The moment she uttered the final verse and her Spell-Tome snapped shut, the air in the chapel grew several degrees colder and a mist started to form around our feet. With a gesture of her wand, the mist sought out the Demon in the centre of the room and began to condense around it, totally obscuring its legs from sight.

Kally raised her wand and the mist instantly turned into a pillar of ice, locking the monster in place immediately.

Now! Saoirse urged me.

I gritted my teeth, slung my staff onto my back, and ran for the Capgras Demon, while urging Meigetsu to orbit close enough to intercept and misdirect every killing tentacle coming my way.

Stopping just a few metres from the immobilised Demon, I raised my hands towards it, then I said the ability’s invocation out loud, tweaking it on the spot as best I could, while borrowing the majority from the memory of when Saoirse had used it the first time:

“Thou art of mimicry born, a monster of Envy and deceit.”

“Thy visage sinister and twisted, fear it doth embolden.”

“Thou hath an everchanging soul, gift it at mine feet.”

“Thy True Name to me is known and in mine hand beholden.”

“Reforged by mine touch, become what I desire.”

“Subservient to me, until thy soul expire.”

I held its True Name firmly in my thoughts, along with the Sigil describing it that Saoirse had shown me, while also picturing exactly the purpose I wanted to reforge it into.

It wasn't a normal exorcism, as it would remain 'alive', but it did solve the immediate problem, although the object it became would surely be sinister and evil, corrupting all who used it.

Silver light emerged from my hands and enveloped the frozen Demon, with a quake rolling through the floor and a hum filling the air. From one moment to the next, the pillar and its captive vanished into thin air, and something hit the ground with a dull metallic *clang* like an old temple bell.

I looked down at the black mask I had transformed the Capgras Demon into.