

59 – Among Friends

I awoke the following morning in Rana’s embrace, managing to slip out from under her arms by quickly switching places with a large pillow that’d been throw on the floor last night.

When I came out into the open lounge area, I saw that Renji was leant back in his chair, snoring up a storm, while the two cats were coiled on top of his lap. Elye was awake, but just lay on the sofa she had commandeered, staring into the ceiling.

“Morning,” I whispered to her, after finding a seat in a chair opposite her.

“*This city of helmets is not what I expected,*” she mused.

“Feeling homesick already?”

“*No.*”

“I see...”

I folded my legs beneath me and started trying to get into a meditative trance. It was something I had made a habit a while back, when Armen had mentioned its importance, but it still didn’t come easy to me, especially not when my mind was busy with a hundred thoughts.

When today turned out to be another of such days where the mental calm escaped me, I let out a sigh and instead called upon my Observer familiar.

Karasumany, lend me your sight and senses.

Immediately, my consciousness left my body and flew into the main body of the large flock of crows that orbited it. From where the crow floated in the air above the building I was in, I could hear the sounds of the city. Given that all the towers and buildings were made of stone, it made the echoes from the far reaches flow across the place in strange ways, amplifying some sounds, like the deep thrum of dozens of carriages rumbling over cobblestone streets, as well as yelled arguments between people, not to mention the marketeers already beginning their aural assault upon the populace in the lower Quarters of Helmstatter.

I drove the crow east towards the Guild Quarter, while repeatedly sending Karasumany’s clones off to perch atop the corners of buildings situated near heavily-trafficked areas. I’d learnt that while the Observer could not act as a messenger, it could follow commands that bordered on delivering messages to me.

If you spot groups of guards or any people resembling Witch Hunters, keep an eye on them.

While the familiar wouldn't alert me if it found such people, I knew that I could return later and ask to see the ones it had found. It was an odd work-around, but at least it worked. Sort of.

I continued scouting the city, while controlling Karasu's body, but found nothing major of interest, so cut the connection. No sooner had I returned to my own body than I saw Rana emerge from our shared room with a look of panic on her face, clutching the pillow but otherwise undressed. When she saw me sitting in the chair, she visibly relaxed. Then she realised her clothing situation, or lack thereof, before locking eyes with Elye, who was watching her curiously.

Rana's face lit up crimson and she quickly dove back into the room, emerging a minute later wearing her pants and arming jacket.

“You scared me,” she said.

“I'm not going anywhere,” I told her and though it seemed to alleviate her somewhat, she still looked between Elye and I with a sceptical glance.

“I didn't want to wake you while I spoke to my familiar,” I explained further.

She came over and sat down on the armrest of the chair I was in, then leaned close and kissed me. I couldn't help but feel that she was marking her territory in front of the Elfin, which was an amusing thought, but maybe it was also just that she was scared I would vanish again.

“We should go to the Adventurers' Guild and have your bounty sorted out,” Rana told me.

“Let's wait for everyone to wake up first,” I said, glancing to Renji in his chair.

He was still snoring away, undisturbed by our conversation and contentedly asleep. We had often had sleepovers at his place and I couldn't recall him ever being a heavy sleeper. In fact, I seemed to remember that he always woke up before me to start playing on his console, the sounds of which would eventually rouse me from sleep.

“Also, I don't really understand what speaking to the Guild will solve.”

“Given that you are a member of their organisation, they will want to know the proper circumstances behind Hearthshire and what happened there. Right now, the only news from the village is that over a hundred people died after you appeared.”

I frowned. “No one remember seeing Leopold and his monsters?”

“Not from what I've heard.”

Perhaps because she could sense that my mood was souring, Rana ruffled my hair playfully, then grabbed my right hand and pulled me from the chair in one powerful tug.

“Let's go prepare breakfast.”

“I'm a terrible cook,” I told her. “All I know how to make is fried rice and omelettes.”

“I’ll teach you,” she replied.

After breakfast shared between the five of us, with some scraps for the two cats, most of which was cooked by Rana’s capable hands, we headed for the Adventurers’ Guild as a group.

It kind of felt like Rana and Lukas were looking around vigilantly the whole way, as though fearing that Bounty Hunters would come from out of nowhere to take me away to prison or worse.

“Is she an Adventurer too?” Rana wondered.

“Elye?” I asked. “No, I don’t think her aura is strong enough. Although if it was, she might either become a Ranger or a Huntress.”

“We should try and have her take the Role Assignment,” she said.

“Weren’t you opposed to it when we tried with Lukas?” I asked, unable to keep a chuckle from my voice.

Rana looked away embarrassed. “Maybe I’ve reconsidered my stance on such matters.”

I smiled, then said, “If Elye wants to, we can try, but we shouldn’t force her.”

The Elfin was looking around with fascination, while Renji in turn observed her with a smile on his lips. Lukas also kept stealing glances, but was focused on his vigilant task alongside Rana. Normally, he’d be up front where she was, playing around, so I was glad to see that he could actually be serious when he wanted to.

“You guys don’t have to be so wary,” I told them. “My familiar is keeping an eye out for me.”

I had, at last, managed to learn how to separate my mind from that of Karasumany, such that only my right eye and ear were overtaken by its senses. It allowed me to not feel as though my consciousness was yanked from my real body and stuffed into that of the crow. Of course, the split senses was still painfully-taxing on my mind, but I was steadily building up a tolerance to it, as it now only caused a dull headache instead of a piercing migraine.

It had randomly just worked when I had tried it while ‘helping’ Rana with making breakfast, after what felt like weeks of trying to no avail.

Lukas gave me a scrutinising look, then nodded and ran up to where Elye was balancing atop a stone fence, immediately trying to imitate her.

“She’s a real heart-breaker, that Elfin,” Rana commented.

“Elfin are strange creatures,” I said. “I met her when she was running away from a forced marriage. I doubt she’d be interested in reciprocating their feelings.”

“I understand why Lukas find her intriguing,” Rana admitted, “But why your friend? He seems the type that would normally have women falling all over him.”

I shrugged. “People can’t control their fetishes.”

Rana’s eyes widened at my words, then she let out a laugh. I loved the way her voice sounded when she was happy.

We eventually arrived to the Adventurers’ Guild, which was situated in a large stone manor of sorts, with tall towers adorned with banners. It also had green shingles like the building in Lundia, but otherwise its visage didn’t stand out too much from the nearby structures. Further down the street lay the Mercenary Guild, which in contrast was like a small castle, with a tall outer wall and manned gate.

There was also a nearby Guild with a large walled-off courtyard in front of it, filled with hedgerows and flowers. Apparently, it was the Bounty Hunters’ Guild.

“I didn’t know there was a Guild for that,” I said as we went through the large doorway.

“There are Guilds for a lot of things,” Rana said, then lowered her voice and added, “Even for Assassins and Necromancers.”

“You think there’s one for Summoners or Exorcists?”

“No idea.”

“But wait, doesn’t the Adventurers’ also have Bounty Quests?”

“Those aren’t for people. Those are for monsters, like Hobgoblin Lords or other big threats.”

“Then why are we in here to solve the issue with my Bounty?”

Renji was the one to answer, having overheard our conversation. “If you’ve got a warrant out for your arrest and you want to handle it amicably and without immediately going to prison, don’t you think it’s best to seek out a lawyer first?”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

Renji nodded. “The Guild Representatives will act as intermediaries and should be able to solve it on your behalf.”

I went up to one of the lines to the Quest Counter. Meanwhile, Rana was talking to Elye, perhaps trying to get her to take the Role Assignment. The interior of the Guild Hall was quite large and there seemed to be twice as many Clerks and Secretaries here than compared to Lundia, although there weren’t as many Otherworlders here, but it was still thronging.

Those parties and solo Adventurers present in the hall, seated either in the tavern area or looking through quests on the boards in the back, seemed of a stronger calibre than those of Lundia. I sent

energy to my eyes and scanned the auras of the assembled people, spotting a few Advanced Roles: like a couple of golden-aura Crusaders belonging to different groups; someone with a beige-and-blue aura, which perhaps meant it was a Role similar to Archpriest; an orange-gold Genius; an aquamarine Elementalist; and lastly three dark-red Witch Hunters.

The sight of the last three made my heartrate spike.

“Unleash me, Exorcist! I will handle them like I did before.”

I gritted my teeth, hoping that Lyssalynne still only spoke to me. If anyone else could hear her, I was in trouble.

Renji cast me a strange glance, and I suddenly remembered that he had an ability that seemed to detect magic. I smiled weakly in return, but then he noticed the Witch Hunters talking to one of the parties in the tavern and moved closer to me, as though shading me from their eyes.

Stay on guard, Armen. I have no idea what’s gonna happen here.

“The Witch Hunters are talking to your Crusader friend.”

My Crusader friend?

I looked back over their way and realised that the three men with their wide-brimmed peaked hats and brown storm-coats were talking to Harleigh and his party.

Why are they here!?

Like a flashfire, Seramosa appeared by my side, and I saw Renji instinctively back away from me. **“I will burn them to ashes! Manifest me!”**

Don’t start shit, Sera, I admonished the Ifrit.

“Are you okay, Ryūta?” asked Renji. “You just summoned something, didn’t you?”

I shook my head. “I can’t control when she appears,” I whispered to him.

He immediately realised I was talking about the Condemned Ifrit, as his eyes narrowed slightly, but then he just gave me a curt nod. “Don’t release it here.”

“I wasn’t planning to,” I told him, annoyed.

“I know you wouldn’t do that.”

Suddenly it was my turn in line.

“Name and purpose, please,” droned the female Clerk.

I reached into one of my belt pouches and pulled out the crumbled quest flier with the title ‘*Endless Winter in Hearthshire*’ at the top. Then laid my Guild Card and the blank one that had belonged to Leopold on top of the flier.

The Guild Clerk swallowed so loudly that I heard it. Then she looked around in panic for a moment, before locking eyes with one of her fellows, who quickly came over.

“What is it?” the woman asked, her face a perpetual scowl. She seemed like some kind of Manager. When the Clerk didn’t immediately reply, she looked at the quest flier and my Guild Card.

“I’ll go fetch the Branch Master,” she said.

I looked to Renji for advice, but he just gave me an awkward smile.

That can’t be good.