

## 28 – Infamy

I tried to wrestle myself out of the vice-grip of the Witch Hunter, but to no avail. Rana had pulled her blade out of its sheath, wavering between aiming it at Lukas’ captor or mine.

*Armen, do something!*

**“I cannot. I am unable to move.”**

“Don’t try to call on your familiars for aid,” the guy holding me warned. “And tell your friend to put her sword away.”

I shared a brief and panicked glance with Rana, and she obliged, lowering her sword, though not returning it to its scabbard. The man holding the squirming Lukas came closer, as did the third who had been covering the scene with a crossbow.

With his hand firmly gripping my shoulder, my captor stared rifling through my bags until he found my Guild Card and Mercenary Card. He passed these to the crossbow-wielder for inspection.

“Hey! Don’t touch those!”

“Be quiet.”

*Why can’t you move!?*

**“These men wield some strange magic that spellbinds me.”**

I looked around, while my captor continued digging through my pouches and robe pockets, and spotted the crossbow-wielder having a smaller second aura glowing from his left gloved hand, though I could not tell what it meant, although the aura was pure-white and pulsing faintly.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I asked. “At least let my friends go.”

The man ignored me, until his friend handed the Cards back with the words: “He’s clean.” Then the vice-grip on my shoulder was released and I stumbled forward until Rana caught and steadied me.

“It seems that the accusation that you were in the possession of dangerous artefacts and forbidden familiars was a falsehood,” the man who’d searched me said out loud for all three of us to hear.

Behind me, Lukas was released as well and he quickly came up to my side, pulling out his sword.

“Who has accused me of such things!?” I shouted back. “I just helped this city get rid of a Demon, why would I be evil!?”

“We are aware of your accomplishments,” the leader replied steadily, while the crossbowman once again aimed his weapon at us. “We are likewise aware of your association with the Seditonist known by the name of ‘Owl’.”

“What do you mean?” I asked shakily. I wondered if they knew about his forbidden familiar or his disturbing religious belief in some reality-defying deity.

“Your teacher is responsible for raising some of the most heinous villains the continent of Hallem has ever seen. We are of the firm belief that the Demon brought to Ochre was caused by one of his former students. He is also infamous for having trained the ‘Puppet Master’ who made a hunting ground of Helmstatter, terrorising the city for nearly two years.”

“What does that have to do with me!?”

“Perhaps nothing,” the man said, stepping closer. “But placing a familiar to track us is certainly a move that someone suspicious would do, don’t you think?”

It terrified me that they knew that I’d made Sumi observe them, but if they could paralyse Armen, then it was surely no difficult manner for them to see my normally-invisible familiars.

Rana cast me a sceptical look and it made my chest tighten that she’d believe my intentions were evil.

“I’m new to this world,” I told him, “but I already know that you Witch Hunters are dangerous to people of my profession.”

“Tell us where your teacher is,” the man replied, ignoring my defence.

“I don’t know.”

The man watched me closely for a moment, then nodded to his friend with the crossbow, who lowered his weapon.

“We will be watching you closely,” he warned me, then he turned and went into an alleyway with his friends.

*Sumi, you’re dismissed.*

The inky Watcher that floated high above dissipated into the air.

A moment later, Armen said, “**My functions have been returned to me.**”

“What the hell was that!?” Rana asked, somehow blaming me for what had just happened.

“I don’t know,” I muttered weakly, my heart still beating a thousand times per minute.

“One of the Crusader’s friends must have sent them after Ryūta,” Lukas said.

We both turned to look at him. It had been maybe two weeks since I’d last seen Harleigh and the timing of events seemed to line up somewhat. Still, the revelation that Owl was the person who’d taught the Exorcist that’d torn Harleigh’s party into pieces, as well as the Demonologist that’d somehow sent a Demon to Ochre, it did not sit well with me.

An event played through my head unbidden: Owl frantically trying to figure out if I’d summoned a forbidden familiar. With the knowledge of hindsight, I now wondered if he had been more concerned about me being captured and executed by the Witch Hunters because of it, rather than it being something antithetical to his teachings. He had told me that Harleigh was responsible for the death of his last apprentice, but was that because that apprentice had possessed a forbidden familiar? Given the way that Owl had talked about the ‘tasks’ he had to perform for the Observer, I now wondered if he had known that I’d come across these Witch Hunters and had thus ensured that I had no incriminating evidence on me. As though ensuring that I would go on to fulfil whatever strange purpose he had prepared me for.

It confused me why the Witch Hunter had not bothered to check my Encyclopaedia, but perhaps that was because they were unaware of the information within? Surely such a tome of esoteric and forbidden knowledge would’ve been incriminating enough by itself. It seemed unlikely that they’d know about familiars and how to counter them, but not know that Exorcists carried around such potent knowledge on their persons. Which made me wonder if it was in fact normal to have an Encyclopaedia like mine. It was hard to know what he had told me was real and what was fabrication. But then again, he had not told me to hide my Encyclopaedia from anyone, just my Guild Card.

The more I thought about it, Owl’s explanation that his Flayed Lord’s Curse caused people to betray him now just sounded like a suspicious cover-up to hide the real truth...

“Did you seriously tell your familiar to spy on them!?” Rana asked in outrage. “Why would you do something *like that!*?”

“I was worried, okay!?” I replied. “Owl told me that his previous apprentice was killed by Witch Hunters, so I tried to keep an eye on them just in case...”

“Which only made them more suspicious of you,” she scolded me.

“Yeah...”

“I think we should take the Mercenary Contract and get out of Ochre before they decide to pay us another visit,” she advised sternly, inviting no argument.

“You’re not mad at me?” I asked cautiously. Her aura was throbbing aggressively, so it was clear that she was.

“I’m fucking furious,” she growled. “How could you do something so reckless!?”

“Sorry.”

Rana sighed loudly, then said, “Let’s go find this woman. No matter what, we’re leaving Ochre tonight.”

I had no idea what the three of us must’ve looked like when we entered the fancy inn and Rana asked for the proprietor to fetch our soon-to-be client. No doubt we looked like a bunch of amateurs...

After waiting for ten minutes in the entrance of the inn, where the interior was decked out in expensive-looking lacquered ash-grey wood and snobbish Natives lounged in comfortable chairs with drinks in their hands, a woman came down the stairs. She wore a modest dress of a fabric that seemed somewhere between silk and wool, and which was a bit on the thick side for the Ochre warmth and sun. Her face was pale and had sharp high cheekbones, with sunken cheeks and dark rings around her otherwise charming amber eyes. The coal-black hair on her head was made into a thick braid that slouched over her shoulder, and a sliver of it was shock-white, twisting throughout the braid and making her otherwise mundane appearance quite unique.

When she was on the third-to-last step, her shoe slipped on the step and Rana quickly shot forward to catch her before she could fall on the floor. A few of the patrons that lounged nearby snickered mockingly.

*I wonder if she’s feeble.*

“**She is afflicted with something,**” Armen commented.

*How can you tell?* I asked him.

“**I have in the past treated patients with similar symptoms. The white streak in the hair is a commonality. I do not know the cause, sadly.**”

I chewed on my lower lip. *This might end up being more troublesome than expected...*

“Thank you,” the lady said to Rana, slightly embarrassed. “Are you the Mercenaries who have decide to take my contract?”

“That’s right,” she replied. “My name is Rana, and these two are Lukas and Ryūta.”

The lady, who might only have been thirty, though it was hard to tell, gave us each a scrutinising look. Then she said, “A Vanguard, a Rogue, and a... I’m sorry, but what are you?”

I met her eyes and said, “I’m an Exorcist.”

Behind me, one of the lounging Natives choked on his drink and I heard him sputtering and coughing as he attempted to clear his airway of errant droplets.

“I cannot say I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting one of your kind before,” she answered. Her aura was a vague dark-purple-red that was hazy and impossible to gauge much from, but it was clear that she was no lying at least...

I forced my true expression down and adopted an easy-going and confident smile.

Rana then said, “He is a capable wielder of his familiars and will be able to protect you in ways that my shield cannot.”

Lukas nodded in agreement and I could tell by the shape and pulse of his aura that he was upset on my behalf, which I thought was nice. I still struggled to fully understand what went on in his head, but it was good to know that his intentions were good.

At the statement, which was mostly false, the lady gave me another glance up-and-down, before nodding to herself.

“Very well, you three will do, I suppose. Let’s waste no time. I’ll go have my servant bring the carriage around.”

The carriage was of some pale black-veined wood given a lacquered shine and could comfortably seat six people within on its cushioned benches, while the driver at the front sat on a lifted bench and played the reins of the two black horses pulling it.

“You, Exorcist, will sit up in front with my servant. Lukas and Rana, you will join me within.”

Instead of contesting this, all three of us agreed to her terms. Rana had made it clear that while Adventurers’ Guild quests allowed for a lot of freedom in terms of how a quest was handled, Mercenary contracts relied on the client to set the terms, unless they were unintentionally putting themselves in harm’s way. As such, we simply nodded and did as she wished.

When I climbed up in front, I was glad that my robe-coat had several layers, since the nights could get a bit chilly and it was bound to get colder as we went further south, according to Lukas.

“I’m Temaru Ryūta,” I greeted the driver.

The man grimaced and then muttered, “I ain’t talking to an Exorcist.”

I couldn’t help but frown in response. I scooted as far to the edge of our small bench as I could, then hunkered down for what was sure to be an unpleasant ride.

The carriage shifted as the lady, Rana, and Lukas got in, then the servant whipped the reins and we started rolling along the bumpy stone streets of Ochre. It had been a short stay, but I had enjoyed my time here.

Given what Rana had told me of Helmstatter, and the fear I had that the servant and his mistress were representatives of their attitudes, it seemed like it might not end up a very fun visit.

While we rolled along the same road that’d brought us to Ochre, I practiced commanding and utilising Sumi to scout ahead, discovering that the Watcher familiar had abilities such as zoom vision and

tracking a moving target while it itself was moving. The latter proved useful for following the carriage’s journey and also repositioning to a new location further ahead. Given that the road between Lundia and Ochre was surrounded by forests pretty much the entire way, it was a bit hard to put my familiar to its best use and I wondered if it’d unlock the ability to see things in heat vision or infrared as I advanced my Pact of the Familiar and Summon abilities.

As well as practicing my manipulation of the familiar, I also tried to get used to having both eyes open while sharing my vision with Sumi, but it was not something I thought I could ever get fully used to, due to the massive migraine it caused. As such, I spent most of my time using Sumi with my left eye mostly closed.

I could hear Rana and Lukas talking with the lady inside the carriage most of the time, and the exclusion stung quite a bit, particularly because the driver fully ignored me as well. He was a dour sort with a big red nose and small eyes, as well as an unkempt beard that hardly gave off the air of ‘servant’, but perhaps the lady could do no better than such a servant?

*Armen, as a Priest, were you able to diagnose people’s conditions?* I asked, while looking through Sumi’s eye at the upcoming fork in the road that’d take us south to Helmstatter, rather than east to Lundia.

**“Indeed.”**

*Do you still have that ability?*

**“Only when it pertains to you. My existence prevents me from interfering with the world much, except for when it involves safeguarding you. However, I practiced as a Priest for many years and believe I retained my appraising eye for all manner of ailments, such that I can identify them at a glance.”**

*The Lady’s condition, what happened to those who shared it?*

**“Most perished within a few weeks. Their hearts simply gave out.”**

I thought about it for a moment and considered the lady’s nature. *Is it possible that a curse could be responsible?*

**“Yes. That would be my estimation.”**

I frowned. We had truly found a troublesome client. We might as well have gone with the smugglers who were paying nearly five times what we’d be getting from guarding the lady.

*How do you break a curse like that?*

**“I am untrained in such manners,”** Armen replied. **“Cursebreaking is generally a trait of the Summoners.”**

I noticed something by the fork up ahead through my borrowed vision and quickly gripped the driver by the arm, startling him awake. The horses had been going on autopilot while he dozed off.

“Stop the carriage,” I told him.

Given the tone of my voice, he did not argue and whipped the reins, uttering a word to the beasts.

As soon as we slowed, Rana flung open the door and leaned out to look at me.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“There’s an ambush up ahead,” I told her. My heart was pounding in my ears as adrenaline started flushing through my system.

“Goblins?”

“Not this time,” I said with gritted teeth. “They’re human.”

She hopped out the open door and, when the carriage slowed completely, Lukas followed behind her.

“Lukas, you stay with the carriage!” Rana told him.

“Ryūta, you guard the Lady with your familiars!”

*You heard her, Armen.*

“**I follow only the commands uttered by your voice,**” he replied loyally.

*Make sure no harm comes to the Lady, the driver, the horses, nor Lukas,* I instructed.

“**Very well.**”

I had been sparingly using Sumi, so I had a lot of energy left to use. In the worst-case scenario, I could bring out Kabanenoki, but I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

As Rana walked out ahead of the carriage, the lady got out as well, climbing up to sit next to me.

“It would be best if you waited inside,” I told her.

“Why? You will protect me, won’t you?” she replied, as though daring me to let her die just to prove a point.

“Of course.”

“Karl, go fetch the crossbow from the trunk,” she then said to the driver.

“Milady, please...” he pleaded.

“Don’t disappoint me now.”

He sighed, then climbed down from the front seat and went to get the weapon from the trunk at the rear of the carriage.

“These men are here for me,” the lady said. She seemed very sure of that.

“Why?”

—Patreon-exclusive Copy—  
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka “Dosei”)—

“Because of my cousin, Torvalder Gyldenrose, the Prince of Arley.”