

## 68 – On the Trail

In the sky above the Artisan Quarter floated a great flock of crows in a V-formation, copies of the foremost bird splitting from the group with every street they flew above, such that there was not a section of the city left unseen by their black eyes.

While I followed the trail of Charles’ black fox with my left eye, I saw the city above from my familiar’s perspective with my right. Although the Observer familiar could not see the trail I was following, I already had a fairly good idea of the direction it was going. It was quite fortunate that the Vanguard who’d found the dead fox had followed the simplest path to reach the Adventurers’ Guild.

Elye and Lukas were in front of me as usual, while Armen trotted next to me with every step echoing through his hollow armour, and Rana and Renji brought up the rear.

The brown-and-green scent trail was already so faint now that it was being overshadowed by the ambient smells of the city and those belong to the people and animals that moved through the streets.

“When we get to the Noble Quarter, allow me to do the talking,” Renji said.

As I was still observing the city from the sky with Karasumany, I knew what he was referring to, as, further up ahead, was a sort of perimeter wall bisecting the city and featuring only a few gates to cross it. The wall itself was shorter than many of the surrounding buildings, but Renji said that crossing it illegally was a terrible idea.

I sent my crow familiar and its many clones ahead, before cutting my connection to it, just as we came to the wall and began following it to reach one of the gates. We ended up on a larger street full of carts waiting to cross into the aristocratic district, and though the scent-trail was barely visible to my eyes at this point, I could tell that it had gone through here.

“Did he say he found the fox in the Noble Quarter or just outside it?” Rana asked.

“I don’t think it matters,” I replied, “the trail is leading into the Noble Quarter.”

After getting in line for the pedestrian gate next to the one for the carts and horses, we waited about ten minutes before it was our turn to either be allowed in or denied entry.

Renji immediately showed off his Guild Card to the two guards by the gate.

“Purpose for your visit?”

“We are following the lead of a missing Adventurer.”

“Do you have a Quest for that?” asked the other man.

“No, but if you see my Guild Rank, you will know that I am permitted entry.”

“You are, sure, but what about your friends?”

“*Use me! Unleash me, Exorcist!*” urged the Siren from the pouch on my belt, startling me. None of my companions reacted to her voice, like every other time she wanted me to call upon her powers. I knew it was a bad idea though, so I ignored her pleading voice.

“**Are you alright?**” Armen asked, his voice in my inner ear. “**Your heartrate is rising.**”

*The Siren wants me to use her powers.*

“**I believe that would be a bad idea.**”

*Yeah, no shit...*

After a bit more back-and-forth with the guards, Renji eventually produced a handful of silver crowns. The two men smiled to each other, before letting us all through with a nod.

Once on the other side of the wall and within the Noble Quarter, I scanned the air for the trail for a minute or so, before finding it again and continuing to follow it to its eventual destination, wherever it would end up being.

“So much for ‘Let me handle this’,” Rana remarked to Renji.

“*Why did we not jump over?*” Elye asked confused.

Renji smiled weakly, “My bad, didn’t realise they were gonna be like that. Seems the quality of guards in Helmstatter has declined since last I was here.”

“Is it true that you can go anywhere with your Guild Rank?” Lukas asked, curiously.

Surprisingly, Armen was the one to answer. In terms of past experience, he was clearly the most advanced of us all. “**Those of Eminent rank with the Adventurers’ Guild are allowed many advantages, though there are yet many places they are not allowed to venture into without express invitation, such as places where Royalty resides or the inner chambers of cathedrals, such as what may be found in this district.**”

“Usually, they are better at accommodating Adventurers in Lacksmey,” Renji added.

“**In my time, there was little difference to what we just experienced,**” my familiar added.

“You were a Crusader though, that must’ve given you a lot of leeway and good faith with guardsmen and the rulers?” Rana guessed.

“**Perhaps it is different now, but there were not so many pious folk during my day. Many actively despised Paladins, Priests, and Crusaders, hence why the city of Altar was formed to house them and their beliefs.**”

“I didn’t know that,” Renji commented. “What rank did you end up achieving at the end?”

**“Within the Adventurers’ Guild I was known as a ‘Savant’, but within the Church I reached the lofty title of ‘Bishop’.”**

“I didn’t realise the Church had a hierarchy like that,” I said, while squinting to distinguish the trail we were following from a few identical ones.

“Being a Bishop is quite a big deal,” Rana said. “You must’ve had a lot of power.”

**“Not so much as you would think. There were many Bishops within Altar during my time, and infighting undermined much of our integrity and influence with the populace.”**

Suddenly Elye stopped in front of us, turning back to look at me. “*Yuuta.*”

“What is it?” I asked.

“*We are going in circles.*”

I blinked, looking at my companions, none of which seemed to have noticed. We had been walking for maybe ten minutes, but when I connected to my crow familiar in the sky, I saw that we were only a street away from the wall to Artisan Quarter.

I was still holding the whistle in my left hand, the shape of the object indented into my palm. “I don’t understand,” I remarked. “I’ve been following the trail just like...”

“What? What is it?” Rana asked.

I put a hand to my head. “Crap, this is what Charles was talking about!”

“What?”

“There’s something strange with the scent-trails in Noble Quarter, they’re misleading and send you on a pointless journey that loops back on itself.”

“Could it be the work of an Illusionist?” Renji wondered.

“If it is, how do we deal with it?” Lukas asked.

I was just about to echo his question, when I realised I actually had the answer on me. I reached into my belt bag and retrieved the pouch of Sinner’s Ash. I undid the rope that kept it shut and then held it out towards Elye and Lukas, telling them, “Take a small amount and spread it as we follow the trail.”

“*This smells like dead people,*” she remarked.

“That’s because it is,” Rana joked, although only Renji laughed.

Even though I knew it would not make a difference, I blew another note in the whistle, then followed the very-faint scent-trail, hoping that the Sinner’s Ash, which the Elfin and Rogue cautiously spread, would actually counteract whatever force was at work here.

Half an hour later, the scent-trail was gone. I had been following our journey from the sky with Karasumany’s vision occupying my right eye the entire time, and we had avoided getting misled, but unfortunately I had no idea where else to go now.

“Any ideas?” I asked my companions.

“There are a few mansions around here,” Renji observed. “We could check them for any signs of the Tracker.”

“I’m seeing a lot of guards around them,” I remarked, as the eyes of the crow took in the nearby large stone manors belonging to aristocratic families.

“Wouldn’t it make the most sense to see which one belongs to Myrabelle’s family?” Lukas then asked.

Renji, Rana, and I shared a look, then we all seemed to shake our heads in unison. “That makes so much sense that I can’t believe I overlooked it,” I commented.

**“I may also be of service here,”** Armen commented. **“I have visited a few of these mansions in my past life.”**

“I doubt many would be held by the same families,” Rana said. I nodded in agreement. Though I had no clue how long ago it was that Armen had been alive, it sounded like several centuries at least.

**“You underestimate the grip with which the rich and powerful hold on to their power. I would imagine that many of these mansions have not changed owners since my time.”**

“Let’s put it to a test, shall we?” Renji commented.

I turned towards the Elfin and Rogue, and told them, “You two should see if you can sneak past their walls and have a look at what goes on inside.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” Rana warned.

Lukas ignored her cautiousness and asked, “What do we do if we find something?”

“I’ll be watching from the sky, so just try and wave at the crows flying around, then come find us.”

“Okay!”

Elye thumped her closed fist into her chest, then said, *“I will follow the small one.”*

“She said she’ll follow you,” I told Lukas before he could ask.

He nodded and then off they went.

**“Your energy is below half,”** Armen told me.

*I know, but I should have enough left to continue looking around with Karasumany for at least another hour.*

**“It would be advisable to regroup and rest if we do find something.”**

*I agree. Whatever is going on here, I don’t think we should take it too lightly.*

Renji looked around the corner of the crossroad we were in, watching the guards further down by the ornate iron gate leading to the first of the mansions. On the other side, Lukas and Elye were following the three-metre wall, looking for the optimal place to crawl over it.

“If there really is an Illusionist at work here,” Rana started, “then we should be cautious in how we proceed. The Aristocrats with powerful Otherworlders on their leash are not to be taken lightly.”

“Like Finn Serelliam in Lundia?” I asked.

She nodded in response.

“I hate that guy,” Renji commented.

“Alright, we will proceed carefully,” I told her. “Armen is also advising that we regroup and figure out a plan, if we do find a trace of Charles around here.”

“Let’s do this,” Renji said with an eager grin. “I don’t want to be upstaged by a Rogue and an Elfin.”