

## 57 – Reunion

“Was this really the best you could come up with?” I complained, while walking in front of Charles and Elye, with the large black fox in front of me.

**“I am doubtful your trick with showing Leopold’s Guild Card will work here.”**

*That’s why I’m going along with this dumb plan, so the guards won’t ask about it.*

**“They always ask.”**

Up ahead was a small arch next to a giant gate with its portcullis closed. The arch was where six guardsmen of the Arley Principality inspected those travelling on foot across the border. Coins exchanged hands as the toll was paid, and papers of citizenry and/or Guild Cards were thoroughly looked at. The portcullis would be opened once all carriages and caravans had been inspected, allowing them to pass through. It seemed very strict, but, given the fact that Harrlev was an erstwhile foe to the Principality, it was perhaps not so strange.

What worried me most were the three Witch Hunters who oversaw the affair. There was no way they wouldn’t be on me the second it was my turn in the line.

But that was where Charles’ harebrained plan came in: I would be acting as his captive that he was bringing back to Helmstatter.

*There’s no way this will work...*

**“Manifest me! Set me upon them! I’ll burn them all to ash and bone!”**

Seramosa had been especially on edge because of the Witch Hunters, and though I hated that my mind went there, I couldn’t help but feel that her plan of attacking first was the safest bet. After all, my last encounter with their kind had shown me that they possessed some unnerving ability to lock-down my familiars.

**“I do not believe they will be able to ensnare Seramosa,”** Armen commented. **“Demons are not so easily controlled.”**

Charles shoved me forward and I heard Elye hiss in response. She was definitely not on board with this plan. I was also growing increasingly despondent about our chances.

Suddenly a voice emerged from the pouch on my hip.

*“Unleash me, Exorcist. Use my song!”*

*Unleash?* I thought, wondering if she meant the new ability I had gained. I glanced around quickly, wondering if I was the only one who had heard. Charles gave me a smirk, and the other travellers around us seemed just bored at waiting around.

*Did you hear that, Armen?*

**“Hear what?”**

“Next!” yelled the man, and with another shove from behind, I was placed in front of him and his five mates. As their eyes scrutinised me and rightfully determined I was an Otherworlder, no doubt thanks to my attire and gear, another demanded, “Show us your Guild Card and explain the purpose of your passage to Arley.”

I could feel the moment the three Witch Hunters settled their eyes on me. I squared my jaw and focused ahead at the main guardsman. With a bit of my essence fed to my eyes, I could tell that none of them were Otherworlders, though all six had reddish auras, marking them as something akin to Vanguard or Brawler.

Charles came up next to me and said, “I am bringing this prisoner back to Helmstatter to cash in the bounty.”

The guards exchanged glances.

“What is the prisoner’s name?” they asked, two of them putting their hands on the pommels of their swords.

“Exorcist Ryūta Temaru, Scourge of Hearthshire.”

The atmosphere changed abruptly: nearby travellers backed away with muttered curses; the guardsmen pulled their weapons; and the three Witch Hunters marched over with determined glares in their hard eyes.

“Why isn’t he gagged, blind-folded, and bound!?” yelled the first guard in protest.

One look at Charles’ face made me realise he hadn’t thought that far.

*Idiot...*

I quickly put my hand in my belt pouch and withdrew the wooden Music Box.

*Armen, protect me!*

Terrified of what I was about to do, two of the guardsmen surged forward with downward swings of their blades, but they were punched back with such force by Armen that the weapons flew from their hands.

“Elye! Disable the Witch Hunters, but don’t kill them!”

She didn't reply, but I heard as she drew an arrow from her quiver and knocked it to her bow. A *woosh* and pained exclamation followed, before she pulled another arrow.

I put my Ifrit Claw on top of the Music Box, and despite Seramosa's excitement and desire to join the fight, her fire did not fill the hand and scorch the wooden exterior of the box. I sent a lot of my available essence into my right hand, flooding it into the Music Box, then said, out loud, “Unleash Siren's Song!”

When I pulled open the lid, the melodic and charming sound of Lyssalynne's voice filled the air. At once I heard weapons clatter to the ground and saw that even the three Witch Hunters, one of whom had an arrow lodged in his hand, had fallen still.

While her song swam across the air, sounding not at all as though it came from the box in my hand, all of the nearby people, except for Elye for some reason, had fallen completely still. Their eyes and expressions were mellow and placid. They were seemingly experiencing true bliss in their minds.

*Holy shit! I can't believe that worked!*

**“It would be prudent to exploit the opportunity while it lasts.”**

I couldn't argue with that, so I grabbed Elye and pulled her towards the arch that led to the other side of the border. But I had only just set food on the threshold, when I looked back and saw that Charles was likewise under the Blissful Song.

“Go on ahead and find us a carriage!” I told Elye, then went back and grasped Charles by the wrist and pulled him with me. He meandered nonchalantly while I tugged at him with all my might. His fox companion seemed unbothered as well, but trekked along with me, perhaps its bond with the Tracker also filling its head with bliss.

I went through the stone arch of the enormous border wall, my grip on the Tracker's wrist keeping him with me. On the other side were perhaps thirty caravans and carriages, either looking to take people to Helmstatter and beyond, or waiting for those who had yet to go through the inspection. Elye had found one that was empty of passengers, but which had a driver up front.

As I looked at the driver, I realised that I'd fed the Music Box too much energy, because even on the other side the people were all just staring blankly ahead, blissfully unaware to the real world. The horses at the front of the carriage were trotting anxiously, perhaps sensing that something was wrong.

I handed Charles to Elye and said, “Get him inside!”

Then I moved up front and sat down next to the driver.

“Take us to Helmstatter,” I told him.

He turned to face me, with a blank stare and stupid smile. “Helmstatter? That sounds like a great place to visit.”

“You’re taking us there, remember?” I lied.

He nodded slowly to himself, as though remembering.

“I remember now. I’m taking you to Helmstatter.”

“That’s right. Off we go then.”

“Off we go,” he repeated dully, then slowly tugged on the reins, which was enough to set the horses in motion.

“Are you good back there?” I called through a little grill behind the driver seat to Elye seated within.

*“The Tracker and his foul canine are inside,”* she told me. *“Yuuta, what did you do?”*

“I did what I had to do,” I told her.

She didn’t inquire further, so the answer must’ve placated her.

Once we were perhaps a few kilometres out from the Border Gate, I shut the Music Box. I wondered how long Lyssalynne could’ve kept up her song, but it was something I’d ask about later.

I steeled myself for the moment the Blissful Song wore off, fearing that both the driver and Charles would flip out once they came to.

The driver immediately gasped, as though waking from a nightmare. Then he looked down at the reins in his hands, before looking around at the forest we were rolling through on a wide gravel-and-dirt road that could fit four carriages side-by-side. Finally, he looked at me.

“Good weather today, wouldn’t you say?”

I nodded slowly.

“So, what’s a bunch of Adventurers like you plan on doing in Helmstatter?”

I swallowed, then said, as calmly as I could manage, “Just visiting friends and seeing the city.”

The driver grinned, “O, it’s a great city!”

A knock on the carriage wall behind the driver seat made me almost jump out of my skin.

“Ryūta!” said Charles, excitedly.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I told you it’d work!”

I realised just then how powerful the Siren’s magic song was. Not only had she spellbound potentially hundreds of people, but they didn’t even know that it had happened to them. Charles’

mind must’ve somehow just assumed that his plan had worked out, just like how the driver must’ve assumed that we were passengers he had meant to bring to Helmstatter. A fist of dread, anxiety, and guilt seized my lungs in a vice grip.

“It sure did...” I told him unenthusiastically.

**“I do not need to tell you this, but I will say it nonetheless: this Music Box is too powerful. It ought to be destroyed.”** I couldn’t help but agree with Armen, but it was also true that, without it, I would no doubt have been detained by the Witch Hunters and never been able to see Rana and Lukas again. Or I would’ve fought tooth-and-nail and a lot of people would have died unnecessarily as a result.

*“I like it!”* said Seramosa. *“Her voice is pretty!”*

*I will try and set her free, I assured Armen. Return her to the ocean where she belongs. It is clear that her magic is not meant to exist here, away from the open waters. It is too powerful in densely-populated places.*

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up, as the melodic voice addressed me: *“I knew that placing my trust in you was wise, Exorcist. I can tell by the flavour of your soul.”*

I knew that her voice spoke only to me, even my familiars deaf to her luring tongue.

“What’s that you got there?” the driver asked, looking at me again.

“It’s a gift,” I lied and stowed it away in my pouch, before he could ask further. “Say, would you mind stopping over here by the side of the road.”

“Nature’s calling you, is it?”

After disembarking the carriage, I moved over into the cover of some trees and invoked my Observer.

*Karasumany, if you have copies left at the Border Gate, show me what they see.*

**CAW!** came the reply, before my eyes and ears were overtaken by the senses of a crow seated atop the wall, near to where the arch for travellers were.

Through its eyes I saw that all were as normal. The guardsmen were checking travellers and inspecting the caravans and their goods. The Witch Hunters were standing off to the side where they’d stood initially, though one had a bandage around his hand where Elye had shot him with an arrow. Disturbingly, they didn’t seem to question the cause of such an injury.

When one of the Witch Hunters glanced up at the crow I was inhabiting, I cut the connection immediately and told the Observer, *Scatter your copies! Do not observe the Witch Hunters unless you believe you can get away with it. They are a cunning lot.*

**CAW!**

“Are you okay there, *boyo*? You look a bit pale.”

His word-choice sparked an uncomfortable familiarity and I couldn’t help but frown. I didn’t want to be reminded of Owl right now.

I ignored the Tracker and just closed my eyes as I leaned back against the wall. The black fox was cozying itself up in Charles’ lap, while Elye was running her hand along the body of her bow.

I’d decided to sit in the back of the carriage, since the driver was insistent on small-talk and right now I didn’t have the mental capacity for it. The reality of what had just happened was still weighing heavy on me. Fortunately, sleep found me after a short while.

It took about four days journey along the wide road to reach Helmstatter, much of which was within the expansive forests that covered the southern part of Arley. The last hundred kilometres were across open and hilly farmland, which was torn open by tools drawn by beasts, no doubt preparing for the crops being seeded this time of year.

For this last leg of the journey, I sat up front with the driver, watching as the enormous stone city came into view. I’d been cheated of this sight when Leopold had dragged me with him to Harrlev, so now I was drinking it all in.

Anxiety bloomed in my chest as I thought about what I should say when I saw Rana. Would she even believe me after all this time? But I knew she wasn’t that way. She had believed me back in Ochre when Harleigh’s Brawler friend had tried to pick a fight. This was a different thing, but I was confident that I could trust her.

Lukas wasn’t someone I was too concerned about, since he seemed easy to go along with and I felt I had a lot of goodwill with him since he had only become an Adventurer because I’d had faith in him.

The carriage came to an abrupt halt.

“We have arrived!” said the driver.

I blinked and looked around. I’d been so invested in my thoughts that I hadn’t realised we’d entered the city. The carriage was in a part of the city that held hundreds of similar vehicles, all transporting people and goods to-and-from.

After dismounting the front seat, I handed the driver ten silver crowns. I didn’t exactly have a ton of money on me, but I didn’t want to leave him unpaid.

“But you already paid me,” he protested.

“Consider it a thanks for the chat,” I told him.

He took the coin and smiled. “Have fun!”

“Thank you,” I replied, then walked around the back to where Elye and Charles were standing.

Elye looked around suspiciously, the hood of her cloak drawn over her hair and horns. “*Where are all the helmets?*” she questioned.

“For the last time,” Charles started, “this is not a city of helmets!”

“*I have been lied to,*” she hissed paranoid.

“Charles, if you wouldn’t mind, lead us to where Rana and Lukas are staying.”

“Of course. Word of advice though, you may want to hit up the Adventurers’ Guild and get the mess with the bounty sorted.”

I frowned, but nodded. It wasn’t a good idea to leave it hanging over my head.

Helmstatter was easily the most unfriendly place I’d ever set foot in, as all the tan-and-blond Natives stared at us with suspicion and open hostility, while we passed through the crowded streets that led to a tavern near to the Guild Quarter. It also didn’t help that the city was mired in shadows and the tall stone buildings and spiked towers and uniform grey felt suffocating when compared to the architecture of Ochre, Lundia, or Skovslot.

The city was separated into tiers: with the Market Quarter being the lowest, and also where we’d disembarked the carriage; then the next tier was the Guild Quarter; after which was the Artisan Quarter; and then the Noble Quarter. Though it wasn’t stated anywhere, the Market Quarter doubled as a slum for those who couldn’t afford to live in the other three places.

Charles had told me to keep an eye on my belongings until we reached the Guild Quarter, where a small corner was reserved for the Adventurers’ and Mercenary Guilds, with the rest being Guilds for merchants, artists, bankers, cooks & bakers, and other such professions.

Once we crossed the invisible threshold to the Guild Quarter, the hostile glares died down a bit and I started seeing a lot more Otherworlders, many of whom were closer to Charles than me when it came to age.

“Where would I find someone like a Jeweller or Exorcist tools vendor?” I asked Charles, since he was my only guide for the unfamiliar city.

“Most of those types hang out in Artisan Quarter.”

“And the Church? Where do they have that?”

“There are some small chapels in each of the Quarters, but only the Noble Quarter has a proper Church.”

*The entire design of this city feels as though it was made to separate people into hierarchies. I preferred Ochre. It felt much freer and open.*

**“This city mirrors the old world. Evergreen in Lacksmey is more akin to Ochre.”**

*Sounds like you’re wanting me to go there.*

**“I do.”**

“*Yuuta, you are doing that thing again,*” Elye said, snapping me out of the conversation in my head.

“Sorry.”

“This is the place,” Charles said in a way that made me think he might have said it twice already, but that I’d fallen on deaf ears.

I looked at the façade of the building. It was a charming wood-and-stone front, with glazed windows in plus-shaped frames through which came a warm inviting light. With a deep breath, I walked up to the door and pulled it open. Immediately, the thrum of voices and the warmth of the interior washed over me like comforting waves.

I held the door open as Elye, Charles, and his fox entered after me. Then I walked up towards the bar counter, but didn’t make it more than five steps before I saw Rana and Lukas talking to a guy with a muscular and tall frame, warm-blond short hair, reddish-tan skin, and an expression and atmosphere about him that was eerily familiar to me somehow.

“Ryūta?” I heard Lukas ask, the first to spot me.

I scratched the back of my head awkwardly. “Hey. I’m back.”

Suddenly Rana ran into me and picked me up in a great big hug, making it comically-easy to tell how much taller she was than me. After setting me down, she fussed over me, looking me up and down to see if I was okay, before drawing up short when she saw my right hand.

I didn’t realise until then, but I must’ve had tears in my eyes, because she wiped my cheeks, then smiled and said, “Welcome back.”

With my Ifrit Claw, I touched her cheek, then pulled her face close and kissed her deeply. She seemed surprised, but didn’t pull away.

“So, I did my job, like I said I would,” Charles chimed in, destroying the tender moment. Rana cast him a scowl, the likes of which only Owl had been the target of it. The Tracker took a few steps back then said, “I’ll find you tomorrow, let’s say around noon?”



When Rana didn't reply, he nodded to himself, and said, “Noon it is.” Then he departed the tavern with his fox.

Elye looked at Rana and Lukas, then settled her eyes on the third man, with the warm-blonde hair. He wore a charming grin, as though he knew something funny no one else had figured out. The Elfin then asked, “*Did you not only have two others in your party?*”

“I did,” I said, looking back at the eerily-familiar expression and posture of the stranger, while Rana kept a hand on my arm. “Who is he?”

“He said he was a friend of yours,” Rana commented. “We just met him two days ago.”

“A friend?” I wondered, before the figure got up and slowly walked towards me. I activated my Spirit Sight and saw that he was a Brawler, but it seemed irrelevant, because the way he moved as he came up to me sparked the final bit of recognition I needed.

“Long time no see, Ryūta.”

“Renji?” I asked, confused. “Is it really you!?”

My old friend grinned at me.