

101 – The Sound of Hooves

We had finished the last two deliveries by the time it got dark, but would need to return to an Adventurers’ Guild with the signed Delivery Quest fliers, before we could cash in on the meagre rewards of a total sum of twelve silvers... On the other hand, if Renji and Elye were able to kill the Black Hound Matriarch and bring its blood to the Alchemist, the reward for the ten Buzzing Rocks we’d receive would be seventy silver crowns. For what would be around two days’ work counting travel and split four ways, it wasn’t a terrible amount of money, though unlike my Exorcism work, it wasn’t enough to keep our finances afloat for more than a few days.

The house of the village Chief turned out to be the same place that Ludwig had referred to, when he mentioned how a man by the name of Jakobs made Black Tallow Candles. Sure enough, the Chief *was* this person, and his entire house stank of acrid and tangy pig’s blood, which was the basis for his candles.

We had delivered the crate of empty bottles to someone in the far corner of the village who had a little shop with random wares. Emily had bought some rabbit-skin gloves from there, with money I had given her as an advance on her portion of the Quest rewards. She was very adamant about paying Renji and I back for the money we had given her, but I told her that she didn’t have to be in a hurry about it, since neither of us were going to run out of money in the short-term, and we viewed it as an investment in her capabilities.

Although, even with the roughly thirty-five gold crowns in my possession, thoughts of buying my own place and eventually funding the creation of an Exorcist Guild were a ways’ off. I could potentially afford a place in Evergreen, if I liked it, but I liked having a buffer right now, so I wasn’t forced to take on quests and could be more leisurely about it. Although saying that, I knew that my F-tier Luck wouldn’t allow me to sit idly by and take things slowly.

I was also starting to feel how my Attributes were controlling my desires. Rana had taught me that Strength made a person inclined to get into fights, and Armen had told me that his Soul attribute made him prone to praying. I was discovering that I couldn’t stop snooping in things, almost like some kind of sick desire to know a lot about people. Like some retired detective who couldn’t stay retired, because there were still mysteries to solve. And I could feel how I itched to solve another Exorcism, as though seeking that sense of relief when clues came together.

From what I gathered about Ludwig, he might’ve been some kind of police officer or detective himself, so maybe the life as an Exorcist wasn’t so bad for him, though his main priority seemed to be tinkering with Possessed Items and aiding Mortl’s expansion of the Necromancy Guild. I wondered if his F-tier Luck manifested itself in the same way as mine, though I doubted it. Just like how Renji and Rana acted in different ways, despite similar Attributes, it seemed that Luck was also contingent on the person in question.

I looked over to where Emily was standing, gracefully swishing her gnarled white wand through the air, as though trying to tame the wind. She had a high Acumen and Intelligence attributes, and I wondered how those would affect her going forward. Owl had an S-tier in Acumen, and I thought this might be what led him to always try to manipulate things in his favour. Part of me was relieved that Attributes weren’t binary equations, as it allowed self-expression despite common traits, but another part of me felt uneasy about it, since there was a comfort in knowing.

Speaking of which:

Karasumany. Show me the box.

My vision and hearing were overtaken by the sight of a second-floor room, seen through a window, where the crow was perched on an outcropping of white wax. I wasn’t sure what exact building it was, but I recognised the person as the same one who had, seemingly, been the buyer in the tavern. As I watched through the window, I saw that he was looking into the black metal box, which he had opened the door on. More confoundingly, he was talking to whatever was inside.

Thanks to Karasumany’s special vision, I saw the same black smoke as what Emily had first noticed in the tavern, but I also heard a voice that grated on my ears like several cutting blades on glass.

I WILL FIND YOU.

I swallowed hard. I needed to know what house this was, so I commanded the crow to lift from the window and take to the sky. As it circled above, I severed my connection and scanned the air, realising that it wasn’t far from the Alchemist’s building.

“Emily,” I said. “I need to check on that box we saw. I’ve got a bad feeling about it somehow.”

The Spellhand immediately lowered her wand and looked at me. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot too.”

“I heard the voice, just now, as I was watching it with my crow. It said the same thing you mentioned.”

“Should we wait for Renji and Elye?”

I’d checked on them with Karasumany a few times, but they seemed to be fighting through a Black Hound den in the Whispering Wilds, so it might take them a while yet before they were done.

“I think you should go back to the tavern and wait. I’ll check on it alone.”

“You’re leaving me to be by myself?”

I bit my lip. “I just don’t want to put you in danger. Who knows what it could be?”

“I’ve gotten better with my magic already,” she insisted. “I can help.”

Though her words didn’t convince me, her aura did, because it gave off a feeling of terror, as though there was nothing scarier to her than being alone.

“If I say ‘run’, then you’d better listen.”

She nodded seriously.

I let out a sigh. *Why does it feel like we’re preparing for battle? It’s just an investigation. Surely it’s nothing but some creepy Possessed Item... Yet why can’t I help but feel so alert?*

Meigetsu, stay close.

The swirling ephemeral robe zipped across the air and began dancing around me in a tight circle, startling Emily.

I don’t think a Lifeward allows me to utilise my familiar on behalf of someone else... so, if it comes down to it, I’ll have to jump in front of Emily to trigger Meigetsu...

Not for the first time, I wished for Armen’s return.

We began moving towards the crow circling in the air above the distant house. Emily walked a couple paces behind me, her wand in her hand and the wind slowly beginning to orbit her. I couldn’t tell if her wand made a big difference or not, though perhaps it sped up her Affinity Control.

Karasumany, send a few more clones to where Renji and Elye are, and then spread the rest of your flock at random in the sky above the village. I want full coverage.

CAW!

A rustle of wings sounded from high above as the crow directly above me seemed to birthe a dozen birds from its own body in an instant, all of which spread in different directions, with three flying towards the forest. A moment later, twice their number thronged the sky.

Maybe inflicting a bit of paranoia on the inhabitants wouldn’t be such a bad thing, I considered, recalling the side-effect of the Many that Ludwig had taught me. After all, if the villagers felt a sense of unease, they might withdraw to their homes, making any potential fallout of my investigation less severe.

If I am dealing with a Possessed Item, I need to figure out what type it is before I properly engage. If it is like the Music Box I’ll need a ward for Emily and I; but if it is more combat-oriented like Oliver’s sword, then I need to focus on getting it out of the wielder’s hand most likely. However, if it is like the orb that housed the Larder Keeper... then I need an altogether different approach.

I gave it a bit of thought, wondering how best to approach. Emily and I were close enough that we could see the tower-like building that stood six doors down from the Alchemist’s party-hat-shaped house.

“Emily,” I said, “Can you direct a strong gust of wind at the window on the second floor of that white tower? It needs to be strong enough to force open the window.”

“I think so. I would need maybe a minute or two to prepare enough power.”

“Excellent.”

Karasumany, I need six more clones to wait above the tower where the other one is circling. Five of them must copy the movements of the one I control. Would that be possible and within the bounds of our Pact?

CAW!!

Crap... that definitely sounded like a ‘no’.

Alright, scratch that then, and just give me control of the one that is circling. Prepare two backups in case the one I control is destroyed.

It would violate my Observer contract if I tried to make Karasumany perform any task that wasn’t within the umbrella of observing. There was a bit of a loophole in that I could do certain things, like delivering letters or making primitive gestures to convey a message, but that was only when I was in control and observing through its eyes. I had thought to use the familiar and its duplicates to lift the box with its contents out through the window, but it would clearly be a Pact violation. Last time I’d commanded Karasumany incorrectly, it had felt like a taser stuck directly into my brain, and I wasn’t interested in experiencing *that* feeling again.

“Change of plans. Do you think you can punch through the window and then suck the air out immediately after?”

“That sounds like it’d be a lot harder,” she commented. “I can try.”

She stopped and looked at me. “It’s the right house, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“And you’re certain the box is in there.”

“Emily, I watched through the window and saw it.”

“I’m just checking. I don’t want to accidentally hurt someone.”

“I’ll take responsibility for anything that hap—”

I never finished my sentence, as the sound of hooves suddenly echoed across the village of Sacramento, like a bell tolling for a funeral. I immediately flung my essence out to the circling crow above, only for it to not recognise my command.

Karasumany, show me what you see! I insisted, trying again.

My familiar did not answer, and, as I looked at the sky above, I saw my crows all fall from the air, vanishing into nothingness as they fell, while Karasu’s real body flew far above the village to escape whatever had disabled its clones.

It finally let me see what it had seen, and I felt my heartrate spike as I beheld the black smoke blanket that rolled across Sacramento from the north, leaving not a single house untouched as it slowly surged in towards the building we’d been heading for.

“We need to hurry! Come on!”

I pulled the Singing Branch from my back and prepared for the worst-case scenario.