

## 150 – His Obsessive Theory

Either it was bad luck or an impossible prospect, but Armen and I were unable to find a carriage, and thus had to walk the several kilometres between the Guild district and Hearth.

“My Liege, I am certain I can transform my body into that of a steed.”

*That sounds ridiculous.*

“Don’t worry about it, Jules,” I replied. “The walking is good for me.”

“**I do believe we are being followed,**” Armen remarked as we passed north out of the Guild district and into a few blocks connected to Great Marketplace, past which lay Taverna.

The crowds around us were dense with activity, but I didn’t immediately spot anyone looking our way, so I connected to Karasumany in the sky with my right eye and ear.

From this vantage in the sky, I could truly appreciate the scope of the city’s population, as what seems like thousands of people filled the streets around us, going to and from places, or standing in place discussing in groups or haggling wares. The Peacekeepers, who I normally didn’t notice, were also out in force, distinguishable by their grey plate over white undershirts.

As we continued manoeuvring around the people in the streets and alleyways, while heading through to Taverna, I spotted only a few people travelling the exact same path as us. After a few more minutes, all but one peeled off to go down different roads, and the one who remained only a street behind us was someone I recognised.

I stopped and waited for him to catch up, and, after a few moments, he came around the corner where we stood, nearly walking right into Armen. He yelped in shocked surprise, the monocle hopping off of his face and heading straight for the flagstones underfoot. Armen was quick as lightning, catching the eyepiece before it was shattered on the ground.

“You spotted me!” Potts exclaimed, making it sound like I’d committed a crime.

Armen handed him back his monocle. “**It is impolite to stalk people.**”

“Well, the two of you left before I could catch you.”

“How did you know where I was going? Ludwig told me you don’t have a Watcher familiar.”

“I have a Church Grim Tracker.”

One of Karasu’s clones came down from a rooftop and landed on my shoulder, and through its vision I saw the shadowy outline of a large black dog next to him.

“It looks nice.”

“Thank you. His countenance is very agreeable.”

It took me a moment to get what he meant, but then I realised he was referring to the fact that many familiars were quite horrific to look at.

“Do you have a Tracker yourself?” he asked.

I decided to be forthcoming since he’d told me about his and answered, “I have a Whistle with the soul of a Tracker inside it.”

“Interesting choice. I wouldn’t have thought to make such a tool. In truth, I haven’t used Contain Spirit more than once.”

I could understand why. It was rather daunting to use the ability, knowing that anyone who got a hold of the item you produced could use it.

“Do you mind if I come with you for a bit?”

“Sure.”

We continued heading through Great Market and to Taverna, weaving in-and-out of the crowds, and Potts kept up with us, though he was sweating profusely. It *was* rather warm with the sun beating down from above and not a lot of wind, but I’d usually been okay during the summers in Kyoto, and this was nothing compared to those.

After we entered Taverna and were met with the noise of several dozen different parties taking place at once throughout the district, we upped our pace until we came out into a smaller street with far less drunken people bumbling about and being a nuisance.

Potts was breathing heavily by now and we paused to give him a chance to recover.

*My Vitality is F and somehow I am faring better than him. Is it possible to go further down in rank than F??*

**“You have been keeping up with regular exercise,”** Armen commented in my mind. **“My guess is that you are at the upper limits of F-tier, while this man is at the bottom.”**

“You okay, Potts?”

“Sorry about holding you back,” he said. “Got a thing with my lungs, you see. You know, I thought that coming to this world would help, but apparently not.”

He didn’t strike me as a smoker or anything like that, so it was perhaps something else.

“Was there a reason you wanted to come with me?” I asked him.

“Sorry. I overheard Ludwig talking to your Brawler friend. He’s got his Role Advancement coming up, right? I’d like to come along if possible.”

I didn’t really know him that well, and I wasn’t sure if I fully trusted him.

“I’d have to ask Renji about that,” I started, then picked up on *something* in his aura. “Why do you want to come along?”

“It’s not every day a Role Advancement happens for one of the rarer Specialisations. It may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

My eyes narrowed. He was only partially telling the truth, judging by his aura.

“And what’s the *real* reason?” I said, straightening up and taking a half-step back. Armen was immediately put on alert and I could feel Jules beginning to move in the pocket where I kept him, preparing himself.

“You are a lot like my mentor,” he replied. “She saw through every lie as well.”

He cleared his throat.

“You may think I’m obsessed, if Ludwig has had anything to say about me after last we met, but I think I’ll find my first real clue to the death of my mentor in Academy district. It’d be impossible for me to get in by myself, but if I was accompanying the celebrations of an Otherworlder about to be Advanced, then no one would bat an eye.”

I frowned. “Why do you think you’ll find a clue there?”

“Good, your first instinct isn’t flat-out rejection, I can work with that.”

“Answer the question please.”

Potts moved over to set on the stone step in front of a shuttered entrance to a small inn that seemed to have been closed for a long time. “I’ve been tracking disappearances across the city for the last year and a half, ever since Mary-Ann was killed. Did you know that more than a hundred people disappear each week? It’s a lot of reports to sift through.”

“Is that why the exorcisms you take are so long in their conclusions?”

“I’m thorough, is that a crime?”

*Ludwig was right, he does seem a bit off. Maybe my initial inclination to believe him was wrong.*

“But yes, it *has* consumed much of my time and personal finances to track all these disappearances, but then I started to notice a pattern a couple of months ago: someone would be reported missing, only to resurface a day or two later, and then about two-to-three weeks after would be reported missing again, for good this time. When I looked back through the many reports I’ve collated, it was more than eighty different disappearances that fell under this pattern. Far too many to be a simple coincidence.

“And, looking even closer, I noticed another pattern: the next person who would go missing in the same way was in the same district or the one nearby to the previous person. If you track the pattern, it draws a circuitous route through the city heading for...”

“Academy?” I guessed.

Potts wore a smug grin. “Exactly!”

“**A Demon is behind this pattern, that is what you believe?**” Armen asked.

His deep voice made Potts nearly jump out of his skin, as though he’d forgotten the Crusader was standing right next to me.

“What else could it be? Do you know anything with the ability to take over people and mimic their behaviours perfectly, while still roaming so wide an area as the literal entirety of Evergreen.”

“I’ve never heard of a Demon like that,” I said. “There would be signs, wouldn’t there?”

“Oh, there is a sign alright.” Potts patted the head of his large shadowy hound.

“A scent-trail?” I asked.

“Indeed.”

“What does it look like?”

“Look like?” he asked. “What do you mean?”

Instead of bothering to explain it to him, I handed him the Scenting Whistle. “Blow a note in this.”

He took the whistle and put it to his lips, producing a deep note. Then his head swivelled around in surprise and awe. “What in the... this is amazing.”

I quickly snatched the whistle from his hands. “This is what I meant.”

“I don’t know what the scent ‘looks’ like, but my Church Grim has the scent locked in and will alert me if we come across it again.”

Despite my many apprehensions about his theory, I had to admit I was intrigued. But something bothered me.

“Why haven’t you just sent familiars to Academy to investigate?”

“They have two Spirit Callers on retainer in the Founding district, who do nothing except mercilessly destroy unauthorised familiars entering the secluded centre of the city. Granted, it’s not an ironclad defence, since I was able to sneak in a Scout familiar of mine. However, this Demon... I don’t know how to put it, except... it eats those that try to spy on it.”

“**If it is truly a Demon, then it must have a goal,**” Armen stated.

“Of course it has a goal!” Potts exclaimed, making a couple walking down the street towards us stop and take a different path to avoid us. “It’s going to work its way up the rung of the city’s hierarchy until it can overtake the place of the King himself!”

*This does sound like the rambling delusions of a man who has not been able to cope with the loss of his mentor... except... there’s a Demonologist at large in Lacksmey, whose goal is the dismantling and death of the Royal Family.*

I released a deep exhale.

“Never tell anyone else about this,” I said to Potts.

“But—”

“No one,” I interrupted him. “Now, come with me. I’ll introduce you to Renji.”

Potts’ eyes lit up. He eagerly got up from his seat, then did a ‘hush’ gesture and grinned immediately after.

*You know. I really hope he’s wrong about this...*

*Saoirse, if you can hear me. I hope you’ll be able to meet with me in the Academy district two days from now. If Potts isn’t wrong, then things might take a downturn very soon.*