

153 – Advancement II

My heart was pounding in my chest painfully, but I managed to establish a connection to Karasumany in the sky and have it send out a clone. Meanwhile, I was manoeuvring its main body away from the bridge and back towards a part of the city, where the Demon in front of us couldn't destroy it.

As I lowered the clone down through the sky, I kept my right eye closed so no one could see it turning dark, while keeping my left eye on the Witch Hunter woman. For just a second, as I trained the crow's eyes on her, I saw how her blue eyes rapidly looked up at it, before returning to pretending she hadn't noticed.

Holy shit...

Do you wish to kill it right here? Saoirse asked.

I don't think there's any way we can get away with doing that.

I know its name. If you make a fitting sacrifice, I can do it. No one would know.

I kept my expression neutral, while handing the tall Witch Hunter my Guild Card and Focus.

If you have the power to kill it, then why don't you??

I cannot simply kill when it suits me.

What about when you were at Fortress Major?

That was different.

The Librarian looked at my Focus, while the tall dark-skinned man studied my Card, even tapping my Exorcist skill set to see the abilities and how they were levelled. For a moment, I forgot about the Demon as I feared that he would ask about Reforge Spirit and the way I'd ranked up Possessed Weapon Wielder.

Don't worry, your skills appear suitably uninteresting, Saoirse commented.

You're willing to alter reality on my behalf, but not deal with a Demon that is murdering people and assuming their identities??

I perform my illusions such that you are not burnt at the stake and my brief respite comes to an end too soon.

That's... actually good to know. I'd be afraid of anything you did that wasn't self-serving.

After looking at my Focus and Card, I next showed them my Singing Branch and Scenting Whistle. The Librarian immediately displayed a lot of interest in the staff, holding it very deliberately and carefully in his hands, while he studied it with some colour-shifting glasses.

Before the Witch Hunter could take the Whistle from where it lay in my palm, I noticed something.

I think the Whistle might be broken.

There was a deep crack along its white surface.

Did you let the misfortunate Exorcist hold it?

... Yes.

How foolish.

Do you think it’s possible to repair?

There is no need. It remains functional.

I released a sigh of relief.

Note to self: don’t lend Potts anything in the future.

“You could have used your Infuse Spirit on him instead,” Armen noted in my head.

I’m not sure that would’ve been a good idea, given the effect it has...

After the Witch Hunter handed off the Scenting Whistle to the Librarian, and I had my staff returned, I emptied out my bags and let them look through my stuff. I found some dried fruit at the bottom of one, where it’d been squished flat by the weight of everything on top of it.

Although I made a show of having nothing to hide, I did not show them my Encyclopaedias, as these would attract too much attention. Instead I kept them in the inner pockets of my robe-coat and hoped they wouldn’t demand a strip-search.

Once they were satisfied none of my items constituted anything imminently-dangerous, the Witch Hunter in charge said:

“Bring out your familiars next.”

I hadn’t expected them to ask this of me, but I obliged nonetheless.

Jules, please don’t say anything to them. It will just complicate matters.

“**Understood, my Liege,**” replied the wooden puppet in my mind, surprising me with his ability to do so.

As I lifted him out of my front-facing pocket and set him on the ground, he grew to the height of an adult. The King’s men all took a step back in response and the surrounding guards came a bit closer.

Next I had the clone of Karasumany land on my shoulder, and followed it up with letting Meigetsu turn corporeal. Lastly, I summoned up my Caster: the Drowned that I’d named Nami-no-Musuko.

I heard some of the guards gag in disgust at witnessing the bloated visage of Nami. For some reason, the blue-eyed Witch Hunter watched my orbiting Lifeward with interest, while ignoring the rest.

“Alright, that’s enough,” said the man.

I quickly unsummoned the Drowned and let the orbiting Moonlight Dancer go incorporeal. Jules shrunk back down, and I picked him up and placed him in my coat pocket again, while the crow clone on my shoulder took to the sky.

“Next,” he said and I moved over to those who’d already been processed and waited by the carriage.

Renji and Kally were standing there, while Armen, Emily, Potts, and Saoirse all waited their turn, with Armen currently being scrutinised. He had to take his helmet off. The blue-eyed woman also watched him with an uncomfortable amount of interest.

“Your corpse familiar is quite unsettling,” said Kally, while we watched the King’s men inspect Armen. Although I hadn’t realised it, he had a fake Guild Card similar to Saoirse, thanks to her quick thinking and creation magic. The dark-skinned man was studying it curiously, while the Librarian looked at his black plate helmet, and one of the Paladins checked his weapons.

“It’s called the Drowned,” I told her. “It’s like a Spellhand that curses other magic-wielders.”

She grimaced, but then said, “That sounds very useful.”

“I was there when he summoned that floating cloth thing!” Renji said, bragging about it, even though it seemed Kally didn’t care that much.

The Sorceress looked at Emily. “It was good that we left her Spell-Tome with Savant Pawn.”

“He said it was forbidden to possess.”

“It’s not exactly forbidden, but bringing it to Academy would be like parading the corpses of their grandparents around.”

“Their grandparents?” I asked.

“It was made from Mages, wasn’t it?”

“Ah, I see what you mean.”

“I’m surprised Saoirse came,” Renji remarked, watching the ginger-haired woman.

“I asked her to come,” I told him.

“Who is she?” Kally wondered. “She looks like some Vanguard Specialisation.”

I nodded. “She’s a Blademaster.”

“I didn’t think there were any in Lacksmey at the moment,” she replied.

“She travels around a lot,” I said vaguely.

Renji cast me a look. The expression I shot back hopefully conveyed: “I’m not letting more people in on the truth!”

While we watched everyone go through the inspection, I debated against telling Renji that I was very sure that the blue-haired Witch Hunter was a Demon, who pretended to be human and killed people to replace them. I only had Saoirse’s word and my own paranoid confirmation bias, but I didn’t think the Dullahan had any reason to lie.

No. It’s better to let him celebrate his big moment, I decided.

“**We will keep an eye on it,**” Armen said, seeming to include Saoirse in his words.

I will watch the Ascension, she replied.

“**My Liege, allow me to accompany the Black Knight in her place!**” Jules chimed in.

I thought about it for a moment, as I tried to come up with a plan.

Potts had finished his inspection, and besides his ‘Church Grim’ Tracker hound, he’d displayed an unsettling monstrosity that was something like eight rats melded together and called a ‘Rat King’, which he used as his Scout. It wasn’t an entity that showed up in my Encyclopaedias, so I made a mental note to ask him about it later.

When he came over to where we stood, it was just Emily and Saoirse left, and for some reason they were inspected at the same time.

Before I could even say anything, he gestured me to follow him. The guards around us had relaxed when it was clear none of us were overtly-hostile, and they didn’t seem to mind us walking away from the rest of the inspection to talk in private.

“My Church Grim caught the trail...” he immediately told me.

There was no denying it now.

I nodded. “It’s the blue-eyed Witch Hunter,” I said.

“It was supposed to have been one of the aspiring new Native Mages... not an Otherworlder.”

“Does it complicate things?”

“It’s the first time it has happened to an Otherworlder while I’ve been tracking it, and normally I’d say no, except... it’s a Witch Hunter.”

“That *is* an issue,” I replied. “But I know someone who should be able to help. I have already sent my familiar out to find him.”

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

As we spoke, one of Karasumany’s clones was heading for the Witch Hunter’s headquarters in search of Oliver Smile.