

## 86 – Schemes

The chubby old Exorcist was grinning at me, though it was impossible to tell if it was genuine mirth or faux pretence. As always, I couldn't see his aura, but given that he had created illusions and changed my perception of time when last we spoke, I knew that he had quite some significant control over what I and others saw.

“*Eminent Ryūta, are thou alright?*” asked Mortimer.

I blinked. “You don't see him?”

“*See whom?*”

I was just about to answer when the surroundings changed and the metal Chaplain vanished from sight, though it was still the same room, except some furniture was rearranged.

“That's better,” said Owl in a self-satisfied tone.

“What just happened?”

“I made our conversation *private*.”

“Cut this shit out,” I said, while moving some of my energy towards my right hand. Although Armen was gone, I wouldn't let him pull me around like he had before. I was done being toyed with for his bizarre schemes. “Why the fuck are you here, after all this time!?”

“I had to clean up your mess, didn't I? You left an Envoy roaming the Harrlev countryside.”

“Mortl dealt with that,” I said.

“That dried husk couldn't clean her own ass even if she tried. Who do you reckon did the heavy lifting, eh?”

““Her”? What do you mean?”

“Mortl is a woman, though I would forgive you for not noticing. Age to the point she has and gender is basically out of the equation. She hasn't left that suit of hers in a century, so who knows if all the bits inside are still in the right place?”

I frowned. *Why didn't Mortl mention that Owl helped get rid of the Envoy. An advanced warning would've been nice.*

“Listen, I don't have time for this, I'm leaving the city today.”

“And going to Altar, I know.”

“Have you been stalking me?”

“Hardly, though don’t act so surprised, I’ve seen your birds all over the place. I’m assuming those are yours, at least.”

*Sera, I need your help.*

I hoped that the Ifrit would burst to life in front of me and help put the old Exorcist off-balance, but she did not heed my call.

*Fuck, he’s preventing outside communication... just like the Larder Keeper did within its territory...*

“Do you want my apology for making you clean up my mess?”

“That’s not why I’m here. I’m not *that* petty.”

“Then what the hell do you want?”

“Don’t act so upset now, Ryūta. It’s already too late to catch up to your friends anyway.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“...What do you mean?”

“They already left.”

“What did you do!?”

“I merely convinced them that you would meet them in Altar. You and I need a chat, and who knows how long it might take.”

I sent a surge of energy into my Ifrit Claw, coating it with fire and then swinging for his face, only to be immediately seized by three powerful invisible claws that lifted me into the air, before slamming me down against the volcanic rock floor.

All the air was punched from my lungs and it felt as though one of my ribs was broken. He wasn’t holding back, perhaps because he knew how powerful I’d become, or maybe because he feared me.

Owl stooped down over me, while I was pinned, unable to move.

“You haven’t been heeding my lessons,” he said, looking at my right hand.

“Fuck your lessons!” I screamed. “You didn’t teach me half of what I needed to know!”

“Oh, but I had my reasons.”

“Your weird cult thing? Is that your reason!?”

He looked offended by my words, then said, slowly, “I am following plans laid out aeons before your bloodline even existed. You can’t even fathom the length I’ve had to go to get things to fall into their rightful places. But do *I* ever get so much as a ‘thank you’ for my diligent efforts? No.

“But, it’s okay, because I’m saving lives with my actions. And sure, maybe I have to manipulate a gullible fucking fool *like you* into doing certain things. Maybe I have to sic some morons on you to

beat you to a pulp to teach you about the dangers of the world and instil some fear into your childish mind. Or maybe I have to tip off the Witch Hunters about your spying on them, just so you understand how easy it is to be caught with your pants down!

“You don’t have one fucking clue about how carefully I’ve worked to get you to this place. Every goddamn step of the way I’ve tried my best to reach the outcome where the least people die. And you know what, I did it! Thanks to me, thousands of lives were spared!”

“Did you know about Leopold!?” I yelled out, interrupting his unhinged rambling.

“Of course I knew. He’d been trying to find someone *just like you* for a very long time. I knew that he could be the perfect tool to shape you just the way I wanted. To become the exact thing I needed you to become!”

I struggled against the forceful grip of his invisible familiar, feeding more energy into my Claw, which grew long fiery nails, though I couldn’t break free. “I’ll fucking kill you!” I screamed.

“Many have tried,” he said, sadly. “And you’re far from the first of my apprentices to utter those words.”

I took a breath, my whole body shaking with adrenaline and anger. If he had known everything that would happen, but had allowed it anyway, then he was no better than Leopold or the Illusionist. He was just a *different kind* of monster.

“Have you ever thought that maybe you’re the reason!? You’ve created monstrous apprentices through your actions! And you’re no better than those who wished the see the Flayed Ones overtake the city!”

“You have no clue what you’re talking about!” he said, leaning close enough that I could smell him and feel the warmth of his breath on my face. Unfortunately for him, I knew I had an ace up my sleeve. There was no way he could predict everything and I highly doubted he knew the abilities I’d unlocked.

*Kōtama, get ready to shine bright enough to blind him, while dispelling whatever illusions he’s conjuring.*

I closed my eyes, still feeling his breath on my face.

“You’re gonna do what I say, because if you don’t a lot of people are going to end up dead. You got that!?”

With my eyes squeezed shut, I said, softly, “Unleash Gravelight Ring.”

“What’d you just say?” he asked, but then I felt warmth emerging from the ring on my left hand and heard his surprised grunt. For just an instant, the grip on my body loosened and I quickly pulled myself free, scrambling back along the rough floor and getting to my knees as I opened my eyes.

A bright glow shone from my ring and the surroundings were back to normal, along with Mortimer, who was still standing where he’d been when Owl cast his spell.

*It worked! The Gravelight can counteract his illusions!*

While Owl fumbled around, his eyes open but somehow not seeing anything, I started looking through my bags for the Music Box.

*Lyssalynne, I need your help!*

“Master Owl,” I heard Mortimer say as he saw the Exorcist. “*Thou are banned from this Guild for this exact reason. Last time, thou were warned by Savant Ludwig that thou would receive a ‘severe punishment’ for attempting to sneak into the premises of our Guild again.*”

I heard the single angry word that left Owl’s mouth.

“Feast.”

The monstrous Spawn of Nwetrou appeared just in front of Mortimer, who was striding towards Owl, looking very much prepared to break some bones in order to kick him out. The familiar’s many eyes swivelled around and it kept blinking in-and-out of existence, until they locked onto the skeletal Chaplain and it vanished. A second later, half of Mortimer’s body disappeared as something took a huge bite out of him.

*Lyssalynne! Quick! I need some kind of way to stop him!* I pleaded to the Siren in the Music Box, as I held it in my hands, staring as another bite was taken out of the metal Chaplain by Owl’s invisible monster, leaving just the top-half of his body.

*“I will sing him a lullaby,”* said the lilting voice of the Siren and I steeled myself.

Owl seemed to regain his sight in the very same moment that I opened the lid of the box.

His dagger-like talisman was in his hand and he was just about to point it at me to unleash his many familiars to stop me.

A serene and mournful voice filled the room, freezing him in his tracks and halting the feasting of his pet, leaving Mortimer with hardly any body left. The melodic siren song echoed off the walls, floor, and ceiling, despite the porous volcanic rocks normally swallowing sound.

With a clatter, Owl’s dagger talisman fell to the floor and I saw how the pupil of his remaining eye widened to fill his iris completely.

*“You may now give him an order.”*

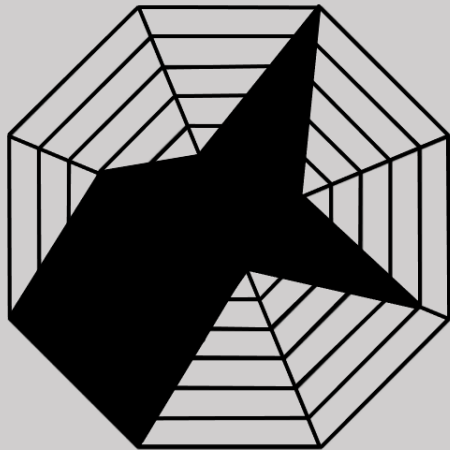
I thought about it for a moment, then came upon the worst fate I could imagine for an Exorcist like him. Though it felt evil, I said, “Owl. Banish all your familiars completely.”

Without hesitation, I saw how various familiars blinked into existence only to disappear, as he wordlessly banished his familiars. The Spawn of Nwetrou in front of Mortimer’s remains went first; then the six-armed and headless Corpse Warden Protector that’d pinned me down; followed by a spindly shadowy figure, with eyes sprouting from every available surface of its strange body; next came his Scenting Tongue Tracker; then a tall humanoid figure wrapped in arms, which I recognised as a Writhing Prisoner; and, lastly, a child-sized blob of tar with three eyes in the centre of its head which stared directly at me.

I gritted my teeth.

“Owl. Throw your Guild Card to me.”

The chubby old Exorcist reached into his coat and withdrew his soul-stone Card, then threw it to me with an underhanded toss. I managed to catch it and quickly looked down to see if it showed that all his familiars were gone.

<i>‘OWL’</i>			
<b>ROLE:</b> <i>Adherent</i>		<b>RANK:</b> <i>Master</i>	
<b>GENDER:</b> <i>Male</i>		<b>AGE:</b> <i>53</i>	
<b>ACUMEN:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>DEXTERITY:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>INTELLIGENCE:</b> <i>A</i>	<b>LUCK:</b> <i>F</i>
<b>PACT:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>SOUL:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>STRENGTH:</b> <i>C</i>	<b>VITALITY:</b> <i>E</i>
<b>ABILITIES</b> <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist V’</i> <i>‘Spirit Caller V’</i> <i>‘Adherent III’</i> <i>‘Soul-Broken’</i> <i>‘Lullaby of Obedience’</i> <i>‘Observer’s Chosen’</i>			

*Wait, he’s missing the Flayed Lord’s Curse. And the Siren’s lullaby is on there... almost like a curse itself.*

“Owl. Why isn’t the ‘Flayed Lord’s Curse’ on your card? Answer me.”

“The Curse is made-up. I wanted you to have sympathy for me.”

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. I had total control over him, but it was important to not let it go to my head. I needed to be rational about this.

“*Why* did you do all this? Why pick me?”

“The Observer chose me to fulfil its plans. I must put a stop to the Demonologist, before his schemes bear fruit. I picked you because I needed a way to deal with Leopold and the Demon in Ochre, and, through manipulating you, I could get powerful fighters like Rana Thorn and Skrald to move to Helmstatter. You by yourself was inconsequential.”

My grip tightened on the Music Box. The fact that I had just been a vehicle to get the ‘right’ people, like Renji and Rana, to Helmstatter during the calamity was a punch in the gut. A question came to my mind, one which I needed to know the answer to, even though the truth terrified me.

“Did you make Rana fall in love with me so she’d go to Helmstatter?”

Owl’s face was an expressionless mask as he answered. “I stoked the embers in a lonely woman’s heart. She would have fallen for anyone like you.”

“Owl. Punch yourself in the face.”

The old Exorcist complied, hitting himself in the cheek with a powerful hook, though it seemed as though he felt nothing from it, despite the red welt it created.

*I want to make him bury his own grave and then leave him in it! I yelled in my mind. But I know what Armen would say. I’m better than this. I won’t become another monster created by this arrogant bastard!*

“Is it true that you saved a lot of lives by doing these things?”

“I believe so,” he answered in his spellbound monotone.

“What does *that* mean? Explain.”

“I cannot prove that lives were saved as a result of my actions.”

The answer infuriated me, but I tried to stay calm.

“And all the things you did to me, were they necessary?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why did you do it then!?”

“Because I believe it is what the Observer wanted me to do.”

“Are you saying you don’t know what it wants from you!?”

“The tasks I am given are hard to understand. I do not know all the steps that are expected of me to fulfil them, so I did what I thought was best. I believed you needed to learn all your mistakes early, before they could kill you and ruin the chances of your friends making it to Helmstatter.”

I exhaled slowly, feeling my temper rising again. “It didn’t matter whether or not I survived encountering Leopold, did it?”

“It did not. Rana Thorn and Skrald were already in Helmstatter by the time he would have discarded you. I used you as bait to bring him out of hiding. The plan was to take the Music Box for myself, but I lost track of you after you removed the curse I placed on the Encyclopaedia I gave you.”

“Tell me why you came here. Was it to take the Music Box from me?”

“Yes. But I also needed you to go after the Demonologist in Lacksmey.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t figured out why it’s important yet. I thought it was fine if you died by Leopold’s hands, but my task has evolved since then to include you.”

“But what is the end goal? I don’t understand what the point of all this is for you or why it matters.”

“I believe that I am saving lives.”

“But you have no proof?”

“No.”

“How many people have died because of your actions?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you don’t know... The inconvenient truth of the sacrifices you have made would run counter to your belief that you are saving lives!”

I took another deep breath to steady myself.

“What were your plans after you acquired the Music Box from me?”

“I would use the Music Box to force you to follow me to Lacksmey, where we would meet up with your Party in Altar and then find the trail of the Demonologist, by spying on the Witch Hunters who are tracking him.”

“Why didn’t you just try to amicably join my Party again, before leaving the city? Why did you tell my friends to leave without me!?”

“I did not believe it would work. I did not think you would trust me.”

I knew they couldn’t be far away, but catching up to them would not be possible unless I acquired a fast horse and knew their exact route, which, given that our plan had been to travel with a Caravan,

it could go in any direction. Although, considering that Owl had used his powers of perception, I was sure their caravan was making a beeline for the city of Altar.

“You’re probably right. I doubt I would’ve trusted you, but the fact that you didn’t even entertain the idea says a lot.”

I considered my options, weighing the benefits of leaving him be or putting an end to his madness. In the end, I picked the choice that ultimately took the decision-making out of my hands.

“Owl. Empty all your bags and pockets and put your stuff on the wooden table *there*,” I commanded, pointing at the gnarled table that Mortl and I had used yesterday.

As the old Exorcist immediately began complying, pulling out coin-pouches, weapons, tools, and such, I added another command, the final one I’d make: “After you are done, sit down and wait for Master Mortl to show up, at which point you tell her everything as truthfully as possible. I’ll let her decide what’s to be done with you.”

I shut the lid of the Music Box, cutting off the song. It was clear that Owl would comply with my orders, as he continued emptying all his stuff out and then, finally, planted himself down where I’d sat just yesterday on the soft animal skin draped over the block of porous rock.

Mortimer, who seemed to also have been captivated by the Siren’s lullaby, suddenly piped up. “*Eminent Ryūta, pray tell what has transpired. I do not recall the last few moments.*”

“Sorry Mortimer, I had to use my Siren to stop Owl.”

I sat down next to the head of the metal Chaplain, gasping in pain as I accidentally grazed my bruised back and ribs against the wall he lay in front of.

“*Savant Ludwig will be quite upset at my current state. And how am I to greet our members? Oh what a bother.*”

I looked down at the pitiful remains of the metal skeleton. Just the head and half the upper torso remained, with the rest gone, apart from a tiny bit of the upper left arm. “Is there anything I can do?”

“*Doth thou know how to exchange vessels for a contained spirit?*”

“I don’t, sorry. Can you teach me?”

“*It is a bit of a long-winded process, but we do have a spare body behind the counter of mine shop. If thou were to fetch it, I would teach you the litany and sigils required.*”

I looked at Owl who just sat staring into the air, waiting for Mortl as per my command. “Well, seeing how *that asshole there* made sure my friends left without me, I may as well finish up here.”

“*I am sure Savant Ludwig will be quite excited to hear that he does not have to return here just to fix mine body. He does loathe detours quite vehemently.*”



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

Despite it all, I grinned a bit at Mortimer’s strange sincerity.  
*Not exactly how I envisioned today going...*