

67 – The Curse Mark

Warm light shone from Armen’s gauntleted hand as he healed the bruises that Renji had sustained during their fight.

You can do that now?

“The terms of our Pact were altered by the Binding Litany you invoked, hence my powers can now be used externally as well.”

I don’t know how I feel about you flaunting your powers, but it certainly was impressive. And the drain on my essence is barely noticeable.

A few Adventurers lingered on the fringes of our little group, while most of the onlookers had settled their wages and dispersed as quickly as they’d arrived. Lukas stood next to Renji, telling him how well he did, but I could tell my childhood friend wasn’t really paying attention.

“I want a rematch,” he told my familiar.

“Tomorrow,” he answered, eliciting a grin from the Brawler.

He lifted his gauntlet away and Renji nodded his thanks.

“I need to know,” Rana started, “How are you able to use Repulse if you’re a Priest Crusader? It’s a Paladin ability, isn’t it?”

Armen’s helmet turned to encompass her, though I wondered if he actually needed to look at someone to see them. It was a very human mannerism though and helped to sell the illusion that there was an actual person within the hollow suit of armour.

“I once heard a theory to explain why I possess abilities beyond my Roles: Advanced Roles are meant for one specific Role to reach, but through diligent training and preparation, some may be reached by other Roles. When this happens, abilities from the intended base Role are granted to fill in the gaps that would otherwise occur.

“It is seen with Paladins who reach the specialisation of Archpriest, as they gain the ‘Heal’ and ‘Barrier’ abilities. It is seen in Spellhands who become Spirit Callers, as they gain the ‘Summon’ and ‘Pact of the Familiar’ abilities. And it is seen in Priests that become Crusaders, as we receive ‘Repulse’ and ‘Consecration’.”

“I didn’t know that,” Renji admitted.

“Nor I,” said Rana.

“Does that mean you lose access to other abilities as a result?” I wondered.

“Indeed. I believe I lost access to abilities that boost proficiency with certain weapons, but with enough practice, such a shortcoming is not felt.”

“Can he get a Guild Card now?” Lukas suddenly asked. He froze when Armen looked directly at him.

“No,” I answered. “He doesn’t have an aura.”

“By the way, Ryūta,” Renji started, changing subject for some reason.

“What?”

“Happy birthday,” he said, patting me on the head.

“Stop that,” I said in faux annoyance.

Rana shoved a wooden box into my hands and the Brawler pulled his hand away.

“What’s this?”

“Renji told us that your birthday was probably soon, so we bought you something,” she explained.

“Go on, open it.”

“*I think he will like it,*” Elye commented. Lukas nodded although I was doubtful he had already learnt to understand her in the short time he had been practicing.

“***I know what it is!***” Seramosa commented from where she was floating above Elye. She had probably been following them when they had bought it.

I pulled the lid off the box and saw a pair of glasses inside. When I lifted them out of the box, I noticed that a string connected the foldable legs, such that they could hang around my neck when I weren’t using them. I moved them around a bit and saw that the lenses were Spirit Quartz.

“These must’ve cost a fortune,” I remarked.

I wonder if it’s too late to tell them that I had been considering going back to goggles...

“You should perhaps not mention that.”

“Put them on,” Rana urged and I obliged.

They felt comfortable and perfectly sculpted to my head. It was almost liking having my old Spirit Glasses back, although these were perhaps better crafted and the metal seemed different somehow.

“Thanks,” I told them sincerely. “This means a lot to me.”

Renji grinned as he always did, Rana and Lukas smiled as well. For some reason, Elye had gotten onto Armen’s metal shoulders and was resting her arms and chin atop his helmet.

It was nice to have easy access to my Spirit Sight restored to me, although I did feel that I’d become quite proficient with the manual activation of the ability. As I looked at my Party gratefully,

I noticed the auras of the few people who lingered nearby. I immediately recognised the two companions of Harleigh who’d been watching the fight.

As though spurred on by me looking at them, the Brawler came forward and immediately addressed Renji.

“You’re Skrald, right?” he asked. I remembered that his name was Gilliam. His features were quite Elfish in a way, such as his elongated ears, which seemed to immediately catch Renji’s attention. Elye seemed to notice as well, but for once she just watched without interrupting.

“That’s right.”

Gilliam looked across my Party briefly, before returning his gaze to Renji and saying, “You might not remember, since it’s almost two years ago, but you once saved my team. I never got the chance to thank you.”

Renji nodded. “I vaguely recall something like that. And if you want to thank me, you can start off by not antagonising my friend Ryūta here. He’s not a bad guy. Exorcists aren’t evil by default, but when you bully them for who they are, you create a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Gilliam lowered his head shamefully.

“Don’t worry too much about it,” I told him. “You had a bad experience with an Exorcist in the past, so of course your guard is up.” I was trying to be amicable, though in truth I hated his guts for how he’d made me feel in Ochre.

The Elfish Brawler looked up at me. “Harleigh wanted you to know that he regrets accusing you of what happened in Hearthshire. We’ve since heard the truth from the Branch Master.”

“He should tell Ryūta that himself,” Rana replied. It was comforting that she believed in me more than the Crusader whom she had looked up to for so long.

Suddenly Armen seized the Brawler by his chin and turned his head to the right slightly.

“Armen, stop that!” I demanded.

Without turning, he said, “**This man is cursed.**”

Gilliam, who’d had both his hands on Armen’s gauntlet that held him, suddenly stopped resisting. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“**You have a spark of something in your eyes. I believe I have seen it before.**”

“There’s nothing on my Guild Card about that!” he insisted.

I came up next to Armen and saw that Gilliam’s black and faint-grey irised eyes had something like a red streak through half of it.

“You should find a Cursebreaker,” I told him, as I noticed how his aura indicated that he was clearly not telling the truth.

Gilliam wrenched himself free of Armen’s grip, rubbing his chin and backing away from us. “It’s none of your business okay.”

I nodded. “You’re right.”

His companion, the Elementalist Zelser came up to him and began pulling him away from us. Though it was brief, I saw how his eyes bore the same red line going halfway through.

Sera, do you know what kind of curse that is?

“***The Mark of the Flayed Lord***,” she immediately answered.

I swallowed hard as I watched the two members of Harleigh’s party quickly leave the courtyard.

“What the hell was that about?” Rana asked.

“My familiar says they have been cursed by the Flayed Lord,” I told her. She looked confused, but I noticed how both Elye and Renji reacted to the name.

“*The Flayed Lord is very evil and cruel*,” the Elfin remarked.

“What are they doing to get themselves involved with such a despicable God?” Renji muttered, a serious look on his face.

I quickly pulled out my Bone Whistle and blew a note in it, revealing the scent-trails of the two who had just left. Though I should’ve been surprised by it, I barely felt shocked that their scents were stained with crimson drops, just like those of the Mimics’...

Something bad is definitely happening in Helmstatter.

We had only just left the courtyard behind when a commotion just outside the Guild Hall drew my attention. I saw how a large man, a Vanguard by the look of his aura, was carrying a dead animal in his large arms.

“Do you see that?” I asked my friends.

Lukas gasped, “That’s Charles’ pet!”

“You’re right...” Rana agreed.

Our group moved over to where a few people were talking to the Vanguard holding the black fox.

“What happened to it?” Rana asked before I could.

The man regarded her for a moment, then said, “I found it lying in an alleyway when I came back from Noble Quarter.”

“Did you see Charles anywhere?” she asked.

“No, but I knew it was his fox.”

I traded a glance with Rana and Lukas, then said what we were all thinking, “That fox never left Charles’ side...”

“**Do you notice its wounds?**” Armen interjected.

The Vanguard stooped to place the fox on the ground so we could all inspect it. I couldn’t really tell what it was he had seen, but then Elye suddenly answered, “*It was bitten in the neck! Poor fox! Can I eat it?*”

“No.”

“Aw.”

“**The Elfin is correct. It was bitten and the blood was sucked from its body. Its corpse shows clear signs of exsanguination.**”

Lukas looked confused by the answer. “It means it was drained of blood,” I told him.

I pulled out the Bone Whistle again and sounded the deep bass note, revealing the scent of the black fox. It was very similar to Charles’ dark-brown aura, though with streaks of green through it as well.

“I’ve got its trail,” I told them. “Follow me.”

The Vanguard who’d found the fox looked at us, “What should I do with it?”

“Go alert the Guild first,” Renji advised him. “They’ll know what to do.”

I left the front of the Guild as I retraced the path the man had taken from Noble Quarter to get here. The trail floated in the air like a gossamer veil that was so light that the wind held it aloft, and I could tell that it was already growing fainter with every passing second, so there was no time to spare.

“What’s the plan?” Rana asked as they all followed after me, while I in turn followed the scent-trail of the dead fox.

“We see where this trail goes, and hopefully we find Charles safe and sound.”

“I still haven’t paid the last bit of his Contract...” Rana said shamefully. “It never even struck me as weird that he didn’t show up the day after he returned you to us...”

“It’s not your fault he’s missing,” Renji assured her.

“I thought about it, but didn’t mention it,” Lukas admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“He was on a high-paying Contract to find Myrabelle,” I revealed to them, having only told Renji before. “Perhaps he found a clue or an actual trail, and maybe that’s why something happened to him.”

“Myrabelle never made it to Helmstatter,” Rana then said, surprisingly.

I halted in the middle of the cobble street, “What do you mean?”

“We made a stop at a lake a few kilometres from the city and she just vanished, leaving behind her servant. Lukas and I followed the tracks she’d left behind, before eventually finding her severed arm and tattered bits of clothes near a wolf den.”

“You’re kidding me...”

“Was that all you found?” Renji asked.

“Yeah.”

“Do you still have that arm?” I asked, eliciting a ‘Are you serious?’ look from Rana.

“Of course not! Why would I keep an arm like that?”

“So you could show it to the Mercenary Guild or something?” I said.

“Well, that’s the weird thing. When we went to the Guild, they already had our money.”

“Is it possible that it was some kind of illusion?” Renji asked.

“I don’t know,” she admitted.

I shook my head.

What a total mess this has devolved into.

“Let’s not waste more time. Come on!”

I sped up and continued following the ribbon-like trail in the air, hoping that it would bring us to some answers.