

ISEKAI EXORCIST

1 - I'm an Exorcist?

The 7/11 chime played and the automatic doors started closing behind me. In my hand was a plastic bag with a bottle of lemon tea, a salmon onigiri, and a lukewarm nikuman. Already the flimsy handles of the bag were digging into my skin.

It was late spring and the air had started warming significantly over the last few days. It was sure to be another sweltering summer this year.

The clap of my sandals against the heels of my feet followed me as I walked up the slope to the street where my house lay. In hindsight, it was still a bit too cold for sandals and bare feet, but I'd been too lazy to put on proper shoes when I left the house, after all, I was only going to be out for a few minutes before I went back to studying.

Although I'd failed this year's entrance exam, I was determined to study enough that I would ace it next January. Still, that was such a long way away.

I sighed as I pulled open my house door. I'd promised mom that I'd get into a good university, but look where that'd gotten me. Now I was a Rōnin, left to wander the streets of Kyōto until next year, while all my high school friends were having fun with their new classmates.

How long before they forget me?

I pushed the thought from my mind and hung my windbreaker by the door. The plastic bag with my lunch I placed on top of the console table next to the coatrack. It was ugly and its colour didn't match the walls whatsoever, but mom loved that thing and refused to throw it out.

Before I could take my sandals off, there came a knock from the door.

That's odd, I thought. I hadn't seen anyone else outside on the street.

I opened the door and looked outside, but there was no one there.

As I stepped through the doorway to check, I felt my stomach shoot up into my throat as though I suddenly fell through the ground and my vision flickered black several times.

A buffet of summer-warm wind ruffled my hair and I opened my eyes to my surroundings. The street outside my house was gone, its asphalt road and houses replaced with trampled dirt and a bustling marketplace.

Next to me, a woman yelped in alarm and I turned to look, realising quickly that I’d been the cause of her fright.

I suppose that makes sense. I did after all just suddenly appear next to her.

As I looked around, walking a bit aimlessly back-and-forth between the many market stalls, I felt as though I’d stepped through a wormhole to a different time and place. The people near me, all of whom were staring curiously at me I might add, looked distinctly European in their features and wore what could only be described as medieval peasant clothes.

I had to grab my head to stop my mind from reeling.

Am I having a really strange dream right now? Or maybe I’m hallucinating?

It was not yet warm enough for a heatstroke, but maybe this was the side-effect of not hydrating properly?

I pinched my cheek as hard as I could.

“Ow.”

Okay... not a dream.

I crouched and scooped a handful of dirt from the ground, moving it around with my fingers. It felt very real, so hallucination was probably out of the picture too.

Not knowing what else to do, I walked up to one of the stalls. A blonde and tan trinket vendor with sausage fingers covered in rings stared up at me from where he sat.

“Excuse me? Where am I?”

He looked at me like I was stupid, then sighed and said, in perfect Japanese with the same Kansai dialect as me, “This is the city of Lundia. It sits eighty leagues inland from the port of Ochre.”

“Thank you,” I replied and walked away from his spread of jewels, rings, and timepieces. I had no idea what a league was nor why he was perfectly comprehensible to me, despite clearly being of a different nationality.

After walking around the marketplace for fifteen minutes or more, I found a guardsman who was clad in polished platemail and hugged a tall lance. He was standing guard outside a building that might have been a bank or luxury store.

“Excuse me,” I started, but before I had a chance to ask my question, he took one look at my clothes and replied:

“The Adventurers’ Guild is down *that* street and to the left, you can’t miss it.”

I followed the direction he pointed with his left hand and nodded my thanks before going that way.

I have no idea what I’m doing here, but maybe this Guild can help me?

The Adventurers’ Guild was indeed quite easy to spot, as it towered over the nearby one-storey buildings and was built not of wood, but rather of stone, with green shingles on its roof. Its crimson wooden doors were flung wide open and there seemed quite a throng of people within.

After entering, I saw that half the place was like a tavern, with people drinking and eating around circular tables. Many of the people within, Adventurers I guessed, were dressed in elaborate flowing robes or brutal-looking armour, with their weapons of choice leaning against their chairs or strapped to their waists. Some of them turned and snickered when they saw me enter, but most seemed to purposefully ignore my arrival.

What struck me the most, however, was not their clothes nor weapons, but rather that many of them looked just as out of place as me, with their features showing more than just the European features I’d seen in all the people about town.

Maybe they’re like me? I thought hopefully.

I walked up to the nearest person: a tall musclebound black man dressed in spike-covered leather armour who was leaning against one of the wooden pillars that supported the tall ceiling to the first floor. His palms were both placed on the pommels of two shortswords that hung from each hip.

Before I could utter a single word, he pointed to a queue of about eight people on the other side of the floor, “Newcomers have to register.”

Puzzled, but assuming this was the way to get answers, I got into the line of people. At the front, a desk with a kind-looking woman dressed in a green blouse and skirt with blonde twin-tails was greeting the people and having them place their hands on a strange glyph-covered black-grey slate. The glyphs glowed a strange frost-blue.

After about twenty minutes, when my legs were starting to get sore from standing, I got to the front of the line.

“Name, please.”

“My name is Temaru Ryūta. I was hoping you could—”

“How do you spell that?” she interrupted.

“Oh, erm, my family-name is the sign for Hand and Circle, with my given-name being the sign for Willow and the one for Fat.”

She looked at me, confused, then showed me what she’d written on her scroll. She was writing in Romaji.

“Hmm, I think it’s T-E-M-A-R-U R-Y-U-U-T-A in Roman lettering.”

“Thank you. My name is Caroline, and I will be performing your Adventurer Role Assignment today.”

“My *what?* I don’t understand what’s going on or why I’m here. Or where ‘here’ is for that matter...”

She nodded, as if this wasn’t news to her. As if my situation here was commonplace...

“I am unfamiliar with the World you are from, but you are currently in Mondus, specifically the western continent of Hallem. This city is called Lundia and is part of the Principality of Arley.”

“Is it... common for people like me to be here?”

Caroline nodded solemnly. “No one knows why, but Otherworlders like yourself appear in Lundia quite frequently. It has actually become the backbone of the Adventurer industry, as most commonfolk would never take on such jobs as what we offer.”

“How do I get back home? I don’t want to be here... my family will be worried!”

“I understand this is hard to digest, Temaru, but there is no way for you to return to your world. My best advice would be to take the Role Assignment and try to make a living in Lundia for a while doing quests for the Guild. Hallem is a fantastic place for explorers and travellers, and many who were in your situation have found a new life here and even seem to thrive.”

I was trying my best not to panic, while parts of my brain were still locked firmly to the belief that I was dreaming. In the end, as the next person in line voiced their frustrations at the delay, I caved in and told her, “I’ll take the Role Assignment.”

“Excellent.”

Caroline brought out the slate I’d seen earlier and bade me place my hand on it. Its black stone was frigid to the touch and the glowing sigils seemed to throb gently as I put my clammy hand on its surface.

I held my hand on it for what might have been a moment, but which felt like hours, especially considering how I got the sense that everyone was staring at me and awaiting the result. As the slate’s glyphs started blinking, she had me lift my hand, before, somehow, interpreting the response of the tablet. It seemed to make as much sense as reading the stains left by tea in a cup to me, but she apparently understood how to read it, because she announced, louder than I felt necessary:

“Exorcist.”

I had half a second to think “Oh man that sounds super cool!”, but then I noticed the responses of the crowded tavern and nearby observers. Some laughed, a few sighed disappointed, but most seemed to just instantly lose interest.

Before I could ask what my Adventurer Role was good for, she handed me a credit-card-sized stone of the same nature as the tablet. Rather than esoteric symbols I had no way of deciphering, the card was covered in legible symbols. I once again had to wonder why everyone spoke Japanese and why the card was covered in Japanese text, when they clearly did not use the language.

Caroline cleared her throat and told me, “This is your Adventurers’ Guild Card. Your first one is free, but, if you lose it, a replacement will cost three gold crowns. You can use this card to see your Status, Abilities, and Guild Rank. Make sure to always keep this on you, because it’s required when accepting and turning in quests.”

“Thank you,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to respond. Things were already completely beyond my control. “Erm, how am I supposed to learn about my Role, this world, and, you know... everything?”

“I understand that you must have a lot of questions, Temaru. You can learn the answers to many of them by speaking to the Genius in the library on the second floor or from your fellow Adventurers. I would also recommend looking at what kind of groups have openings for new members, although...”

“Although?”

“I’m sorry to say this, but your assigned Role is very specialised and does not have a lot of synergy in groups. It’s generally a solo Role that takes on very difficult quests which no other Roles are capable of dealing with.”

“Are you kidding me?” I almost blurted out, but instead I managed to keep my calm and simply asked, “Can I change my Role then?”

“Unfortunately, that is not a possibility. Although if you make it to a higher rank you will be able to specialise in an Advanced Role with more group utility.”

“...If?”

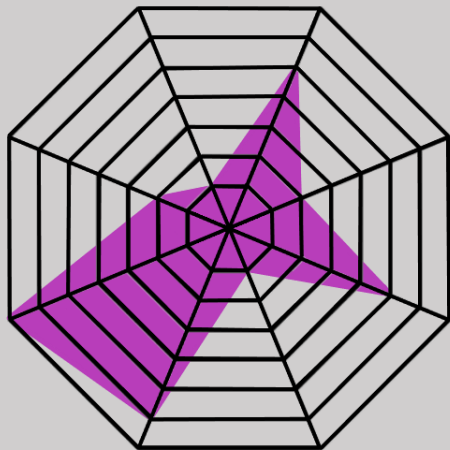
Caroline suddenly blushed, realising she had let that one slip in.

Great... Not only am I in a completely foreign land with apparently no way of getting home, but I had the misfortune of being assigned a Role that sounds like a death sentence...

“Thank you for your help,” I told her. She was not to blame for my circumstances, so I couldn’t exactly fault her for it.

I finally took the Guild Card from her hands, before leaving the line. There weren't a lot of people waiting in the queue for registration, but it had definitely grown while I was at the front of it, which made me feel rather guilty and embarrassed.

As I moved closer to the tavern section of the Guild Hall, where large boards were plastered with quest scrolls of varying types, as well as group posters, I looked down at the card in my hand and saw how I had been reduced to a bunch of very clinical estimates:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i>			

Two E's and F's...

I didn't really know what each of the eight attributes represented, but I guessed that my Role was determined from all of these combined. Considering the brief description of the sort of jobs I could expect, maybe an F-rating in Luck was mandatory to become an Exorcist?

The E in Strength and Dexterity seemed pretty accurate to my real-life physical condition, as I had been one of the slowest and weakest boys in my high school class. As for Vitality, I had no idea what *that* represented, though it could possibly be my physical endurance, given that I tired easily from just a brisk jog.

Soul, Pact, and Acumen were not immediately clear to me. I had never been much of a gamer, so while I could recognise some game elements from this place and setting, my understanding was so shallow that I had no idea if it applied here nor how it could be applied...

Renji would've known what to do if he was here... I complained internally. He had always been the smartest of my friends, somehow managing to attain the highest grades in every field, while also maintaining an all-consuming Gaming Otaku lifestyle. I'd watched him play hundreds of games, and listened to his long exposés of how to do *this* and how to do *that*, though now I wished I'd been paying more attention, as it was clear that his wisdom had been wasted on me.

I bit my lower lip in consternation. My string of misfortunes had only continued, even though I had done my best to improve. Failing to get into university had been a wake-up call for me to take life more seriously and do something about my many shortcomings. I had even managed to build up the courage to confess to my high school classmate Inoue Kumi, who, instead of flat-out rejecting me, had said she would think about it and let me know her answer during the summer, though now I would never hear what answer she had.

While I seared the image of the colourful little graph that was supposed to represent me as a person into my retinas, I felt an overwhelming wave of despondency settle on me like a weighted blanket.

What will mom say when she gets home and sees I'm no longer there? Will she be relieved that her failure of a son is gone? Or will she be sad and report me missing?

Given how our last argument had gone, I couldn't truly say I knew. I still remembered her accusations that I had wasted all the money she had spent on getting me into a private high school and prestigious cram schools. I had never wanted to be a doctor like she desired of me, and, perhaps, as a kind of rebellion against her will, I had failed the entrance exam intentionally. I hadn't been a bad student in high school, so perhaps my failure was a deliberate self-sabotage that I could never admit to myself?

The last time I had seen Renji before the summer, he had clapped me on the back and told me things were going to be alright. I had honestly believed him.

...but look at me now.

After shouldering my way to the Quest Boards and perusing the options for a while, I found a quest for an Exorcist of Novitiate Rank like me. From looking at the many other quests, I knew that those that asked for a specific Adventurer Role were extremely rare, and, besides Exorcist, the only other

ones I saw on display were Priest and Hunter, the former for its apparent ability to ‘heal’, and the latter for its tracking and animal handling. I had also gathered that, besides the Rank requirement, each quest had a difficulty/complexity scale, which ranged from Simple to Perilous. Unsurprisingly, the only Exorcist Quest on offer was ranked the highest difficulty...

If I were to actually take a quest from the board, I knew I’d go with the Simple-rated Gathering or Delivery types, which, although not having much of a reward, at least offered a steady income, although I didn’t really understand the currency here nor its value. Granted, if I were to actually take the Exorcism Quest and complete it, the reward was one gold and forty silver crowns, while the Simple everyone-can-do-it types only offered a few dozen copper crowns.

I seriously doubted I’d commit to the dangerous Adventurers’ Guild work though, and besides, no one had said I couldn’t just find a job in the town of Lundia. After all, I was okay with my hands when it came to repairing electronics and making things, plus I had some experience from my part-time job at a Yakitori restaurant, so I could make some simple meals and wait on customers.

Before really deciding on what I’d do, I wanted to speak to the ‘Genius’ on the second floor. I had yet to talk to any of the established Adventurers that lounged in the tavern and near the Quest Boards, but I was hardly the only Novitiate that found them imposing and intimidating. Although, when a person was announced as having the Priest Role, many of the lounging Adventurers had swarmed the guy, eager to acquire him for their group. Even Roles like Vanguard, Brawler, Ranger, and Spellhand had all found modest interest from groups. Unsurprisingly, female Novitiates were all given a lot of attention, which made me wonder how the mass of Adventurers would react to a Girl Exorcist.

As I began climbing the staircase to the next floor, I realised how ridiculous I must look, given how I was still wearing my sandals, as well as comfortable pyjama-esque pants and a threadbare t-shirt with a panda print on the front that said “*I hate morning people*” in English text. I doubted my bedhead hair and sullen eyes were much to write home about either. Not for the first time in my life, I felt envious of Renji, who had somehow gotten the S-tier package deal: he was handsome, smart, funny, and charming. The fact that he had been my friend since middle school was one of my proudest accomplishments, although it had been tough constantly being the go-between for the girls who wanted to ask him out, but I had treasured my friendship with him nonetheless.

I let out a sigh as I reached the first-floor landing and didn’t pay much attention to the floor before ascending to the second. With every step came the awful slap of the squishy plastic sandals against the soles of my feet. If not for the fact that there was dust, dirt, and errant stones everywhere in the

building, I would’ve taken the sandals off. If someone came to this world and brought the invention of the vacuum cleaner with them, they would become an instant billionaire, I was sure. No sooner had the thought hit me than I remembered that I had left my house with my phone and wallet in my pockets.

Stopping halfway up to the second floor, I began patting down my deep trouser pockets, but found nothing within except my new Card and some balls of lint...

So much for wowing the general populace with my hyper-advanced technology...

Then again, if they have magic here, maybe they already have some equivalent to the smartphone? I thought, thinking back to the stone tablet. And I could hardly be the only person here who had the thought of bringing technology with me. Perhaps the people of this world were reticent to change or maybe they just didn’t trust people like me who randomly showed up?

As I reached the second-floor landing, I was greeted by tall bookcases that created a maze of sorts. Each shelf was half-a-metre deep, as there were as many scrolls packed in as books, but, just looking at it, I highly doubted I was meant to rifle through stuff and find the answers that way. The Guild Representative had mentioned a ‘Genius’, which I was mostly certain was a title for a person, though, as I began my foray into the bookcase-maze, I started to doubt myself. I began to double back, when I suddenly noticed a path that led deeper into the centre of the floor, and, as I rounded a corner, I entered into an office of sorts.

Three large desks surrounded a figure sitting cross-legged atop a wooden swivel stool, each of which was piled high with wobbling stacks of books and pyramids of scrolls. The figure was holding one end of a scroll high above his head, while using his free hand to scratch his chin as he studied the contents.

“Erm, pardon the intrusion, but...”

The man moved the hand holding the scroll slightly, so that he could see me. Round thick-lensed spectacles sat atop his nose and his long unkempt dark-grey hair fell down across his face and back. He went barefooted and only wore a lab-coat-esque garment with wide overlong sleeves and deep pockets on the side.

“You’re the new Exorcist.”

“Erm, yes, that’s me. Wait... how’d you know?” I definitely hadn’t seen this guy in the hall and it seemed like he might have been in this place for days, given that there was something like a sleeping bag on the floor, as well as the leftover dirty trays from at least a dozen meals.

“I expect you’re looking for answers to your many questions?” he asked, not answering my question.

“Well, yes.”

The Genius, or at least I assumed that’s who this guy was, nodded sagely, then said, “You can’t go home. Yes, you’re stuck with your assigned Role. You could try to find work outside the Guild, but the native population of Lundia despises Otherworlders and actively prevent them from finding honest work, meaning you’d no doubt end up in something shady and illegal if you *were* to find employment.”

“What about my friends and family?”

The Genius tilted his head slightly, as though not following.

“Aren’t people going to question my disappearance from the real world?”

He replied with a shrug, before adding, “No one knows, because, you see, none of us can go home to check.”

“Are you an Adventurer yourself?”

“Of a sort, I suppose. I was assigned the Role of Librarian, then later specialised as a Genius. It’s a comfy job if you like reading and organising information, but I don’t do a lot of Adventuring.”

“Can I see your Guild Card?”

He squinted slightly suspiciously.

“If you’re willing to trade,” he replied. That made me pause. After all, if he destroyed it or decided to not return it, getting a new one issue would take a lot of money. Money that I definitely did not have. But did it really matter either way? I was fairly sure I wouldn’t do any Guild quests.

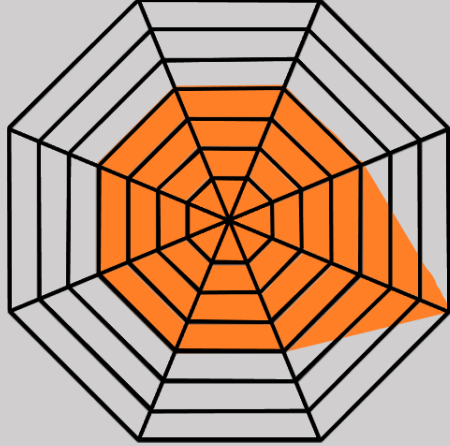
“You’re thinking that replacing a Guild Card will cost a fortune, but that you don’t mind losing the Card regardless.”

“Does your Genius Role include mind-reading?”

The man shrugged.

I ended up handing him my Card and he handed me his in exchange. Before I could even take a look at his Status and Abilities, I heard him chuckle and say, “...Two F-tiers.”

I couldn’t help but blush. Showing someone else my status was surprisingly embarrassing. After all, it was like giving them a report card of all my grades from my finals exams. I looked down to the Card in my hand and frowned at what I saw.

ROLE: <i>Genius</i>		RANK: <i>Savant</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>39</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>C</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>C</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>S</i>	LUCK: <i>C</i>
PACT: <i>C</i>	SOUL: <i>C</i>	STRENGTH: <i>C</i>	VITALITY: <i>C</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Librarian V’</i> <i>‘Genius V’</i> <i>‘Nightmare Feeder’</i> <i>‘Omniscient’</i>			

C in everything except Intelligence, which is S-tier...

“How come you don’t have a lot of abilities?” I asked. I couldn’t tell if this was the norm or not, but I’d assumed that someone at his Rank would’ve had more. I almost asked what the ‘Nightmare Feeder’ skill was, but was honestly too scared by the title to ask.

“As I say, I stay mostly stay cooped up with my books, but my Librarian Skill Set allows me to create scrolls that mimic other Roles’ abilities, so long as I have the attributes to match. And before you ask, no, I cannot use any Exorcist abilities. They all require an S-tier in Soul.”

We swapped back Cards and I took a moment to look at my own abilities. Omniglot was self-explanatory, as it simply meant that I could understand all languages, hence why everything sounded and looked like Japanese to me, except for times like when the Guild Representative had written out my name or when I looked at the Genius’ unique name.

“What does ‘Exorcist I’ mean?”

“Each Role has something like it, but it’s your basic Skill Set that includes the abilities of your Role. To view them, you just have to tap it with your finger and it expands.”

I did as he said and tapped the ability name, which caused the list to expand and become a continuously-scrolling list, as it was too long to encompass all the elements within the frame of the card. Before I could really get a good look at all the abilities available to me, Æmos continued:

“Skills come in five levels, and with things like your Role Skill Set, the entire thing will reach level two after you train at least half the abilities within to that level. Think of it as different levels of math, with the first level being simple things like subtraction and addition, and the final being like quantum physics. Some abilities are easier to level than others, but I’ve heard it compared to training certain muscle groups, where some are quick to bulk up and grow stronger with hardly any effort, and others take more concentrated and specific training to accomplish the same results.”

I nodded slowly. It seemed quite an extreme comparison, but perhaps there was such an extreme difference in the Abilities and their power? After a few cycles of the scrolling text, I had a grasp on the abilities included in ‘Exorcist I’. They were as follows:

ABILITIES

‘Omniglot’

‘Exorcist I’:

- *Banish I*
- *Contain Spirit I*
- *Focus Wielder I*
- *Hymnal I*
- *Investigation I*
- *Invoke Ritual I*
- *Meditation I*
- *Offering I*
- *Pact of the Familiar I*
- *Possessed Weapon Wielder I*
- *Repel I*
- *Sanctify I*
- *Soul Barrier I*
- *Spirit Sight I*
- *Staff Wielder I*
- *Summon I*
- *Ward Crafter I*
- *Worship I*

“Could you explain some of the Attributes to me as well? Like, what does Soul, Acumen, and Pact mean?”

The Genius nodded curtly. “Of course. Soul is the counterpart to Vitality and represents your spiritual endurance and defences, governing how many spells you might use before exhausting yourself and how much resistance you have against spells that affect your spirit and mind directly, such as Possession, Sleep, Madness, and so forth. Some people equate Soul to the term ‘Mana’, but that excludes the defensive element, which is very important against many of the challenges and monsters Adventurers face. Particularly Exorcists who have to deal with wraiths, demons, and the like.

“Acumen is something like innate wisdom, but seems to affect accuracy and tinkering as well. A low Acumen is generally seen as impulsive and lacking forethought, as well as being clumsy with spells and ranged weapons. It’s probably the hardest of the Attributes to define, but you don’t have to think too much about it. Pact is one that is however quite easy to define, as it governs your ability to deal with anything like a ritual or summoning, but it also affects how easily you might form bonds with familiars and pets, hence why it is a C-tier requirement for Hunters, who have the ability to tame wild animals.”

“So the Roles we’re assigned is based on meeting requirements then?”

“As far as we understand it, yes. Amusingly, Exorcist is the only Role I am aware of which requires an F-tier in an Attribute.”

I frowned. It wasn’t really that amusing to me.

“Listen, Ryūta, this situation that you’re in is definitely bad luck. It’s very few people who would actively wish to be taken away from their world and be faced with perilous quests by an uncaring world that honestly despises them for their very nature. No one knows why all of us are here, nor why only we ‘Otherworlders’ have access to all *these* powers, but you’re going to have to accept your new Role. There is no room for mistakes and half-heartedness when it comes to being an Adventurer, especially not with a Role as difficult and complex as yours.”

I had a grim thought that I blurted out. “What’s the mortality rate for Exorcists?”

Æmos didn’t say anything for a moment, surprised by the question. “I don’t think you’d gain anything by me telling you that.”

“I’d still like to know.”

He unfolded his legs and rolled-up the scroll in his hand, before adding it to a pyramid stack on one of the desks. As he swivelled back to face me, he said, “For the first Exorcism Quest, the mortality rate is ninety-six percent. That means only one in twenty-five make it out of their first exorcism alive.”

My frown deepened. Now I understood the pitying glances I’d gotten and the unsaid warning in Caroline’s voice. “And what’s the general mortality rate?”

“Exorcist is the only Role that faces Perilous Quests right off the bat, but if you were to say within the first month of work, which might include Simple Gathering and Delivery, as well as Bounty and Extermination Quests, then it’s about forty percent on average. Those who make it past the first month of being an Adventurer generally only face a twelve percent mortality rate though. There’s a sudden spike when Adventurers reach the ‘Eminent’ Guild Rank though, since all available quests around that Rank end up ‘Dangerous’ or higher in difficulty.”

“I see,” was all I could reply. Having my expected lifespan and that of my cohort reduced to simple statistics was a demoralising thing.

“In case you were wondering, the Guild Ranks are as follows: Novitiate; Initiate; Seeker; Eminent; Savant; & Master. The deciding factors for going up in Rank is whether or not you are deemed capable of handling the responsibility that each Rank bears within the Guild, as well as how you’d deal with the kinds of quests you’ll face. Given that Exorcists usually always deal with quests of Dangerous or Perilous difficulty, they usually go up in rank quite quickly. In fact, I think it’s almost tradition to receive a promotion to Seeker upon completing your first Exorcism Quest, as it shows overwhelming talent.”

I nodded lamely. It was already too much information to bear and too much responsibility to deal with. A seventeen-year-old like me wouldn’t have been expected to face such overwhelming adversity in the real world, but here it sounded like people like me who were stolen away from our worlds were just cast directly into the meat-grinder, with those few who came out the other end perhaps finding some purpose in life, though who could say for sure.

“That look on your face is one I’ve seen a lot before, but I will give you the same advice that I’ve given all the Exorcists before you: take your time to learn your abilities and rely on easy quests to make a living for a few weeks, before attempting to take on an Exorcism Quest. And also, try to find an established Exorcist to become your mentor.”

I nodded again, slightly more energy this time, though it was mostly faux. Suddenly a coin was shoved into my right hand. It was cold against my skin. I looked up, realising I’d been staring at my

sandalled feet for a while, then I lifted the coin up and saw that it was of a silvery metal and had the engraved letters for “ten” on its face, alongside a stylised crown above a half-moon crescent.

“I’m giving you this money out of my own pocket, Ryūta, because I believe that you’ll be able to beat the stats that promise only failure. Use this to find a place to stay for the next week as you settle in. Don’t forget to check out our For-Rent Armoury on the first floor that you no doubt saw coming up here, but keep in mind that your equipment won’t magically make you better than you are. I recommend starting off with just some basic clothes to replace what you’re wearing, as well as a good pair of boots and a backpack of some kind. You’ll end up walking a lot for the Delivery Quests and you’ll need a way to carry stuff for Gathering Quests.”

I quickly put the coin in my pocket, then looked intently at Æmos, before bowing deeply. “Thank you so much! I will aspire to live up to your expectations of me!”

“It’s not like this is goodbye or anything. I’m here more often than not, so come back anytime you have questions or... you know... if you just feel like talking.” He said the latter with an awkward kind of hesitation, which made me think that he probably rarely got to *just talk* to people without the expectation of giving answers and advice.

“I will,” I told him and bowed deeply again, before leaving the maze of bookcases.

I went down the stairs, not bothering to check the first floor yet, and then left the Guild Hall out the open front doors as well.

I was greeted by a dark early-evening sky, though was fairly sure it was no more than five in the evening, which made me wonder what kind of night-and-day cycle this continent of Hallem had. Without any reference to the rest of the world of Mondus, it was hard to tell exactly how close I was to either of the two poles of this world, but if it followed the same pattern as Earth, then I assumed I was somewhere semi-tropical, given that it was still quite warm, though not as much as summer-time Kyōto.

Letting out a sigh, I pushed the pointless speculations from my mind and began looking for a place I could stay for the night and get a meal for my growling stomach.

2 - My First Friend

A limb-quaking yawn escaped my body as I stretched my arms and legs in the comfortable bed of the inn. A night had cost forty copper crowns and a simple stew had cost ten, so I could stay for a while with the money Æmos had given me.

Driven by a gurgling and demanding stomach, I left the cozy inn that a sign out front named as ‘*Hallie’s Hospitality*’. I walked down the cobbled streets of Lundia’s Commerce Ward, where shops, inns, and restaurants were plentiful, searching for this world’s equivalent to a convenience store. Unfortunately, no such thing had been brought to this world by the influx of Otherworlders like myself, though I did manage to find a general store named ‘*The Choice Goods*’.

After stepping inside the wood-and-stone building, I was greeted with a neatly-organised store full of shelves and tables, whereupon was everything from boot polish to pickled vegetables, with no clear delineation between the wares despite the orderly fashion they’d been placed in.

It took me a few minutes of perusing before I found some sort of salami and some hardtack. Together they cost twenty coppers, but I reckoned it could last me a few meals, so I ended up buying them.

Another thing that had not been imported to this world was customer service apparently, as the owner of the store kept eyeing me suspiciously throughout my perusal and, when I paid, he looked as if he couldn’t wait for me to get out of his sight. He didn’t even let out a “*Safe travels!*” or “*Thank you, come again!*” to see me on my way...

I ended up finding a bench on the way to the Guild Ward, where I took a seat and ate a bit of the food I’d bought. It then hit me that I hadn’t found anything to drink, and the dry hardtack and smoked sausage really left me parched. Although I spotted a few wells here-and-there, I was fairly sure that drinking well water would make me seriously ill, so I kept my eyes open for a beverage-type shop as I walked back towards the Guild Hall.

A while later I arrived to the Adventurers’ Guild, having found some kind of cold tea store with drinks that tasted faintly of the mixture of berries and fruit that’d been cooked with the water, although it had cost me ten coppers per flask, so I had only gotten two. Suddenly it was starting to seem like the money from the Genius would not last *that* long.

After passing through the perpetually-open red doors of the building, I went over to the Quest Boards to see if there were any that seemed something I’d be capable of, but, when I considered the

rewards for some of the Gathering and Delivery quests, I realised that I’d already spent more on food and drink this morning than I’d be paid for potentially spending hours on such menial tasks as walking to a nearby farm to deliver a few letters.

My eyes kept slipping to the lone Novitiate-ranked Exorcism Quest that hung at the top of the rightmost board, but I knew it was folly to even consider taking it, doubly so when I had yet to even attempt to figure out my Role abilities.

There were some quests labelled Troublesome which paid a few silvers, but most were Bounty or Extermination, which seemed to be focused on killing specific targets and, from what I remembered of my abilities, that seemed far from my forte...

I let out a sigh, then decided to have a look at the Group Board, which was covered in handmade posters and scrolls, several of which featured cute drawings and artistic scribbles. I noticed quickly that several of them had written at the bottom “*No Librarians, Exorcists, & Summoners!*” Although it was frustrating to see, it did make me feel a strange sort of kinship with Æmos, since he knew what it meant to be excluded based on your arbitrarily-assigned Role, and I suppose that knowing that not just Exorcists were excluded also helped a bit.

“Hey, *newbie*, are you looking for a group?” someone behind me suddenly asked.

Newbie?

I turned around to face the guy who’d asked, suddenly very conscious of my dumb outfit.

The guy was about a head taller than me, but I hadn’t really grown during puberty, so it wasn’t anything new. He had an unkempt and thick dark-brown beard and knotted overlong hair that looked like it needed a trim. His clothes were loose with some leather padding on his forearm and chest, and on his hip hung a shortsword about a metre long.

“You just arrived, right?” he asked, moving closer. I didn’t really know how to interpret his interest in me, but it seemed a bit overwhelming. From a look at the queue of people by the Guild Representative’s desk waiting for their Role Assignment, I knew that there was still a steady stream of new people coming in, so his interest in me seemed strange, almost desperate.

“What’s your Role? My group is looking for a spellcaster or ranger and you don’t look like the brawny type.”

“Erm, I’m an Exorcist.”

Immediately the guy took a step back. “Ah, you were the new one. I see... Sorry to bother you.” Then he was gone.

Not like I wanted to join your group anyway! I complained internally.

Moments later, a tall guy came over. He was wearing engraved expensive-looking plate armour that seemed to let off a faint golden shimmer.

If this guy is looking for group members, I’m saying yes no matter what! Even if I have to lie!

With a gauntleted thumb, he pushed the beak of his feathered helmet up to reveal his face. His eyes were warm and his skin was a pale tan. Light-brown locks of hair flowed out through the bottom of his helmet and ran down his back.

“Was *that* guy bothering you?” he asked in a deep thrumming voice. For some reason he reminded me a lot of Renji with his charming and comforting aura.

“Erm, no. Not like anyone want to team up with an Exorcist like me anyway,” I replied with a fake laugh.

The man’s heavy gauntleted hand landed on my shoulder and he looked me directly in the eyes. “Don’t put yourself down like that. Exorcists serve a very important role in this world. I’m sure you were chosen for that Role for a reason.” Even though I didn’t really believe his words, his kind demeanour and aura made me want to believe that he was right.

“I’m pretty sure that I was chosen due to my bad luck,” I replied, self-deprecatingly.

The armoured guy let out a chuckle. “I suppose that an F-tier in Luck is a bit worrying.”

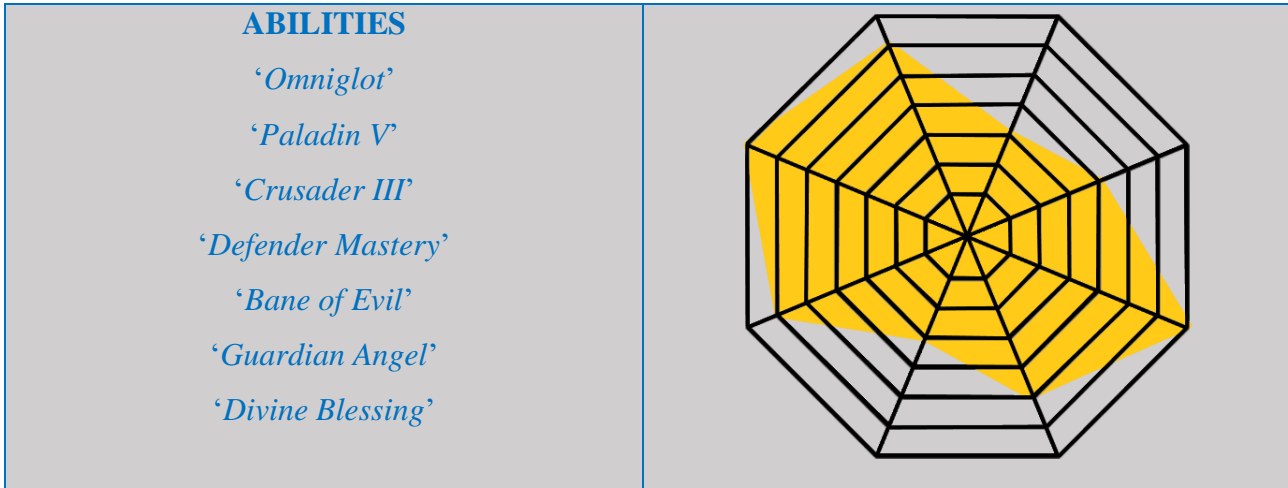
I frowned in response, although his chuckle made me want to laugh as well.

“Have you already spoken to the Genius? Roles like yours benefit the most from learning from people with a lot of experience.”

“I did. What Role do you have, if you don’t mind me asking?”

In response he used his right hand to pull his Guild Card from a small bag attached to his left hip, then he held it up in front of me. As an act of respect, I also showed him mine.

<i>‘HARLEIGH’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Crusader</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>29</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>D</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>C</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>S</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>D</i>	SOUL: <i>A</i>	STRENGTH: <i>S</i>	VITALITY: <i>A</i>



“Wow,” I replied, seeing his incredible attributes. Not a single one of them was under D-tier... From the presence of ‘Paladin’ and ‘Crusader, I realised that he had an Advanced Role, similar to Æmos.

“My Attribute Graph kind of looks like a shield, don’t you think?”

I smiled weakly. “Thank you for showing me, Harleigh.”

“Don’t worry about it, Temaru.”

“Please just call me Ryūta,” I replied. “I feel like I might be the only one who gave my full name to the Guild Lady.” I’d been listening to the names people gave as they registered for the Guild and thus far I was the only one who given more than just my first name.

“There are a few different reasons,” the Crusader explained. We had moved a bit away from the Guild Boards so that we weren’t blocking the many people who looked through the postings. “Some people come from worlds where surnames aren’t very common, and some see this as a chance to reinvent themselves so they pick names that they aspire to match.”

“Which kind are you?” I asked.

He grinned, showing rows of perfectly-aligned white teeth, the very image of a picture-perfect smile. “I’m not telling.”

“Ah man, I wish I’d been as lucky as you. Crusader sounds like someone strong and reliable and popular.”

Harleigh shrugged, but I noticed the slightly uncomfortable look on his face. Perhaps it was a lot of work to maintain such an image, though he definitely radiated such energy to me.

“Can I admit something?”

I blinked in surprise. “What is it?”

“I recognised you from hearing your Role Assignment yesterday, and I approached you with hidden intentions.”

Oh no... I replied internally, fearing the worst.

“Erm, what kind of intentions?”

“The last Exorcist Novitiate I saw before you was this really kind girl with a warm smile, but, like everyone else, I just ignored her. A few days later she was killed on a quest she attempted alone, and I felt really guilty for not helping guide her. Those of us who have been Adventurers for years understand how dangerous the job is, and know how especially hard it is for some Roles, so it ought to be our duty to educate Novitiates so they might thrive. But instead we just focus on ourselves first and only approach those whose Roles might benefit our groups in some way...”

“I... I’m not sure how to respond to that.”

Harleigh grinned, though there was no mirth in it. “Sorry, that was probably a bit weird, right?”

I scratched my chin awkwardly, but then replied boldly, “If you want, I could use some help finding equipment to suit my Role, as well as some guidance on how to use my Abilities.”

He nodded seriously and I suddenly felt like back when I’d approached Renji in middle school to hang out for the first time and he’d said yes.

Harleigh showed me the For-Rent Armoury on the first floor, where racks of every weapon imaginable lined the walls, and tables in the middle of the floor were covered in things like shields, spell tomes, and bizarre talismans. At the back of the floor was an archway past which lay a mirrored version of the layout, but instead with every type of imaginable armour.

“Exorcists have a limited kind of weapons they can use,” he explained. “They are Staves, Foci, and a unique type called Possessed Weapons. The latter are pretty rare and quite dangerous, so the Guild doesn’t keep them on open display, but if you make a special request you can rent such a weapon, though you need to be of Eminent Rank or higher.”

I nodded. I remembered as much from looking at my list of Exorcist abilities. “Which one should I pick?”

“Actually, I think it’s a good idea to get both a Staff and a Focus.”

“I don’t really understand the difference,” I replied, nudging a two-metre-long metal staff with a ring at the top onto which had been fastened a bunch of small bells.

“Staves are used to channel certain things like prayers, blessings, summoning, and anything you might consider ritualistic, while Foci are mostly for offensive spells and things like banishment or detrimental effects.”

That didn’t truly make much sense to me, but it seemed that Harleigh realised as much, because he took the staff I’d been poking and shoved it into my hands.

“Oh, that’s a weird feeling,” I replied.

The moment my hands grasped the shaft of the staff, it was like a familiarity arose in my muscles and knowledge I’d forgotten resurfaced in my mind after a decade. Without even moving my hands, the bells atop the staff began to ring slowly in unison.

“Is *that* supposed to happen?” I asked, concerned.

“Right now, your Soul energy is unfocused and leaking from your body en masse, so this kind of empathic response from a magical tool that you’re aligned with is quite normal. As you become better at utilising your potential, you can control the flow of your spirit. Picture it like holding a heavy weight in your outstretched arm: to begin with you can’t really hold it like that without shaking, but as you practice, you’ll be able to keep your arm steady.”

“And what about the focus? I have no idea what I’m looking for. I don’t even know what a focus is...”

Harleigh chuckled. “That’s normal. When I first came here this was all very confusing to me as well. It took me breaking my arm twice to learn how to properly wield a shield,” he said, laughing as though *that* was a fond memory.

He didn’t notice my expression though and instead began searching for a focus I could try.

A few moments later he called me over to a table close to the archway leading to the other part of the armoury.

“There are a few here to pick between,” he told me. I looked down at the objects he indicated, letting out an involuntary “Eww” when I saw that one was a horned skull.

Besides the horned skull, which was possibly the skull of a ram or a goat, there was a metal orb made of thin metallic string with a triangle within, a glass vessel that looked like an old lantern, a simple iron bell on a half-moon handle, and a doll made from some kind of animal fur and stuffed full of beans of some kind.

“Which one should I pick?”

Harleigh let out a contemplative “Hmm”, before answering, “The type of magical effects and characteristics of your spells depends on the type of focus you’re wielding. The skull and doll are

made from parts of animal bodies, which makes them good for spells that affect living beings, such as curses, afflictions, and such things, but those are more suited for Summoners and Advanced Roles like the Necromancer.”

“Necromancer?” I asked, surprised. That sounded very ominous. From the little bit of fantasy I’d read in the past, Necromancer-type characters had always been exclusively evil...

“It’s one of the Specialisations that Summoners and Exorcists have access to. A lot of Summoners go for it, because it compliments their Summoner Skill Set, but I don’t know of any Exorcists who have picked that. But, then again, Exorcists are one of the few Roles where most of the Specialisations are still unknown.”

“Because so few live long enough?” I replied.

His smile faltered for a moment, but then he said cheerfully, “Don’t be so gloomy! Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes, the bell-type of foci are optimal for summoning spells, while the lantern-type is great for projections and illusions. But I think, for you, this steel ball is the best kind, since it is versatile and your Role has a lot of different spells. You could also benefit from using a tome as a focus, although it would require a lot of practice to utilise as effectively.”

I picked up the wire orb and it naturally came to rest in the palm of my hand. As my untrained energy surged into it, the wire triangle within lifted and began hovering perfectly in the centre, jittering slightly and letting out a deep pulsing hum. Once again, that bizarre feeling of familiarity flowed through me, as though I was holding a baseball and had in the past been a talented pitcher.

Looking back at the bell-staff that Harleigh was holding for me, I asked, “Do staff types also have an impact on my rituals?”

He nodded, “But don’t worry, this one will serve you well for pretty much any ability you have.”

With the bell-staff and wire orb in hand, I went up to the counter of the For-Rent Armoury and the Clerk tending it asked me, “You’re renting these two then?”

I nodded.

“That’ll be one silver crown per week per item.”

I nearly choked, not feeling like I had money to spend, but also feeling pressured by the Crusader’s in-depth help and expectations of me.

Harleigh immediately came over and placed four silver crowns on the counter. “He’s renting them both for two weeks.”

“Very well,” the Clerk answered and took the coins, before pulling out a slate similar to the one that had decided my Role, but wider, the size of a keyboard or thereabouts. “Card please,” he asked

and I offered him my Guild Card, which he laid atop the slate, alongside the Focus and then the Staff. Then he wrote down a note about the items and my name, Rank, and Role, probably so they knew who had rented what.

“Thank you,” I said to the Clerk. Then turned to the Crusader and bowed deeply, before thanking him as well.

“Now let’s find you some clothes as well,” Harleigh told me, all but dragging me by the elbow into the other part of the Armoury.

“I can’t have you pay for all of this,” I complained weakly.

“It’s not *that much* to rent stuff,” he replied.

“Are you sure?”

He clapped me on my back, making me stumble forward and through the archway. “Don’t be so serious about it, just let your senior treat you!” Then he laughed heartily. I suppose that in his own way he was making up for the guilt he felt from not doing enough as an experienced Adventurer to help the new members.

In the end, Harleigh bought me a pouch-like bag that sat on my lower back and attached to a belt around my waist, as well as some sturdy grey linen trousers, a simple white shirt, brown hide boots, and a dark hooded travel cloak with pockets on the inside.

The Focus attached to a hook on my belt and the Bell Staff turned out to have a telescopic shaft that allowed it to be collapsed to a metre-long baton, rather than its usual two metres, and it too could be attached to my belt on a simple loop on my left hip.

In the end, he had spent a total of close to twenty silver crowns on me and I felt incredibly obliged to pay him back as soon as I could.

After the purchases and rentals, we had gone out back behind the Guild Hall to a vast courtyard with dummy targets and enough space to practice magic without damaging any of the buildings nearby, should something go wrong.

“I’m serious, Ryūta, *this* is my gift to you. This kind of money isn’t really anything to me. My group takes on really dangerous quests that pay at least a few gold crowns each, so I mostly just have a bunch of money that I don’t know what to spend on.”

“Still,” I replied, “I’m going to pay you back!”

He chuckled. “I suppose it’s good to have goals.”

“Now,” he continued, “I don’t know how to help with practicing the Pact-based abilities like summoning and rituals, but a few of your other abilities are similar to ones that Paladins and Crusaders have access to, such as barrier-type skills and offensive abilities like Repel. I think we should start with your Meditation ability though, since that’s one I think will benefit you the most in terms of improving your skill with manipulating your soul energy.”

Harleigh had me join him by a tree that shaded a corner of the courtyard, next to the backwall of the Guild Hall. We sat below its shade, as a gentle breeze occasionally washed over us and played with the leaves in its canopy. He told me that the posture did not matter, so long as it was comfortable, so I ended up seated with my legs folded across each other and my right hand resting within the palm of my left in my lap just below my stomach. The deep thrum of his voice guided me through the kind of imagery I ought to try and invoke within my mind’s eye, and though it took quite a while, I eventually started being able to vaguely sense the energy that coursed through my body, picturing it as a continuous flow of light that ran down every limb, using the veins of my body as a highway.

I couldn’t really sense how my energy was supposed to be leaking from my body, but I assumed *that kind* of awareness would come in time. For now I was just happy to be making a tiny bit of progress.

“The reason we started with Meditation is because it is the easiest to learn and is a great stepping stone to learning how to utilise your other abilities that require a specific image in your mind, as well as intense focus. I think we should try Repel next, as this is really the only truly offensive spell in your arsenal right now.”

“It sounds quite strange that I am expected to take on very dangerous quests, but have no offensive capabilities.”

“To my knowledge, Exorcists rely a lot on their summoned familiars or paid bodyguards for such matters. Exorcism Quests are, from my understanding, quite a lot like Investigation Quests, but narrower in the sort of expertise required.”

I gave him a confused look in return, so he rewinded a bit and explained, “Investigation Quests are a type of unique Role-based quest, meaning that not all Roles are capable of doing them. As the name suggests, there’s a lot of research and in-depth analysis involved. Exorcism Quests are basically the same, but with many esoteric elements added on top, which is why they are only possible for Exorcists to deal with.

“For example, an Investigation might deal with finding out how someone died through looking at evidence, witness testimony, following clues, and such. The difference with Exorcisms is that,

while the elements might be similar, they are basically invisible to everyone but Exorcists and might feature obstacles that only you might be capable of dealing with.”

I nodded diligently. Suddenly the idea of an Exorcism didn’t sound so scary, after all, from how he was presenting it, it was more like detective work that dealt with the supernatural.

“But, let’s return to the training for now. You shouldn’t even consider trying an Exorcism Quest until you have familiarised yourself with your abilities.”

“So, what should I do for Repel?” I asked, leaving the shade of the tree. The weather was nice like yesterday, sunny and probably around twenty-five degrees, but with a wind that had a cold edge to it, which made the shade a bit chilly after sitting there for what might have been half an hour.

“Repel is a concentrated blast of your Soul energy and depending on how much innate power you are able to put into it, it could potentially be quite dangerous, so I recommend we go over to the target practice area.”

I nodded and followed Harleigh to the part of the courtyard where primitive wooden dolls were placed at the end. In the interval since we arrived, a pair of bow-wielding Adventurers had taken up the spots furthest down the line of the eight targets that were spaced evenly along a ten-metre-wide wall.

One of the two archers was someone I recognised from yesterday as having been two spots ahead of me in line for the Assignment. He was a ‘Ranger’ if I remembered correctly. From what I recalled of Æmos’ explanation of Attributes, I assumed that his main ones were Dexterity and Acumen, as those seemed most closely connected to skill-based abilities.

“Eyes up front, mister.”

I immediately snapped back to look at the Crusader. “Sorry.”

“To be able to pull off spells, it’s important you don’t let your mind wander. You have to shut out all other unnecessary stimuli.”

“I understand,” I told him. I had a tendency to zone out though, so it was easier said than done.

“For offensive or target-based spells and incantations, it works the best if you say the name of the spell out loud and tether your imagination to its name. For this particular spell, I would recommend that you picture energy building in your body, before flowing down your arm and shooting out your palm in a particular shape. The result should be something that pushes targets away by metaphysically repelling their souls. Anyone hit by it will feel compelled to move away from you, but against inert objects it will seem as though a wind pushed them, if that makes sense.”

“Not really,” I wanted to reply, but I stayed my tongue. “Got it,” I replied instead.

Harleigh looked at me for a while and I wondered if he wanted me to go ahead and try it, but then he said, deadpan, “You’ll need your Focus for this.”

“Of course... sorry.”

I pulled the wire orb from my belt and held it in my right hand. My jingling staff was in my left hand, though he took it from me and said, “Try to pull it off without holding the staff first, since it might make it more difficult to accurately channel the energy for it.”

“So, should I give it a try?”

“Yes.”

I swallowed hard, then took a step up to the knee-high wall that people were meant to stand behind while aiming for the targets that stood eight-to-fifteen metres away, depending on which you went for.

Thank god I went through that cringe-inducing phase in middle school where I thought I’d become an ESPer. I feel like my mind is perfectly suited for this sort of thing thanks to those delusions.

I held out my hand with the wire orb and pointed it towards the closest target, which stood maybe nine metres away from my position and off to the left slightly. Then I imagined *that* light I’d pictured while meditating and felt it swirl around my chest, building up power, before uncoiling itself and shooting down my right arm and entering into the wire orb, from where I released it by yelling:

“REPEL!”

The air itself began to sing and dust flew to the left-and-right of my invisible projectile as it flew down the range, before it collided with the target doll and blew it off its simple wooden stand and sent it flying down towards the backwall of the range. Upon impact with the stones, the dummy was pulverised into bits and came apart as a bundle of disorganised straw and broken sticks.

“As expected of an S-tier in Soul, your potential is very high with any skills based in that attribute.”

“Thank you,” I replied, letting the praise wash over me.

“However. You took too long to cast the spell. This is not an incantation with a litany that must be recited, so it ought to be something instantaneous requiring very little build-up.”

It felt a bit harsh, but he was the expert here, so I didn’t argue back. Besides, I was really just excited that I was capable of literal magic! I suddenly felt incredibly powerful, but then had a thought: *If I’m capable of causing this much damage to an object, but this is my only offensive attack, then what must other Adventurers be capable of?*

“Pick a new target and try to cast the spell as fast as possible.”

I took in a deep breath, mentally picked a target that stood twelve metres away and then lifted my arm and yelled, “REPEL!”

This time, nothing happened.

“You forgot to picture your spell, didn’t you?”

“I did,” I replied embarrassed.

“Do it again, but remember the order of things.”

I repeated the process, but it still took probably eight tries before I was able to instantly shoot off a Repel, though this time the power was only enough to tip over the target.

Harleigh nodded, satisfied with the results. “I think that’s enough practice for today. You seem quite a natural at this. If you’d like, we could try some other abilities tomorrow?”

“I’d very much like that,” I replied, “Thank you so much for your guidance!”

Harleigh smiled warmly. “Don’t mention it.”

Before I could leave, he added, “Try and make it a habit to meditate every morning and evening. It may seem pointless, but you will notice how much better your spells will work after doing it for a while. Just like a muscle, it is something you need to train and keep strong.”

“Thank you,” I said again. I couldn’t wait to learn more tomorrow and progress ever-so-slightly towards the distant goal of becoming a proper Exorcist.

3 - Master “Owl”

After I awoke and had some breakfast, I went directly to the Guild Hall, looking for Harleigh. Since I didn’t immediately spot him, I spent some time looking at the Boards, noticing a few new quests and group posters on them.

I waited around for maybe an hour, but then decided to go out into the courtyard to check, after not being able to spot him in the Hall nor on the first and second floors.

Before trying to practice Repel again, I sat in the shade of the tree and meditated for a bit, though it wasn’t as easy alone as when the Crusader verbally instructed me on how I ought to picture my inner spirit and the flow of energy through my body.

As I came up to the training range, I saw that the dummy I’d destroyed the day before had been replaced, which made me feel guilty for whoever had been charged with the task. I spent a while practicing my rapid-fire Repel, before giving up on trying to improve and returning to the Guild Hall, where I once again didn’t spot Harleigh anywhere.

Though it felt awkward, I asked for a beverage from the tavern-esque counter and was handed a diluted sweet mead. I found a table and sat down, observing the hall and the newcomers, while weakly sipping the faintly-alcoholic beverage which most certainly wasn’t something I fancied, preferring the fruity cold teas from the store I’d visited yesterday. But it was cheap, costing only three copper crowns, and slightly hydrating, so I still decided to try and finish it.

Sometime towards noon, a short chubby man in dark clothes and a heavy coat, wearing strange goggles and with shoulder-length greasy black hair, came over and sat down opposite me by the small circular table. I was surprised by his appearance, but didn’t say anything, as I felt certain that he was my senior and figured I was intruding on what might be his preferred spot in the Hall. As I looked across the table at him, I noticed how the lenses of his brass goggles distorted the colour of his eyes, somehow continually shifting his irises through a rainbow of hues.

“Wanna be my apprentice?” he asked in a gruff phlegmy voice that made me wonder if he smoked frequently.

I blinked, uncomprehending.

Apparently he took it as a sign that I hadn’t heard him over the noise of the Hall, so he leaned across the table, putting two fat-fingered and callused hands on the tabletop, nearly spilling my remaining bit of sweet mead as my mug began sliding away from me towards the edge before I grabbed it.

“Do. You. Want. To. Be. My. Apprentice?” he asked again, speaking as though I wasn’t just deaf, but also learning impaired.

“I’m an Exorcist,” I told him, thinking that the word alone would drive him off.

“Yeah, no shit. I meant as an Exorcist Apprentice, pipsqueak.”

Who’s the pipsqueak here? You’re shorter than me, old man...

I didn’t like his attitude, but part of me was eager to have a proper mentor. “Are you an Exorcist yourself?”

“That’s right. Been in this business for over twenty-five years. But you see, I’m getting old and I want to train an apprentice to replace me when I eventually mess up and get eaten by a Banshee or something...”

That’s grim.

“That’s very altruistic,” I replied politely. “But why me?”

“Don’t kid yourself, I’m doing it as much for my sake as for the Guild’s sake. And I just picked you because you look wet behind the ears and Exorcist Novitiates don’t exactly grow on the trees. I’m sure if I had the pick of the litter, you wouldn’t be it, pipsqueak, but alas, such is the state of our profession.”

“Is this your attempt at trying to convince me to say yes?” I asked, cracks beginning to form in my polite façade. Something about his way of talking down to me was incredibly irritating and provoking.

“You don’t exactly have many options yourself, young man. Æmos has probably told you that one-in-twenty-five Exorcists survive their first job, but he probably didn’t mention that those who survive their first job always have a mentor to guide them. It’s more like one-in-a-thousand who survive their first job without outside guidance.”

“I already have someone showing me the ropes,” I replied as way of declining his offer.

“Mister Holier-than-thou?” he asked. “I noticed he had finally found a conscience, but,” he made a show of looking around the room, “he’s not here today, is he?”

I was surprised that he knew Harleigh was the one I’d been referring to. “Do you know where he is?”

“His party was called in for an urgent Bounty Quest, so they’ll no doubt be gone for a few weeks chasing whatever-it-is the Guild is fretting about this time.”

I lowered my head sadly. “I see.”

“So, what do you say?”

Æmos had advised me to find a mentor and, though he was very patronising, who was I to look a gift-horse in the mouth?

“Very well. What kind of training will we be doing first?”

Instead of answering, he eased back off the table and pulled a scroll from a pocket, uncrinkled it and placed it on the table such that the text was facing me. My heart sank when I recognised the Exorcism Quest I’d been glancing at for the past two days.

<i>‘The Haunting at Hamsel’s Rest’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Perilous</i>	RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>
<i>Eight people have gone missing from the village known as ‘Hamsel’s Rest’ and all signs point to a Haunting, though no one knows the exact entity behind the disappearances.</i>		
<i>You are to travel to the village and ascertain what nature of apparition is behind the tragedy, such that an experienced Exorcist can tailor their approach to dealing with the entity.</i>		
<i>You are under no circumstances to attempt Exorcising the apparition by yourself, as this is too dangerous a task for a Novitiate!</i>		
REWARD: <i>1 Gold & 40 Silver Crowns</i>		

A Guild Representative with shoulder-long blonde hair, dressed identically to Caroline in a green blouse and skirt, greeted us when we came to the Quest Counter with the Exorcism Quest. She took a look at it, then looked us over.

“A new apprentice, Master Owl?”

That’s a strange name, I thought immediately, but then remembered what Harleigh had told me about Adventurers and their names. From his title, I wondered if he was in fact of Master Rank in the Guild, as that would put him above Æmos. It was also possible that it was just a respectful way of referring to him, due to his advanced age.

“That’s right, sweetheart.”

I spotted the tiny twitch in the corner of her eye at his term of endearment, but she was a professional, so she didn't comment anything. I wondered if people often harassed the Guild Representatives and Clerks.

“Your Guild Cards please,” she requested, and we handed them to her. I tried to get a look at Owl's card, but he purposefully angled it away from me, which I found to be very suspicious. After all, I'd yet to see it and ascertain that he was in fact an Exorcist, though I assumed that the Guild Representatives would at least ensure I didn't just go off on a Quest with some random guy... Right?

As she took our Cards and placed them with the Exorcism Quest scroll atop a magical slate similar to the one for renting equipment, I felt nothing but dread and apprehension. How many times had I been warned against taking on such a quest before being ready?

Owl seemed to notice my inner turmoil, because he leaned close and whispered, with a hot breath that stank of smoke, “They suspend your Guild License if you try to return a quest you have accepted. They're quite serious about that sort of thing.”

I'm screwed.

I was trailing after the chubby Exorcist while heading to a part of Lundia that I hadn't seen before, called the Market Ward. It was similar to the Commerce Ward, but had more than just shops, as you could find livestock and horses, as well as people selling their services. These services included anything from bodyguards to prostitutes. Unlike the other ward, it also absolutely thronged with people and stank of oil, smoke, metal, and sweat.

“Anything catch your fancy, pipsqueak?”

“I'm not interested in *that* kind of thing,” I replied. In my mind, I could still only imagine being with Inoue. Of course, I would never see her again, and *even if* I somehow managed to find my way back to Earth, she would have no doubt moved on by then.

Master Owl paused, then turned to look at me, still wearing his bizarre eye-colour-shifting goggles. Then he laughed mightily.

“That's not what I meant,” he managed to get out, before another fit of laughter came over him. “We're looking for a mercenary, to escort us.”

I felt warmth rise up my face as embarrassment overtook me. After a few deep breaths, I managed to ask, “Why didn't we just make a quest for the Adventurers' Guild? We can do that right?”

“Don’t be silly. First off, those things are way too expensive. Secondly, you don’t know what you’ll get. The Mercenary Guild is a far better choice for people like us. So, do you see anyone you like the look of? Intuition about these things is important you know.”

“What do we need a bodyguard for?” I asked, while scanning the people showcasing their shiny equipment or glistening oiled-up muscles.

“Us Exorcists, we’ve got the kind of Luck that makes us magnets for disaster and misfortune. Trust me on this: we need a bodyguard. Best make it a habit to befriend strong people who can protect your sorry ass.”

“But don’t we have access to familiars? Can’t they protect us?”

“Ehh, that’s a terrible idea. Don’t rely on something you summoned to have your best interest.”

“Why not? I have the ability to make a Familiar Pact and I’ve been told they can be used for protection.”

“You’ve been told that by people who haven’t actually used familiars,” he replied.

I couldn’t really argue with that, but he seemed to believe that I still need convincing, so he pulled his goggles up over his head and pointed to his left eye, then lifted his long bangs to show a dark scar that ran up to his scalp.

“See this eye?” he asked, then tapped it with his index finger, producing a dull *clink-clink* sound. “Lost it to a Crimson Nightingale I summoned and relied on a bit too much when I was still a dumb Seeker, who thought I was hot shit. Dumb bitch tore my fucking eye out when I tried to ask her to do something not included in my Pact. So yeah, don’t rely on familiars, for they do not have your best interests in mind. They’re basically like spirits that we kidnap and bind to our commands by using contracts.”

I frowned. The picture of Exorcists and their work that he was painting for me was wildly different than the romantic image of supernatural detective work that Harleigh had impressed upon me.

“Back to the matter at hand,” he said, putting his goggles back on and scanning the crowds. “You see anyone?”

“There’s a lot of people showing off, but polished armour and oiled-up muscles don’t really say much about their skill,” I remarked honestly.

“Huh, you actually have a good head on your shoulders, boyo. Good. I was starting to become despondent at your naivety.”

“How about her?” I asked, pointing to a two-metre-tall woman whose dark plate-armour had seen many battles, but whose stance and aura was like the very image of a natural-born killer.

Master Owl appraised her for a bit, then turned to look at me with a stupid grin on his face. “Is *that* your type, huh? Tall and beautiful, but with the strength to snap you in half?”

“I just thought she looked strong,” I replied, trying not to rise to the bait.

“Oh she’s strong, that’s for sure, but probably a bit of a hothead too. A lot of Vanguarders are like that though, sort of par for the course with their lot.”

“You can tell what Role she has?”

He looked back at me again, then said, “You should be able to as well. You have the Spirit Sight after all. Argh, but, right, they don’t give you Spirit Goggles *just like that*... hold on a moment.” He began rummaging through a pouch on his right hip, but when he didn’t find what he was seeking, he searched inside his heavy leather coat, before eventually finding what he was seeking in a breast pocket. He gave them a quick appraisal then rubbed the lenses on the edge of his stained shirt, before handing me a pair of goggles that were similar to those he wore, although the left lens was cracked down the middle. They also smelled of his rank sweat.

“Put those on and you’ll see what I mean.”

I pulled the goggles over my head, then had to tighten the strap on the back for them to fit to my face, but, as I looked through the lenses, I suddenly saw what Owl must’ve been seeing every day for years. Every person was lit up with some sort of glow, each with a certain colour that, for some reason, effortlessly translated into a tangible personality trait or mix of traits in my mind. When I looked at the curly red-haired and dark-skinned two-metre-tall Vanguard, her body was outlined by a pulsing spiky red aura that translated in my mind to meaning only one thing: danger.

Looking at Master Owl, I didn’t notice an aura at all, but when he saw me staring at him, he grinned suspiciously, which made me think he had a way of hiding it.

“When you get enough practice studying people’s spirit, you can immediately tell what sort of Role they’re suited for. It’s more-or-less the principle upon which the soul-stone tablets the Guilds use for Role Assignment works.”

I scanned the crowd of people a bit longer and saw the same red glow on a few of the other mercenaries offering up their services, but while the tall woman’s was spiky and menacing, theirs were soft or full of rounded bits, with some even having an aura that visibly trembled, perhaps due to some anxiety or fear.

The more I looked around, the more I noticed how, not just the mercenaries, but everyone, even the blonde lightly-tanned Natives of Lundia, had auras that could be translated into a Role for the Guild. I looked down myself and saw that my own aura was like a hazy outline that pulsed with my heartbeat and had the same violet hue that I’d seen on my Attribute Graph that was on my Guild Card.

“I thought only us Otherworlders had the ability to be Role Assigned,” I commented.

“My guess is that, because we do not belong to this world, the Divine Ones that govern it decided that we must be given a purpose in such a crude way. But what you’re seeing are the souls of people, expressed through the energy leaking from their spirit. Everyone has a soul, not just us Outsiders.”

That makes sense, I suppose.

“So? Have you changed your mind?”

“I think she’s the most competent one here,” I told him. While looking around, I’d seen a rainbow of hues, although none like the colours of Æmos and Harleigh’s Graphs.

“Alright, let’s go introduce ourselves,” Owl answered with a smirk. I doubted the woman would want to work with us when she discovered that I was an inexperienced weakling and he was a frustrating lecher.

A river of bodies moved back-and-forth between where we stood on an incline and where the tent with the mercenaries was placed, but instead of shoving his way through, Owl simply lifted his right hand and pointed straight towards the woman. As though he was Moses parting the sea, the mass of people began moving in a way that allowed us to walk straight through the crowds. No sooner had I followed him than the flow of people returned to normal behind me and threatened to take me away.

When we emerged out the other side, near to the tents, I asked, “How’d you do that?”

“I used the Repel ability.”

“It can be used like that!?”

“Ah, I see you’ve already familiarised yourself with it a bit? Maybe Holier-than-thou Harleigh isn’t so terrible an instructor as I feared. But yes, all your abilities can be used in a multitude of ways. If you can imagine it, it can probably work. Repel is a spell that affects the soul of a person, and though it can be used to physically repel them, it can also be used to subtly manipulate people, like herding sheep in a way.”

“You used the ability without a Focus as well, how’s that possible?”

“Hm, I thought you were smarter than this. It’s called a ‘Focus’ for a reason, pipsqueak. It *focuses* your energy. With enough training you don’t need any tool to use your abilities, but tools are meant to be used, because to not use them is ineffective and quite frankly moronic.”

“So I don’t actually need these goggles to see people’s souls?”

“Certainly, although I use them because maintaining the Spirit Sight without them always gives me a thundering headache. A benefit of not using a Focus for a spell is that it becomes weaker, which is preferable to achieve a subtle result. Like a drizzle of rain rather than a monsoon, if you get what I mean.”

I didn’t truly, but I was sure I just needed to practice not using a Focus and then I’d internalise the truth he was speaking. Although he was irritating and mean, he was a trove of knowledge that I would do my best to learn from.

Before I could ask anything further, he strode towards the Vanguard, who, to my surprise, was staring intently at us, perhaps having sensed our gazes on her for a while.

“Howdee, sweetheart. Wanna hang out with us?”

How’s that your opening pitch...?

“Exorcists, are you?” she asked. Her voice was deep but with a distinct feminine edge to it and reminded me of the voice actress Park Romi whose voice I’d always liked. “I don’t think you can afford me.”

“Now-now, no need to be hasty,” Owl replied. “If you know enough about Exorcists, you must be aware that we’re paid very handsomely by the Adventurers’ Guild.”

“I’m also aware that your jobs tend to get lots of people killed. Besides, you don’t look like the image of affluence, wearing such hand-me-down clothes and wielding rented gear.” For this latter comment, she was looking at me.

“Keen eye you have,” he praised her. “But you see, we’re about to embark on a Quest that pays ten gold, and for your services, we’re willing to pay you ten percent of the reward.”

Are you crazy!? I almost yelled at him. The reward for the quest was only one gold forty silver, and if we gave her the lion’s share, then we’d only be splitting the forty silver, meaning neither of us would be that well off, while she’d be laughing all the way to the bank.

“Let me see the quest,” she demanded.

Owl reached into his coat and brought out a crinkled scroll that was quite clearly not the same as the quest we had both accepted, which made alarm bells go off in my head.

As the Vanguard woman was reading through the specifics of the quest, I pulled Owl aside.

“What quest is *that*?? Did you lie to me? Where are we even going??”

“Relax, boyo. ‘Tis the same as yours, just above your Rank, y’see.”

“So it’s also for Hamsel’s Rest?”

“That’s right. You didn’t think I’d be satisfied just splitting the measly reward with you like that did you? Also, you’ll be paying her one gold retainer out of your quest reward, but I’ll let you keep the rest.”

“Wait, so what’s the point of me going there to figure out what kind of monster is responsible for the disappearances, if you’ll be there to immediately handle it?”

“Are you unfamiliar with the concept of an apprenticeship?” he asked, looking at me as though I was potentially very stupid. “Of course I could easily do your job for you, but what exactly does that teach you? Consider it a form of supervision, what we’re undertaking here. I’ll leave the actual quest in your hands, but I’ll make sure you don’t do something profoundly stupid and get yourself killed. Of course, there are no assurances. You might still get killed. ‘Tis the way of the business we’re in.”

“Very well,” the Vanguard said. “I’ll escort you, but I want my fee upfront.”

“Don’t be a smartass,” Owl immediately replied and the sudden look on her face made me wonder if she was about to break his nose.

“Then I want a proper contract written out. I’ve heard enough about your lot to know you can’t be trusted.”

“Maybe we should pick someone else,” I whispered to Master Owl.

“You’ve made your choice now, pipsqueak, don’t run away from the consequences.” He turned back to face the woman who was two heads above him. “We’ll sign a proper contract, have no fear about that, but we’re not paying before we know if you’re actually worth what you cost.”

The woman scoffed, but then said, “Fine.”

This will be a terrible partnership...

We returned to the Guild Ward, with the Vanguard leading the way with her long confident strides in her metal armour. A slightly-bowed circular shield was fastened to her left forearm and had two spikes jutting out from either side of her wrist, allowing the protective tool to also become a weapon, which I thought was fitting for someone with so aggressive an aura. On her left hip hung a double-edged shortsword with a weighted pommel.

Master Owl and I struggled to keep up with her and didn’t catch up until we came to two imposing metal doors of a castle-like building that was apparently the Mercenary Guild. The door was only slightly open, with enough space to move in two abreast, but far narrower than the entryway into the Adventurers’ Guild, though the doors themselves also seemed so cumbersome and heavy that I doubted anyone could even shift them from their position.

The building had a completely different vibe than my Guild, as the brutal stone-and-metal structure radiated a very serious and overbearing atmosphere, with all the people within looking more like lifelong soldiers than Adventurers, even though they went through the same Role Assignment and were all Otherworlders like me. As I scanned the gathered Mercenaries within, I saw a lot of people with a similar aura hue as our hired Vanguard, but there were also a couple that had a golden hue that was identical to Harleigh’s Attribute Graph, meaning they were Crusaders. The rest were a bunch of different colours that I didn’t yet know what meant, though their armour and weapons gave some hints.

“See that soft-looking baby-blue spirit over there?” Owl asked.

I nodded.

“That one’s a Spellhand, this world’s equivalent to a magician I suppose. That group of three brown auras are Hunters, they’re capable of doing specialised quests like Tracking and Investigations.”

“What about the dark-green ones?”

“Those are Sharpshooters, a long-ranged archer Specialisation available to Rangers and Hunters.”

“And the green ones are Rangers then?”

“That’s right.”

“What about the Beige one surrounded by all those people? She seems really popular.”

“Pipsqueak, you cannot rely exclusively on your Spirit Sight. Take off your goggles and tell me what you think she might be, knowing what you do about Roles.”

We had reached the end of a queue to a large counter staffed by three clerks in outfits of dark-blue shirts with black ties and grey dress pants, where a few groups ahead of us seemed to also be preparing to make contracts for Mercenary work with the clients next to them, though we seemed the only Adventurers in the lot, with the rest being rich-looking Lundia natives.

I took off my goggles and looked at the girl who was surrounded by three Vanguards, a Sharpshooter, and a Spellhand, and noticed her particular clothing of a stainless white robe with golden embellishments and the peculiar staff in her hand. I hadn’t seen her kind of staff in the For-Rent Armoury, though I was sure I’d just missed it, but it was made of bronze and had a cross at the end, in the middle of which sat a perfectly-spherical glass orb. If it worked similarly to the lantern-type Foci, then it’d be optimised for projection spells apparently.

The way that people were crowding around her eagerly reminded me of a scene that I’d witnessed yesterday in the Adventurers’ Guild Hall. She had the most popular Role out of all that I’d seen so far.

“She’s a Priest,” I answered.

“That’s right. When it comes to Luck, they’re the direct opposite of us, given that their Role requires an A-tier in the Attribute.”

I frowned. That kind of instant popularity was unfair I thought.

“What do they do, since they’re so popular?”

Master Owl looked at me weirdly. The Vanguard in our group was purposefully ignoring our conversation, but even she twitched slightly when she heard my question.

“You’re from Earth, right?”

“Yeah?”

“And you don’t know what a Priest does?”

“I mean, they pray and hold sermons, but what kind of abilities does that translate to here?”

“Hm, I thought all Earthlings knew the answer to that.”

I noticed the Vanguard nod in the background. Apparently only I didn’t know.

“Priests heal. They’re the backbone of any competent party in this world.”

“Heal? Like curing sickness and injury?”

“... Yes,” he replied, then broke out in some kind of incredulous laughter.

“Huh, that’s pretty cool,” I replied, though I was still pretty jealous of them.

“Just like how Exorcists are the only ones that can deal with Exorcisms, Priests are the only ones who can deal with Healing. They’re not quite as rare as us, when it comes to Role Assignments, but they’re not a dime-a-dozen either, so they get the pick of the litter when it comes to groups. Like us, they also don’t really have any offensive abilities, so they are beholden to the goodwill of others, but, you know, when you’re single-handedly capable of keeping people alive, they tend to prioritise your safety. No one gives a shit about Exorcists like that...”

The way he talks about it reminds me of how the nerds in my high school complained about the popular kids... but then, I was one of those nerds I suppose. Once again I was reminded of how special Renji was, given that he was ostensibly the King of Nerds in both our Middle School and High School, but was somehow also friends with all the popular people and admired by all the girls.

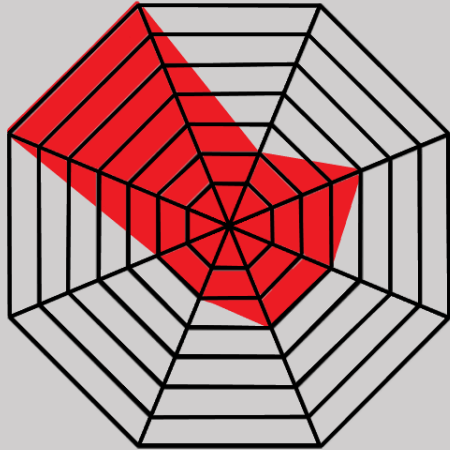
“Next!” called a clerk at the Mercenary Guild’s counter and it was suddenly our turn to make a contract.

4 - The Haunting at Hamsel's Rest I

I snapped awake as our carriage out of town hit a bump in the road. I'd been leant against the wall, while Master Owl snored to my right and the Vanguard we'd hired sat with her arms crossed opposite us. Further down the uncomfortable benches of the carriage sat other passengers who were heading in the direction of Hamsel's Rest, though would probably ride the carriage past the place, as it only lay a hundred kilometres or so outside of Lundia. Given the sort of roadwork one could expect in this world, it seemed that what would've been a forty-minute car ride took eight hours by horse-drawn carriage, but then, we were also making a few stops and detours along the way and moving no faster than twenty kilometres an hour.

“You're awake,” the woman opposite me stated in her deep voice, then handed me something. I looked down and saw that it was her Guild Card. I blinked in surprise for a moment, then frantically reached into my bag and handed her mine in return.

“Thank you,” she said meekly, which was very much at odds with the image I had of her up to now: a stoic-but-dangerous warrior.

<i>‘RANA THORN’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Vanguard</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Female</i>		AGE: <i>23</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>E</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>C</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>D</i>	LUCK: <i>D</i>
PACT: <i>E</i>	SOUL: <i>E</i>	STRENGTH: <i>S</i>	VITALITY: <i>S</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Vanguard IV’</i> <i>‘Offensive Defender’</i> <i>‘War God’</i>			

“Damn,” I mumbled. I was surprised to see that she had two S-tier Attributes like Harleigh, although her overall layout was very unbalanced. Part of me felt a strange kinship with her, given that she also had several E-tier Attributes like me. Although I didn’t think it prudent to ask, I also wondered what kind of ability ‘*War God*’ was, as it sounded pretty powerful.

I looked up and saw that Rana smiled slightly, as she read my card. “It’s really true, about the F-tier Luck.” It suddenly struck me how beautiful her face was. She had rosy lips and reddish-brown freckles below her eyes and on her nose, as well as dark-golden irises, with her facial structure soft and charming. I’d been way too focused on her aura and menacing gear and attitude to notice, but now I couldn’t help but blush when she looked up and our eyes met.

“I look f-forward to working with you,” I stuttered, as I returned her Card to her.

“Smooth,” Master Owl whispered from where he pretended to sleep next to me.

My blushed face became even redder.

I thought we were getting close to our destination, when suddenly Master Owl stood up from his seat, stretched his legs, and then went over and banged on the wall I was leant against.

It took a few knocks before the little sliding panel was opened and the driver asked, “What is it? Hamsel’s Rest is still a ways off.”

“Stop the carriage,” the chubby Exorcist said calmly. “There’s an ambush awaiting us around the next bend in the road.”

The message seemed to take a second before it was absorbed, but then the whole carriage rocked to a sudden halt and those passengers furthest down the two benches were asking if we’d reached this-or-that destination.

“What kind of ambush?” asked the Vanguard.

“Goblins,” he replied dismissively. “Go deal with them, won’t ya?”

Rana nodded seriously, then rose from the bench, strapped her shield to her left arm and walked down the length of the carriage to the door at the other end, lowering her head the entire time as she was too tall to stand upright in the narrow space.

I stood up to follow her, but Owl grabbed my arm.

“Bad idea, boyo. They may just be goblins, but you’ve got no way to defend yourself and someone like her is best served not having to babysit a weakling while doing *her thing*.”

Moments later, the driver stepped off the seat and I moved to the little sliding panel that was still open, staring out of it. I saw as Rana strode past the front of the carriage and the two horses, then, when she was some metres out she shouted a wordless challenge.

I had no idea what a goblin was supposed to look like, though was fairly confident I’d read the word in a few books. Regardless, I wasn’t expecting the child-sized muscular green creatures that came charging in response to the Vanguard’s taunt. They were covered in dark-green fur and the skin beneath was a lighter shade of green, while their eyes were a dirty-yellow with tiny black dots in them. They had large drooping ears like goats that were also covered in fur, as well as large hooked noses that were so big they seemed almost comical in comparison to their child-sized faces. Their hands and feet were, like their noses, also far too big in comparison to the rest of their bodies.

As they screamed bloody murder, they exposed their mouths that seemed far too wide and which were full of blocky molars like those of an herbivore. In their hands were primitive clubs and spears of wood, and they wore simple clothes of woven leaves or hide, with several sporting jewellery such as simple necklaces adorned with teeth or iron and brass piercings in their noses and ears. One of them also had a golden ring on his overlong pinkie finger.

Like a pack of rabid dogs, the five goblins leapt for Rana, but she immediately caught one mid-jump with a jab of her double-edge shortsword through its neck, before spinning around to slam her shield into another one’s face, sending it on a collision course with a tree, where it crashed into the trunk with a loud *crack* and didn’t stand up again.

Watching through the small panel, it was easy to pretend that I was just watching some kind of movie and that I wasn’t a part of this. But as she continued to battle the crazed monsters, their overwhelming stench of filth and the coppery tang of their spilled blood washed over me. I didn’t look away from the carnage she inflicted on them, nor did I flinch when she severed the arm of one or cut another clean in half along its waistline. I was frozen in place by the sight, but I realised that I felt no pity for these inhuman creatures and I almost relished in every kill Rana made with her skilled movements.

The carriage floor under me creaked and rumbled as Master Owl walked down to the door and hopped out. Not knowing what else to do, I followed out after him, massaging my sore legs as I landed on the dirt road we’d been travelling along for hours.

I walked over to the pair, who were in the middle of rummaging through the dead goblins. It was a grim sight I thought, to see them looting the dead *just like that*. I pinched my nose as the stench really wafted over me as I drew close.

“Look at this one,” Owl said, lifting a necklace he had taken from the one which had been cut in half. The necklace was a simple twine string that ran through six silver coins that had been hole-punched.

“The Adventurers’ Guild take those at face value,” Rana replied. The way she spoke with such confidence made me realise she was more than just older than me. In fact, she had the air of a hardened veteran, even though she was just twenty-three. I supposed that would be the same case for me if I lived to her age in this world as well, though by all accounts that was statistically improbable.

“It’s been too long since I fought normal monsters,” Owl replied.

“What are you doing?” I asked, unable to keep the question to myself.

“What does it look like, boyo? We’re looting.”

“Looting the dead... isn’t that...?”

“What?” he asked sharply, turning to face me.

“Don’t be so hard on him,” Rana defended me. “You’re new, right, Temaru?”

“Yeah. This is all really crazy to me.”

She nodded understandingly. “That’s how this world is. We have to do things we do not desire in this world in order to survive.” I felt like there was more truth to that statement than just encompassing looting the dead.

“I wonder what goblins were doing so close to the city,” Owl remarked. “They’re usually closer to the mountains. I thought they knew better than to get too close to civilisation like this.”

“I heard rumours of a Hobgoblin Lord in the area,” she replied.

“Hm, maybe that’s what Harleigh and his group were sent to deal with,” he ventured.

“Harleigh? He’s around here?” she asked and it was as though she had stars in her eyes.

No wonder she’d be head-over-heels for a guy like him.

Suddenly Owl kicked me in the shin. “What are you spacing out for? Help us out here.”

“It’s okay, he doesn’t need to,” Rana replied, once again defending me.

“Remember your place, sweetheart. This boy’s my apprentice and he’s going to die if he’s coddled and not shown the harsh reality of this world,” Owl said icily. I hated the way fear curled my insides at the way he inflected his voice. He was just a chubby old man, so why did he sound so dangerous like that?

The Vanguard lowered her head.

“I’ll help,” I said, trying not to put her too much on the spot.

I went over to the goblin that I’d noticed wearing the gold ring. Although it was the height of a ten-year-old child, it was still *so big* up close. Bile rose in my throat as I knelt down on the dirt road, staining the grey trousers Harleigh had bought for me. Despite trying my best to breathe through my mouth, the stench the creature gave off was so overwhelming that it seeped into my nostrils and stuck there like a malign entity.

Swallowing hard, I quickly lifted its right hand, which was somehow bigger than mine. I felt the greasy fur on its finger slide over my skin as I pulled the golden ring off its pinkie finger, then I quickly stood back up and moved over to a nearby tree where I puked my breakfast out onto the grass. Emptying my stomach like that sent a jab of hunger through my chest and up my throat, reminding me that I hadn’t eaten any lunch. I puked again.

“Nicely spotted for your first time,” Owl praised me with a heavy pat on my back, almost triggering another puking convulsion from me. We were back inside the carriage and would soon arrive to our destination. He was holding the dirty golden ring in the air, grinning.

“Shouldn’t that belong to Rana?” I asked boldly.

The Vanguard had been quiet and brooding since Master Owl had scolded her, and had not argued when the man had taken all the loot from the dead goblins. Surprisingly, they had just left the corpses on the side of the road. I wondered if that was common.

“Party rules,” Owl replied. “We are paying Lady Thorn for her services, so the looting rights and distribution falls to us, and, since you’re my apprentice, that means I get the final say.”

That seems unfair when she did all the work and we just watched...

“Isn’t her last name Rana?” was all I asked in return.

Owl grinned and suddenly the Vanguard smiled as well.

“Thorn is my last name,” she replied meekly. “From your reaction, I take it that your name is Ryūta and not Temaru.”

I blushed a deep red. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be presumptuous by calling you by your given name!”

Owl was laughing mightily at this point, finding joy in my embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied amicably. “I will call you by your first name and you may do the same.”

I was too embarrassed to say anything, so I just nodded.

The three of us disembarked the carriage and watched as it took off down the dirt road that ran through the vast forest we’d been travelling through pretty much since leaving Lundia. We found ourselves at a fork in the road and a weatherworn sign pointed left, reading ‘*Hamsel’s Rest*’, while the right-pointing sign stated ‘*Ochre*’, with one pointing back the way we’d come saying ‘*Lundia*’.

The road going to Hamsel’s Rest looked unkempt and overgrown, as though it had not been traversed by carriages and horses in many months.

“How far is it on foot from here?” I asked.

“Twenty kilometres or so. I hope you brought proper footwear.”

I looked down at my hide boots. “These are the only ones I have,” I replied.

Owl nodded. “Better than those ridiculous sandals I saw you wearing on the first day.”

I frowned, warmth staining my face. *Not like I had a head’s-up about being transported to this goddamn world and could pick the most appropriate outfit!*

Then his words fully seeped in and I realised that he’d been watching me from day one...

“Alright, let’s head out then.”

“Do you mind if I get something to eat first?”

“Do you have enough to share?” he asked in return.

What are you, a middle-schooler!?

“No,” I lied, not wanting him to take the food I’d bought to last the next few days.

“A shame. I didn’t bring anything,” he replied.

“Nor I,” Rana admitted.

I looked incredulously at them both.

“How are you planning on getting food then?”

The Vanguard shrugged. “I was thinking of hunting something for dinner.”

I looked to the old man, who just shrugged. “I was counting on her doing that.”

“That seems really irresponsible,” I scolded them both.

“Eh, don’t be so serious,” Master Owl replied lackadaisical, which only irritated me. “The village ought to have some stuff we can take and there’s a river and a well, so we can get water.”

“Are you trying to die of dysentery?” I asked, dumbfounded.

He grinned, exposing dirty unbrushed teeth. “You’re pretty funny, pipsqueak.”

I was about to complain that he ought to take this seriously, considering how much he emphasised the dangers of this world, but then he put a hand on my back and pushed me forward down the left-going road. “Let’s get a move on, we’re wasting daylight.”

I was thoroughly exhausted when we arrived to Hamsel’s Rest. After dealing with the Mercenary Contract and everything yesterday, I had done a bit of practicing for my Meditation and Repel though no physical training. Prior to coming here I’d also never been much of an outdoors person. I was a slow runner and I had no stamina, though I had been okay in sports like baseball, when it came to pitching and batting, since my hand-eye coordination was okay.

Going from my lazy shut-in days, while I studied for next year’s exams, to this sudden twenty-kilometre hike was a bit too tough on me, and I feared that I’d be left behind if I couldn’t keep up with my ‘Mentor’ and Rana. Somehow, even the chubby old man had no trouble walking uninterrupted across hilly forested terrain, while I was wheezing and my vision was blurry by the end. I had been glad to at least have my staff to lean on and wondered if the design was perhaps not designed specifically to work well as a walking stick.

Master Owl had complained about the noise that the bells made, but after a couple of hours they had settled down, apparently no longer responding wildly to my errant soul energy.

The outskirts of the village were idyllic and peaceful, though tall grass grew around the quaint wooden houses and community buildings, with a few places clearly infested with animals and plants within as well. It was clear that the place had been abandoned for a while.

A bubbling river ran around and through the village, and there was even a small centre where stood a few market stalls and a large blossoming tree with off-white flowers that cast a faint spicy sweetness into the air. As I looked around and we explored the place, I struggled to fathom why such a nice place had been abandoned.

We came to a part of the village where crops had been left to grow uncontrollably and where livestock might have been tended, though their stables and pens were now empty. No one lived in Hamsel’s Rest any longer, unless you counted the wild animals nesting in the houses. For some reason, there were also no monsters. We had encountered goblins so close to this place and yet none of them had taken it over, despite it seeming like a great place to settle.

“Oy, pipsqueak!” Owl called accusatorily. “Why aren’t your goggles on? We’re on the job here, buddy. Don’t let your guard drop until we have found a safehouse!”

For our entire trip here he had worn his, but I had taken them off yesterday and just worn them around my neck since. After all, they were quite uncomfortable and the brass fitting was discolouring my skin a faint green, making me worry the metal was toxic. I wondered if his goggles were the

reason that he had seen the ambush coming, although that would mean that he had the ability to look through objects...

I frowned, wondering why he was being so strict all of a sudden, but then I pulled the goggles up from where they hung around my neck and when I secured them on the back of my head and opened my eyes, I suddenly took a step back and fell on my ass.

“W-w-what...”

All around me, covering the ground, the buildings, the grass, the stalls, the tree, everything, were glowing white-blue footprints and handprints. I had somehow forgotten that my job here was actually really dangerous.

Only one in twenty-five survive their first Exorcism Quest...

5 - The Haunting at Hamsel’s Rest II

I had finally stopped hyperventilating by the time we found shelter: a small house that’d once belonged to a seamstress, and which had only three rooms. According to Master Owl, we didn’t want a place too big, since we might have to defend it. The notion of having to fight off a horde of unseen monsters only made my lungs constrict tighter as I struggled to maintain a steady breath.

“You’re looking mighty scared there, boyo,” he teased me. Despite his usual annoying jabs, I noticed that he was actually quite tense. Perhaps it was instinct kicking in or perhaps he was scared of what we were up against.

“You know what kind of monster this is, right?”

“Of course, but I’m not telling you. It’s your task to find out, remember? You gain nothing from me giving you the answer.”

“What are all those... those *things*?”

“Something like energy signatures?” he replied, sounding himself uncertain.

Rana stood near where we were sitting, arms crossed and on guard. Her shield was strapped to her arm, so she was clearly prepared for a fight, though it seemed obvious that she had no idea what it was that both Owl and I saw. Those handprints were also inside the house, as well as footprints. It was creeping me out that such things were only visible when I wore the goggles. Without them I wouldn’t have known anything was wrong. I vowed to never take them off again.

“Here,” Master Owl said as he handed me a small hide pouch with a string that could be pulled to close it. I opened it slightly and looked inside. Something off-white like chalk dust was within.

“Line all the windows and doors with a thin layer of *that*, but don’t use too much, it’s expensive.”

I got up from the stool I’d been sitting on. I was still very exhausted from the hike to the village, and my legs were aching, but I doubted I’d be able to find rest in this place now.

“What is *this*?” I asked, as I started spreading a thin line in front of the doorway we’d entered through.

“Sacred Corpse Ash,” he replied.

I blinked a few times, then the name properly sunk in and I felt incredibly gross for having it all over my hands.

“I think I’m gonna go wash my hands in the river after I’m done,” I told him.

“Don’t leave this house,” he said, his serious tone brokering no argument.

We're really in it here, aren't we? How could I seriously have forgotten what I was doing here?? I scolded myself. Just because something looked peaceful, it didn't mean it was. I could now suddenly understand why the mortality rate for my Role was so high, if all hauntings and such were so unassuming at first glance.

I frowned as I dipped my hand in the pouch and began spreading a line of the ash along the windowsill. The first sentence of the quest information suddenly echoed in my head:

Eight people have gone missing from the village known as 'Hamsel's Rest' and all signs point to a Haunting, though no one knows the exact entity behind the disappearances.

I failed to suppress a shudder. Whatever creature had left all those prints everywhere somehow had the ability to make people disappear without a trace. It had taken eight disappearances before the village had been abandoned... that thought alone was terrifying.

“Hey, Owl—”

“I prefer to be called ‘Master’,” he interrupted.

I frowned. “Master... this creature, does it have the ability to camouflage itself?”

He grinned in response, which made me think I was close to being correct.

After lining the two doorways and three windows of the house with the Sacred Corpse Ash, Master Owl called both Rana and I over, then had us expose our collarbones which were concealed by our clothes, before painting a single line on us both with a piece of cold and oily red chalk. Then he pulled down the neck of his own black blouse and did the same.

“What'd you do that for?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Who knows.”

Then he held up the chalk and said, “This here is called Blood Chalk.” He handed it to me. “Keep it, along with the pouch in your hand.”

I frowned. I didn't want this stuff... However, I didn't argue and put both the ash pouch and chalk in the bag on my lower back that was hidden by my travel cloak.

“How am I supposed to figure out what kind of ‘entity’ is haunting this place?” I asked. It seemed like something that I ought to have been educated in, rather than this haphazard way of learning by trial-and-error, with error meaning death.

Master Owl had the look of someone who remembered something suddenly, then he grinned awkwardly and reached into his heavy coat, producing a little book that looked almost like a prayer book. Surprisingly, he held it out towards me, but, when I was about to take it, he pulled it away.

“*This* is the most expensive thing I’m gifting you. It’s irreplaceable. You are not its first owner and you will not be its last. Major Quests have been issued *just* for its retrieval, when a holder died on duty. Do you understand me?”

I pulled my hand back. I almost didn’t want to take it now. “What is it?” I asked, but part of me didn’t want to know. It had to be something terrible, I was sure.

“There are about a handful of these in the possession of Exorcists and their apprentices all over the Hallem continent, but each is unique and shaped by the knowledge and teachings of those who possessed it, making every copy a highly-knowledgeable journal on the subject matters which we are uniquely tasked to dealing with.

“In short: it is an ‘Exorcist’s Encyclopaedia’. Its first half contains knowledge about the apparitions and entities we might encounter, including creature specifics, behaviour patterns, weaknesses, ways to exorcise them, and so forth. The second half has knowledge about the spirits that can be summoned to serve as familiars. There is a bit of overlap between the two, as many of the things we might invoke to aid us can also be found in the wild, plaguing the people of this world. The last few pages contain forbidden knowledge that, if utilised, might see you hunted down by other Exorcists or Witch Hunters.

“This is quite literally a death sentence to carry on your person, but it is also your most useful tool. Knowledge is what sets you apart from everyone else. To know your enemy is to wield the sword that might slay them.”

Finishing his speech, he then offered the book to me. It was quite small for something of such significance.

“Is the answer to this Quest inside?”

“Of course.”

I frowned, but then reached out and accepted it reverently with both hands. The burden and responsibility it represented made it like a boulder in my hands, and as I took a closer look at it, I saw that it was stained with rust-coloured spots, which was, undoubtedly, old dried blood.

How many aspiring Exorcists like me have died in the possession of this book?

Owl turned to look at Rana, then did a zipper motion across his lips.

The Vanguard looked grim in response, but then said, “As a Mercenary, you see many things that you are obliged to forget. I do not care about your forbidden books, so don’t worry about me.”

The old man chuckled in response and looked to me, then said cheerfully, “She’s a keeper this one!”

I looked past him and out of the window. The village outside our borrowed house was quickly darkening, owing to the fact that we were surrounded by trees and no one tended the streetlamps here like they did in Lundia. Owl had brought out and lit his own little lantern, but its light was weak and only illuminated part of the main room.

As I looked at the fast-moving shadows eating away the remnants of sunlight, a pair of sparkling eyes behind the large tree in the village centre caught my attention. I thought at first that it was a fox or some other woodland animal that made its home here, but then I noticed the pale face to which the eyes belonged.

It was a kid, and she was staring right at us.

Just like a scared and hungry animal.

I ran for the door, but Owl caught me by the scruff of my travel cloak and stopped me dead.

“Seeing things already, boyo?”

“T-there’s a girl out there!” I screamed, pointing to the tree.

Rana came over to the window and looked to where I indicated, then turned back to me and said, “I don’t see anyone.”

I wrestled myself out of Owl’s grip and came over next to her and looked out, but those glinting eyes were gone.

“Make a note,” the old Exorcist said. “It is active in the dark.”

A cold fear ran down my body, making my arms and legs tingle. It felt like the beginnings of a panic attack. I moved away from the window, suddenly worried that it might jump through the shutters that served as the house’s windows and ventilation. After all, this world seemed to have very expensive glass, so windows were basically just square holes in the wall that were either completely blocked off or covered in horizontal panels when closed. It made me feel like we weren’t fully protected from the outside world in here, but glass wasn’t exactly an impervious barrier, so I doubted I’d have felt any safer with normal windows instead.

“Was *that* the monster??”

“Did you see anyone when we were exploring the village earlier?” he argued back.

“What did it look like?” Rana asked.

“It was like a little girl, maybe around the age of six? She had eyes like a cat, with that strange kind of reflection in the dark.”

“Make another note: It can see in the dark.”

I moved to a point in main room where two walls formed a corner and I felt that I could observe the window and the outside world through its panels without anything jumping me from behind, then I sat down on the stool I’d pulled over.

Owl grinned when he looked at me. “It is only watching us for now. I recommend having a peek at the Encyclopaedia. We need to get you some familiars before we truly take on this thing.”

Unlike me, the Vanguard brought a chair over to the door and window, so she could sit and keep guard. Given the fact that many of the foot and handprints were on the ceiling, I doubted she’d be able to see the creature coming. The fact that it looked like a little girl was deeply unnerving.

While keeping an eye on Rana and the window, I opened the book that Owl had given me ceremoniously. There was no foreword or intro, as the first page just immediately got into describing, with a drawing, a creature called a ‘Poltergeist’. The depiction was just a bundle of reaching hands and the brief description about the entity said that it was a lingering soul known to inhabit a single place, like a house, moving objects around, and which would, if sufficiently disturbed, throw things at people to hurt and kill them. Signs of its presence could be handprints visible with Spirit Sight, objects relocating, and sounds of someone moving about in empty rooms.

Listed forms of exorcism were: finding an object closely associated with the spirit during its time as a human and which kept it tethered to the real world, then using the Sanctify ability on it; or to perform something called a Ritual of Obsequy on the possessed location, which then had a long list of bizarre requirements, such as hair from a dead relative and grave dirt. A note written later also added that, if a Priest was available, another way to exorcise it was to exhume the corpse of the dead person whose soul was haunting the place and then performing a new funeral for them.

I frowned. It seemed quite obvious that there were many different ways of dealing with spirits and their exorcisms, with each requiring a lot of investigation to even pull off. What’s more, as I leafed through the pages, I saw that many did not have listed signs nor depictions, with a few having ominous phrases like: “There is no known way to exorcise this entity.”

Some of the drawings were also ones that I had no doubt would revisit me in my nightmares. The worst one was something called a ‘Flayed One’, which had been drawn in gruesome detail as having its skin hanging around its waist, with its upper body completely flayed. It was said to be a type of Revenant that physically manifested to punish those that had tortured it during its life. The recommended way of dealing with it was to contract a Crusader with a blessed weapon, or to use a sufficiently-powerful familiar to destroy it.

“Those are a pain to deal with,” Owl commented, suddenly standing next to me and looking at the page.

“You’ve exorcised one of *these*?” I asked, incredulously.

He nodded simply.

“So, find anything yet?”

“No... there are too many apparitions who have the possible sign of leaving hand and footprints.”

“It wouldn’t be any fun if the answer was easy,” he replied, sounding as though it was all just a game to him.

Similar to the spirit prints, there were also many in the Encyclopaedia that could be described as ‘active at night’ and ‘can see in the dark’, which meant that I still lacked something more distinct to really understand the apparition I was dealing with.

“There’s a man outside,” Rana suddenly said.

I looked up and saw a face pressed against the window shutters, the glinting eyes staring through. My blood froze in my veins and even Owl chuckled uncomfortably. Then it began sniffing loudly, while its reflective eyes scanned the room. The Vanguard looked to Master Owl, who nodded curtly. She got up, pulled her blade from its sheath and then stabbed it through the shutters, perfectly in-between the panels.

With a high-pitched screech, the creature pulled away and Rana withdrew her weapon. Before she could clean her blade with a stained and oily cloth, Owl stopped her and came over with an empty glass vial, which he scraped the black blood on her blade into.

“What do you need *that* for?” she asked, as he put a cork stopper into the vial and then deposited it in a coat pocket.

He just grinned infuriatingly in response.

“Is this why you had me use the ash on the windows and doors?” I asked, my body shaking from the sudden influx of adrenaline.

“Indeed,” he replied, strolling over to sit next to me as though nothing had happened. “So,” he started, “How about you share that food you’ve been hiding from us?”

After the three of us ate all my hardtack and sausage and shared a bottle of the now-lukewarm fruit tea, I had a brief epiphany and began flipping through the book. I quickly came to the page that mentioned the ‘Bloodfiend’, which was characterised by hunting at night, a strong sense of smell, and looking just like any normal person. The cause behind them could be a few different things: a

Vampire had created them by feasting on humans; a powerful cursed artefact had transformed people who found it and they now searched endlessly for food; or someone had deliberately created them by feeding people Dead Man’s Blood over a few weeks.

I almost showed the page to Owl as my answer to the Quest, but then I paused, suddenly uncertain. From the descriptions, the Bloodfiend sounded like a creature that was no different than a rabid animal looking for food. Given that the Haunter of Hamsel’s Rest was still here after the village had been abandoned, it seemed to be territorial somehow, as though something tied it to the place.

It felt as though this was a puzzle and I was still missing a piece to explain the rest. The issue with the Encyclopaedia was that it had too many possibilities, which confused me more than it helped me.

“How many do you think there are?” I asked Owl.

He just shrugged in return.

At first I had assumed it was just one creature responsible, due to the Quest description, but, when I thought about it, we had seen two different human-like entities, and the prints that glowed on the surfaces of everywhere I looked came in at least half-a-dozen shapes and sizes.

I’m definitely not sleeping tonight... I thought to myself, imagining that the house was surrounded by angry monsters on all sides.

After some prompting from Master Owl, I looked through the second half of the book, reading about the many different types of spirits that I could turn into my familiars. There seemed to be a few categories that a familiar could be assigned to: Watcher; Protector; Tracker; & Fighter.

Some of the spirits were listed in several categories, but a few weren’t categorised at all and had a strange trident mark. I pointed one out to Owl, from a spirit named, ominously, ‘Abyss Serpent’.

“Those are a kind of familiar you should not try to sign a pact with. In fact, most of the ones with this mark are forbidden to invoke.”

“I thought the forbidden parts were in the back of the book?” This one had been towards the middle of the second half. The inclusion in this part of the book seemed odd, if there was a second part specifically for banned familiars. The idea that such forbidden matter was listed in the first place was also quite unsettling.

“The latter part is more for things like raising the dead, curses, and such.”

I noticed that Rana had a brief expression of interest on her face when she heard him, but she quickly schooled her face back into a neutral mask. It was probably best to pretend I hadn’t noticed.

“You will also occasionally see that mark on some of the entries about apparitions in the first half. It usually means that you’re dealing with something that another Exorcist brought into this world. The Abyss Serpent is one such creature.”

I suddenly remembered the name, because it was one of the entries that’d had no listed way to exorcise it nor much information in general. I wondered what it did.

“A lot of the familiars you can contract with simply expect soul energy in return for their service or maybe a bit of your blood. Given that we Exorcists are basically a fountain of such energy, it is a simple thing for us to pay them. One of the Spellhand Specialisations also features familiars, but they are far more limited in what they can get, because they generally don’t have the same tier of the Soul Attribute as we do.

“The dangerous types of familiars are the ones that expect more than just your energy or blood offering in return for their aid. We generally refer to such Pacts as having Tolls or Remunerations.”

“Have you used any familiars like that?”

“Yes,” he replied simply. “I don’t recommend it.”

“The thing that took your eye, was that one of such familiars?”

“No, that was just a mistake on my end. A Pact that you form with a familiar is a contract that is binding to both you and your summoned entity. I made the dear mistake of giving a command that lay outside my contract, so the entity was allowed to take a payment in the form that it desired...”

“I don’t think I want to use a familiar,” I told him. It sounded like playing with fire.

“I’m not giving you a choice.”

I frowned. I felt sure that I was about to sign my soul away to the devil. “Which one should I pick? There are so many different ones...”

Master Owl took the book, flipped to a specific page and handed it back to me.

“*Eye of the Observer*,” I read out loud. It was a Watcher-type of familiar, though I wasn’t completely sure what exactly a Watcher was supposed to be good for.

6 - The Haunting at Hamsel's Rest III

Drawn on the floor of the bedroom with the Blood Chalk, was a circle with two overlapping triangles within, which together formed a hexagram. Master Owl had given me a single Black Tallow Candle, which I placed in the centre of the ritual.

I took a step back, after ensuring that the lines matched the drawing in the Encyclopaedia, then pulled the staff from my belt loop and extended it to its full length, before taking up a sturdy stance, holding the book in my right hand so I could read the summoning litany.

I paused. “Don’t we need to light the candle first?”

“No. It’s not *that kind* of candle.” Owl answered.

I doubted that I wanted to know what the candle was made of, but my imagination definitely didn’t do me any favours...

“Alright, hurry up and do this. I want to be able to get some sleep soon.”

I gritted my teeth. He had just spent twenty minutes explaining how important it was to not rush a ritual, as a mistake could be costly. I pulled in a deep breath through my nostrils, then exhaled out my mouth.

“Observer in the sky; thou whose gaze sees all; I beg thee pluck out an eye and gift it to me in exchange for my reverence and adulation; thy eyes can see my soul and know my worth; I pray thee judge me worthy.”

Master Owl had explained that the sort of Pact that relied on being ‘judged worthy’, required an A-tier in the Soul Attribute or higher. Apparently, it was a low-stakes type of summoning, as a rejection from the entity that was entreated with would incur no harmful effects on the Invoker, unlike some of the more involved types that required an offering of blood or a physical manifestation of the entity.

A strange sort of pressure came over the room and the temperature dropped significantly, with my breath coming out as a mist. Then the black tallow suddenly sprouted a dancing blue flame and, to my goggled eyes, a stain appeared in the air, like an inky spill. The inky spot expanded, before, from its centre, a goat’s eye grew into place. Unblinking, the eye stared at me.

The bells atop my staff began to reverberate slowly, although my hand was firmly locked on its shaft. I followed the instructions Master Owl had given me and used the Pact of the Familiar ability, by imagining that the energy in my body, *that light* which Harleigh had taught me to sense, pooled into my chest and reached out like a formless hand to the entity that floated in the air.

In exchange for your sight, I give you an offering of my bountiful essence and my undying reverence.

The moment that my reaching essence touched the Watcher entity, I was overcome by a stinging headache that forced me to blink. I opened my eyes and was then suddenly seeing myself from the entity’s singular eye.

“Name it,” Owl instructed and I focused on the name I thought most fitting.

Then I blinked again and my vision was returned to normal.

Before me, the ritual candle had gone out and the creature was gone.

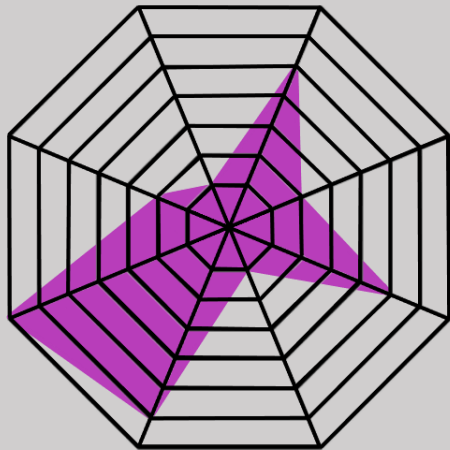
“Now that your familiar has been named and bonded to you with a Pact, you can utilise the Summon and Banish abilities to bring it out or make it go away. You probably don’t need instructions on how to do it. Unlike your other abilities, it should feel fairly intuitive.”

“I feel very restless,” I told him.

“That’s the manifestation of the familiar wanting to be summoned.”

“Do you want to know what I named him?”

“No. You should keep your familiars’ names secret, unless you want someone to use them against you. By the way, have a look at your Guild Card, you should see a change to it.”

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Watcher)’</i>			

“Wait, our Pacts are visible to anyone who looks at our Cards??”

“That’s right. I recommend you don’t show anyone your Guild Card.”

“Why not?”

“It contains your strengths and your weaknesses, and as an Exorcist you are already feared and despised, so you don’t want to give people the upper hand. Imagine what someone’s first impression will be if your Card is full of things that mention the sort of spirits you have contracted.”

“Is that why you won’t show me your Card?”

“You might have the notion that revealing it to people is something that garners trusts, but you’re wrong. In this world you have to hide your true self and conceal your strengths and weaknesses, lest someone exploits it. You have been lucky until now that no one has taken advantage of your naivety, but one day you will find yourself scalded by misplaced trust, so while you may not believe me now, eventually you’ll come to see the truth in my words.”

“I had no idea that it was a bad idea to trade such info,” I replied.

“How many have you seen thus far?”

“Three,” I told him. “Rana, Harleigh, and Æmos have shown me theirs.”

“Æmos did?” he asked, surprised. “Did you notice the affliction he has?”

“Affliction?”

“The ‘Nightmare Feeder’ on his list of abilities.”

I remembered it well. “What does it do?”

“It feeds him nightmares, obviously. Maybe when you get stronger and more experienced, I’ll tell you how to help him get rid of it. It’s no bad thing to have a Genius owe you a favour.”

“Why haven’t you helped him if you know about it and how to fix it?”

“That guy won’t give me the time of day.”

I wanted to say that it was no surprise, given Owl’s personality, but it did in fact surprise me, as Æmos had seemed very easy-going and kind.

“Alright. I’m going to use the bed. You can sleep on the floor after you clean off the chalk, or use one of the leaning chairs in the main room like Rana. Also, keep the candle, you can use it again.”

I frowned and began wiping the hexagram away with a cloth from a nearby drawer, while the old man dumped his chubby body on the large bed, the frame of which squeaked worryingly in response to his weight.

After sticking the candle into my bag alongside the other tools Owl had given me, I blew out the lantern he had used and went out to where Rana was leaning in a chair, watching the door and window.

She was still awake, despite it being late into the evening. A tiny bit of moonlight falling through the shutters made it possible to see where I was stepping.

“Can’t sleep?” I asked her.

“They’re still out there,” she replied. “It makes me uncomfortable knowing they’re just watching us, sizing us up like predators. I saw another man earlier, as well as a woman, so there’s at least four of them.”

I thought about it, as I took a seat in the other leaning chair that stood closer to the corner of the room, furthest from the window.

At least four... I mused, as I looked at the many glowing footprints on the floor, walls, and ceiling. Then I began counting every pair, before counting the different handprints.

“There’s eight,” I said with utter certainty, having double-checked both the number of hand and footprints to make sure.

“Just like the number of disappearances,” Rana replied.

There was a beat of silence, then she turned in her chair and looked at me and I looked at her.

“Just like the disappearances,” I echoed, feeling as though this was an incredibly important piece of the puzzle.

Although she had sounded certain that she wouldn’t fall asleep, Rana eventually dozed off. She had stayed awake during the carriage ride and been on guard the entire day, so it was obvious that she had to be exhausted.

I watched the window while she slept, catching glimpses of the human-like creatures as they passed by outside and occasionally looked into the dark house with their glinting eyes. At one point I could hear one crawling up onto the roof, as though looking for a way in. I also heard a rattle from the backdoor of the house, where one tried and failed to open the door.

For now, the Sacred Corpse Ash served as a strong enough barrier to keep the creatures out, but I wondered how long it would last. Master Owl’s blind faith in the stuff was almost reassuring, if not for the fact that he kept so many things to himself, which made me constantly wonder if I was being tested or if I was actually safe.

As I sat sleepless in the darkness, I whispered the name of my new familiar and it appeared in the air before me, the inky splotch of its body like a condensed piece of night that no light had the power to illuminate.

“Sumi, I want you to watch the house from outside and show me what you see.”

The most bizarre sensation washed over me, as the familiar lifted into the air and passed clean through the ceiling. It felt like fingers were tapping the back of my brain where it rested in my skull, and then the sight of my left eye went black for a moment, before being replaced by a grainy dark-grey view of the world outside of the house as seen from up high in the air.

The split view of my eyes was quickly starting to give me a devastating headache, so I put the palm of my right hand over my right eye, which let me focus exclusively on what Sumi was showing me.

Watching from five metres above the rooftops of the villages, I saw the forest and the clearing within which the village sat, cast in *that* bizarre shadowless grey light. I spotted a few animals in the distance, which were wandering around searching for food, one of which was a fox digging by the foot of a tree, having perhaps caught the scent of a rodent in its burrow.

Then some movement just below my familiar’s vantage point caught my attention and I wished that it would turn downwards to observe it. Surprisingly, Sumi responded to my desire and tilted its gaze, such that it was looking almost directly down at the house I was in.

A man with a bald head was crawling around on the ground on all fours, moving his head around like an animal smelling the scents on the air. He moved up to the front of the house and stood up, and I instinctively moved my right hand away from my eye and saw the moment he looked through the shutters with his glinting eyes, but then the headache started building again and I put my palm back over my right eye.

Although there was a deep terror from knowing I was being observed by this not-quite-human creature, it was comforting to pretend that I was far up in the air, looking down at it from above, rather than inside the house it was stalking around.

I saw as it crawled up onto the roof and moved towards the window to the bedroom in which Master Owl slept, before leaning over the side of the roof to look through the window up-side-down.

For a while, I manipulated the eye of my familiar around to watch the animalistic humanoid, but didn’t notice any of his fellows around, despite both Rana and I having spotted several. Then it went around a corner and disappeared from my view. A moment later, the little girl I’d initially seen emerged and continued acting in the same way as the bald man.

I sent Sumi down to look at the area where I’d lost sight of it, but there was nothing there. I was about to send it to follow after the girl as she ran off towards the tree at the centre of the village, but then a deep exhaustion came over me, and I knew that I’d overexerted my spirit by using the familiar too much.

That’s enough for now, I told the familiar in my mind, dismissing it.

Darkness overcame the vision of my left eye, before the familiar moonlight-stained interior of the house was made visible to me again. I removed my hand from my right eye and sat in the darkness, contemplating the things I’d seen.

“Rise and shine,” Master Owl said, waking me from my slumber. At some point during the night I must’ve fallen asleep, and I quickly sat up straight in the leaning chair, a pang of soreness in my neck making me wince.

Rana sat near the door and was in the middle of oiling up her blade and shield. Through the window shutters I saw that a warm golden light lit up the village and reflected off a thousand beads of morning dew covering the grass.

“I watched the creatures last night using my familiar,” I told him.

“And? Did you come to any conclusions about its true nature?”

“I haven’t yet,” I told him, “But I have narrowed down my guess to a Revenant-type.”

Owl nodded. “And your reasoning?”

From what I’d been able to read about the apparitions that fell under the Revenant-type, they tended to be humanoid in appearance while often displaying animalistic tendencies, such as territorialism, aggressive temper, and insatiable hunger. Their causes were generally due to curses or dreadful murders where the victim wasn’t buried with the proper rites. But the main thing was how they moved about.

“From watching the creatures through the window and with my familiar, I have come to the conclusion that it is permanently manifested into the world.” A lot of entities were unable to maintain permanence, only sporadically appearing to attack, but the ones Rana and I had seen were closer to the zombies in the movies I’d seen back home, never seeming to fade into a mist and disappearing or anything like that.

“Anything else?”

“There’s eight of them. There’s a little girl, two women, and five men. But...”

“But?”

“Only one of them appears at a time,” I added.

Owl grinned. “And why might that be?”

I thought back to some of the revenants I’d read about. They were able to take on the shape of the people they devoured or stalked, and then it clicked for me.

“Because there’s only one entity, but it is able to change shape!”

Owl nodded eagerly. “A very good hypothesis. But can you prove it?”

“I... no. It is only guesswork based on the entries in the Encyclopaedia.”

“So, what do you think would be your next move?”

I thought about it for a while, before coming up with an idea based on the patterns I’d observed and gathered from the description of the Quest. “It seems to be sticking to this village for some reason and I read that quite a few types of Revenants go to a nest or return to their graves when not active. Given that this *thing* seems to be mainly active at night, it may be hiding somewhere in the village during the day. After all, we checked the village, but we did not check all the houses.”

“We’ll go take a look around then,” Owl said. I suddenly realised that we had to leave the safety of the house and felt incredibly apprehensive. “Rana, you will go catch us something to eat while we search the village.”

The Vanguard nodded and got up from her seat and left out of the door, seeming to have no apprehensions about venturing out into the monster’s domain.

I got up from the chair and took a few leaden steps towards the open door. I noticed that, despite the faint breeze coming into the house, the lines of ash remained undisturbed, as though much heavier than it ought to be.

Owl pressed a strange quartz-like stone into my hand and I looked at it uncomprehending for a moment.

“It’s an Energy Stone,” he said. “It responds to pockets of concentrated energy by emitting a faint pulsing light. The brighter the light and the faster the pulse, the closer you are to something of significance. They’re generally best used to find objects closely related to a spirit, such as a memento that might keep it bound to this world, but it can perhaps be of use here.”

He reached into a pouch and took out a little rectangular wooden box with a sliding lid, as well as a small golden bell. “I may as well give you these too.”

I took the box and opened the lid, inside were incense sticks that gave off a faint vanilla-esque scent.

“That there is Gravebloom Incense, which attracts most spirits to you, although it has the opposite effect on a few entities.”

“And the bell?”

“It’s a Blessed Golden Bell,” he stated, handing it to me after I put away the incense. “It generally has the opposite effect of the Incense, in that it weakly repels spirits. But, again, it may attract some types of apparitions.”

I frowned. “How am I supposed to figure out which entities respond in which way to these?”

“Study the notes in the Encyclopaedia and then trial-and-error for the rest.”

Now that he mentioned it, I had seen the words Gravebloom and Bell used on a few entries, though had not known what to make of the terms at the time. From what I’d managed to memorise about Revenants, most of the subtypes had no response to the Bell, except for the Bloodfiends which actively attacked anyone carrying them. All of them did seem to seek out the Gravebloom Incense though.

I drew in a deep breath, then released it out my mouth, before pulling my staff from its belt loop and extending it to its full length. With Master Owl behind me, I walked out of the open door.

7 - The Haunting at Hamsel's Rest IV

For the first hour of looking through houses, I had Owl close-by, but after the fourth house, he said, “We’ll split up.”

I knew he was testing me and had no doubt that he’d already found the den of the shapeshifting creature. As he moved to the part of the village that lay on the other side of the river cutting through it, I went into another house, holding the Energy Stone out in front of me like a flashlight and my left hand around my staff, white-knuckled and tight.

Until now, I’d never been so terrified of an abandoned place. It was a sunny day and the place was by all means idyllic, but, to my Spirit-Goggled eyes, it was clear that a creature lived here. I imagined that it would jump out at me from a corner at any moment as I moved through the main room, looking at the hastily-abandoned meal on the table, which had been left to rot. Unlike the previous house, the windows and doors had been securely barred, meaning that no animals had managed to get inside.

As I came to the bedroom, I realised the reason why. A large rust-coloured stain covered the bed and the floor. I froze in place for a moment, as the overwhelming and heady stench of aged blood filled my head, but then gritted my teeth and pushed through the dread. Although it was terrifying and my head filled with horrific imaginings, I managed to lean down and look under the bed, finding it thankfully empty. With a hard swallow, I moved over to the large cabinet against the wall near the window and carefully pried it open with the end of my staff, while standing as far away as possible.

Thankfully, no monster jumped out at me from its shelves full of clothes, sheets, cutlery, and other random items. I walked closer to look at a little wooden box, opening it to find some crude jewellery. I was sure that Owl would have pocketed it, but I already felt dirty just sleeping in someone else’s house, *even if* it was abandoned, so there was no way I’d loot their belongings, especially not something that might be a precious heirloom.

I closed the box, then shut the cabinet doors as well.

A gasp left my mouth as I saw the face staring at me through the shutters from outside.

“Rana! You scared me.”

Her face vanished from between the shutter panels and I went out into the main room to greet her by the door, but as soon as I rounded the corner out of the bedroom, she was already standing there, only a metre from me.

“You’ve gotta stop scaring me like that!” I complained. My heart was already on edge as it was, so it was really cruel to prank me *like this*.

It seemed very out of character for her too.

I looked closely at her emotionless face.

“Did you not manage to catch anything?” I asked. I had no idea how long it might take to hunt something, but she *had* been gone for over an hour.

“...Why aren’t you saying anything?”

Rana took a step towards me and I involuntarily stepped back. She was taller than me, and, in this moment, very terrifying. Then I realised something.

Her aura was wrong... it was like black smoke, instead of the spike-filled crimson I’d seen every day since I met her, even just an hour prior.

“...Who *are* you?”

Rana took another step forward, and, like a zipper in a onesie, her face opened from just below the nose and to the bellybutton, splitting wide with a sound of tearing flesh and skin.

I took another step back, but then the strength went out of my legs and I collapsed onto my ass, while look at Rana slowly unfolding from the centre of her body to reveal rows-upon-rows of large and hideous teeth with saw-like edges.

I wanted to scream for help, but my faculties had left me. Somehow, though, I managed to lift my hand to point at the monster wearing the guise of Rana, and say, “Repel.”

Nothing happened and I looked dumbfounded at the Energy Stone in my hand, having mistaken it for my Focus.

“Ryūta!” I heard someone shout from behind me, before the backdoor of the house slammed open with a loud *snap* and *clunk*. Then a shield slammed into the monstrosity, pushing it back a couple of steps.

I blinked and looked up at Rana standing there with her shield on her arm and blade in hand.

“Ryūta! You got to move! Get out of here!”

Her words took a second before they hit me, but then I began frantically crawling towards the backdoor she had burst through, while I heard the sound of her shield and blade hammering into the monster, which, a moment later, let out a blood-curdling shriek.

I managed to get to my feet by the time I reached the door, and no sooner had I stood up than Rana came running and grabbed me by my arm. Together we ran away from the house and headed for the place we’d stayed in overnight, which lay a few hundred metres away.

In the distance, the monster continued to scream, but it did not give pursuit.

My hands were still trembling an hour later, while Rana and I sat in the leaning chairs and watched the entrance to the house. I had added more of the Sacred Ash to the doorways and windows to keep us safe, but I worried it would not be enough.

“Thank god that I spotted you when I did,” Rana said, breaking the silence. She seemed pretty shaken-up as well, but hid it better than I managed. But her aura was flickering, perhaps matching her pounding heartrate.

“I thought,” I started, but then went quiet for a moment. “I thought it could only take on the appearance of the dead.”

“Whatever it is, my weapon has no effect on it,” she replied. “I’m pretty sure I stabbed it through its face and broke its right arm, but it didn’t really seem to care much.”

I let out a shuddering breath.

I wanna go home.

After opening the Encyclopaedia with my clammy and cold hands, I tried to consider the monster objectively, although my heartbeat was still drumming so fast that it echoed in my ears and a painful headache stabbed my right temple like an icepick.

I scrolled through the entries I had considered already. My assumption that it was a type of Revenant still held firm, but I reconsidered a few of my other assumptions.

After a bit of reading and back-and-forth leafing through pages, I said, out loud, “I know what it is.”

Although I was sure that Owl would scold me for it, I showed her the entry. It had no picture, but the description was spot-on.

“*Skinstealer?*” she asked.

“It’s a type of Vengeful Dead,” I told her, reading from the page. “It is unable to leave its place of death and will search fervently for whoever killed it and left its body to rot. If the person responsible is nowhere to be found, it will begin indiscriminately attacking and devouring people it comes across. It prefers to strike lone targets and generally attacks at night, but if it finds a person by themselves it will attack during the day as well. It is capable of taking on the shape of those that it devours, as well as those that it has observed for a while.”

“You mean to say that it was watching me in the forest while I was hunting?”

“I don’t know, but possibly? Unless it was able to watch you at night through the window.”

“But why didn’t it attack me?”

I wondered about that for a moment, before answering, “I think it is an ambush predator and probably prefers to go after the weakest prey... which would be me. After all, you injured it yesterday night.”

Rana bit her lower lip in contemplation. “I won’t leave your side again.”

I couldn’t help but blush a bit at the sincerity with which she said it. “...Thank you.”

“So, how are you gonna deal with it?”

Are you crazy!? *I’m gonna deal with it by running far away to where it can’t reach me!* I almost blurted out.

“The book just says that it must be put to rest, but I don’t know what that means.”

“Maybe—” Rana started, but a rattling from the backdoor made her jump up and pull her blade from her scabbard, moving to position herself in front of me. I hurriedly got up as well, eyeing the front door as a viable escape route.

Suddenly the backdoor opened and hit the wall with a *clunk*, then Master Owl came into the house, stepping over the line of white ash.

“Stay where you are!” Rana demanded, pointing her double-edged shortsword at him.

Owl grinned, but lifted his hands in the air nonetheless, then slowly brought his right hand down to the neck of his blouse and exposed the red chalk mark he had made.

“Don’t worry, I won’t eat you.”

Rana lowered her sword slightly, but remained on guard.

“Your turn now, show me the mark I made.”

She pulled down the neck of her arming jacket as well, presumably showing him the mark, though I stood behind her and couldn’t see.

Content with the result, Master Owl closed the door behind him and then walked into the main room. He took a look at me and said, surprised, “Huh, you’re still alive.”

“You knew!” I said and pointed an accusing finger at me. “You knew it would go for me when you left me alone!”

“I didn’t know that,” he argued. “I just made an educated guess.”

“You’re an asshole!”

“Thank you, that means a lot to me.”

I frowned. There was no way I’d trust this guy with my life ever again, given that he’d used me as bait.

“Did you realise what we’re dealing with?” he asked, returning to teacher mode as though he hadn’t just been caught offering me up to the monster.

“It’s a Skinstealer Revenant,” I told him angrily.

He nodded. “Bingo! Well done.”

“You knew from the start,” I replied and pulled down my shirt, “That’s why you drew *these* marks on us.”

“It was fairly obvious from the Quest information and the many different sets of footprints. Of course, it could also have been a Doppelganger, but those are quite rare.”

“How are we supposed to Exorcise it?”

“Well, technically your work is done here, but if you want to learn how to do it, I’ll show you,” he said with a grin that made me very uncomfortable.

“The book just says to put it to rest.”

“Easier said than done with something like this. Now, if we were dealing with a more traditional Revenant, we could simply wait until it was inactive, find its grave, and then perform a fairly simple funeral rite. However, as you may have noticed, our little friend doesn’t sleep during the day, despite being hyperactive at night.”

“How are we supposed to do it then?” I asked.

“We have to trap it,” he said with an even bigger grin. “And what does every good trap need?”

I hate this guy so much.

“Why do I have to be the bait?” I complained for the eight time.

“Focus on the linework,” he scolded me, “you don’t want to mess *this one* up.”

I sighed and continued following the design in the back-half of the Encyclopaedia. As a failsafe for if the trap went wrong, Master Owl had said I would summon a Protector familiar of a type called a ‘Guardian Wraith’. These seemed to be neutral spirits of people who had died protecting someone, which was unlike Sumi, who was an ‘Eye of the Observer’, i.e. the offspring of some unfathomable entity that lent its eyes to Exorcists in exchange for just a little bit of their energy, as well as their reverence. *Whatever that means...*

Just like the first time, I was drawing the ritual onto the floor of the bedroom using the Blood Chalk. However, this time the design was a triangle within a square within a circle. The asymmetrical design really threw me off and more than once the Old Exorcist had to correct my linework. It felt

like I was back to practicing calligraphy like in middle-school, although a mistake here would result in more than just a bad grade...

I wiped my sweaty face on my shirt sleeve and stood up from the drawing, my elbows, neck, and knees all sore from the strenuous work.

“Good enough,” Owl said.

I frowned as he pulled out a small knife and handed it to me. “What am I meant to do with *that*?”

“Did you not read the instructions properly? As you invoke the Guardian Wraith, you slice the blade across your palm and offer your blood directly onto the ritual drawing.”

I grimaced and started to feel a ball of a dread forming in my stomach. I was already a wreck of nerves, but intentionally injuring myself seemed incredibly counterintuitive.

“Can’t I just prick a finger? Does it have to be my palm?”

“Pipsqueak... don’t make me lose my little faith in you now. There are no half-measures with rituals, do you hear me? You’re asking a spirit to become your servant and defend you from harm, but do you think any will respond if you can’t even willingly offer the reward they seek?”

He grinned. “If you want, I can do it for you, but I might go a bit *overboard*.”

I took the knife from his proffering hand resolutely. “I’ll do it, okay!?”

Gritting my teeth as I prepared for the ritual, I pulled the Black Tallow Candle from my lower-back pouch and placed it in the centre of the ritual drawing, then I began the invocation.

“Fallen heroes and defeated champions; guardians and saviours who died to defend your beloved; I call upon thee to grant me your aid in death as you granted your aid in life; in exchange for my blood—” I pulled the blade across my left palm slowly and deliberately, the biting edge tearing open the skin and releasing a deluge of blood down onto the candle and the lines drawn in red oily chalk. Tears welled forth in my eyes, and I struggled to continue the invocation, but then realised that my pain was for naught if I didn’t. *“...I beseech thee to guard me well and true; be the bulwark that defends me from the evils of this world!”*

As I finished the final syllable, I closed my left hand into a fist as tears ran down my cheeks. It felt as though the knife was still digging into my palm, even though I held it in my other hand. The warmth of my blood contrasted the sudden coldness in my arm.

Then my ritual took hold and the temperature in the room dropped significantly, the spilled blood that ran across the floor forming ice crystals on top and my breath rising in the air like mist. To my eyes alone, a spirit emerged from the black candle, as though imitating a flame, before it grew into the size of a brutish human whose lower half had been cut off.

I began to reach out with my essence like I’d been taught, and imbued it with my pact:

In exchange for my offering of blood and a taste of my bountiful soul, I ask of you to protect me.

When my spirit connected with the floating brutish wraith, it felt like lightning punched into my stomach and sent its pent-up electricity down my limbs. I was about to give the Guardian Wraith a name to finalise the Pact, but then it spoke to me:

“My name is Armen and I will ensure no harm befalls you.”

A warmth spread across my body as the Pact was formed, but instead of vanishing like Sumi, the half-severed human wraith just detached from the candle and lifted into the air, exploring the surroundings. Though his features were blurry and hard to distinguish, I got the notion that Armen’s body was covered in rusted plate armour and that he wore a close-helm through which shone two perfectly-round white-glowing eyes.

“What’s wrong?” Owl asked. “You pulled it off correctly from the looks of it, so why are you just spacing out like that? Does your hand really hurt *that* bad?”

I didn’t know what to say and he apparently took that to meaning “Yes”, as he grabbed my left hand and unfurled my fist.

“Where’s the wound?” he asked. “Oy, pipsqueak, *what the hell* did you summon??”

“I just did what you said, I don’t know!”

“It would perhaps be prudent not to tell your Master that I can speak.”

“Show me your Guild Card,” he demanded.

I was so confused and terrified of having done something forbidden that I blurted out, “No!”

“Don’t be obstinate, you little shit!”

As he grabbed my shoulder in a vice grip, Armen suddenly shot forward like a truck and knocked into the Old Exorcist, sending him flying away from me and out into the wall of the hallway.

His chubby body hit the wall with a loud *thump*, before he settled down onto the floor.

“That fucking hurt,” Master Owl complained as he got up.

Rana suddenly came running. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t worry about it, sweetheart, I’m alright,” he said. She cast him a glare as though he was a pile of dogshit, then she looked at me with a worried frown.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “Master accidentally triggered my new familiar and it was a bit too rough with him.”

“I’ll say. That was one hell of a punch.”

Thank you, Armen.

“I require no praise for doing my duty,” the Wraith replied soberly.

Master Owl rotated his shoulder joint. I was sure he’d sport a bruise from the impact. His eyes narrowed behind the lenses of his Spirit Goggles and we had a tense stare-down for a moment, while Rana stood between us like a boxing referee preventing us from breaking the rules.

“Your Master is observing me.”

How? I thought only I could see my familiars.

“He is using his Watcher familiar.”

You can see his familiars? I realised that one of the uses for a Watcher familiar was also to gauge other Exorcists and the kinds of familiars they used, as they apparently had the ability to see other familiars, though that made me wonder why Armen could see them too. He was definitely no ordinary Protector familiar.

I noticed Owl’s gaze flicker as he looked around, maybe trying to spot something other than Armen, though Sumi was invisible when dismissed, even to me.

“Yes. He has quite a few. His Defender is quite formidable, without it, he would have broken several bones.”

If he touches me again, please do not attack him.

“Inadvisable, but the decision is yours. I will obey.”

I let out a steady breath and tried to appear innocent. “We should prepare the trap, before it gets dark, right?”

Master Owl did not look fully convinced that I hadn’t summoned something terrifyingly-powerful or forbidden, but he nodded slowly and we went back into the main room, with Rana trailing along and looking very confused.

I had no idea why Armen could speak, but I could guess that familiars were not meant to speak or have so strong a personality.

I almost don’t want to look at my Guild Card and find out what it says...

8 - My First Exorcism

I pretended to sleep in the leaning chair, while the door to the house stood slightly ajar, with the line of Sacred Corpse Dust broken half-way through. I discovered that, even with my eyes closed, I could still utilise Sumi’s sight, and I used this to observe the entrance to the house from outside.

The Skinstealer was already active as soon as the shadows had begun creeping across the forest, but it seemed hesitant to approach the front door of our house. Wearing the guise of a woman with long dark-brown hair and a simple threadbare robe, it crawled around the house and looked through the window in the back and the one for the bedroom.

Master Owl and Rana were hiding in the bedroom behind a tall dresser and were hopefully hidden from the creature’s sight and smell, while I alone sat in the main room, pretending to sleep. On the floor, Owl had drawn a large two-metre-in-diameter circle with a bunch of bizarre symbols within and a lit stick of incense in its centre, which cast a dense vanilla smell into the air.

Though it was hard to trust him, Owl had said that the Skinstealer would be locked in place when it stepped into the large ritual circle on the floor and I was conveniently placed directly opposite it from the door. It would have to cross the trap to reach me, unless...

Unless it crawls on the walls...

As soon as the thought had entered my mind, I saw through Sumi’s eye that the Skinstealer was coming back around to the front of the house. It seemed to peek through the window shutters, before sniffing around the partly-open door.

My heart skipped a beat as it rose to its full height and used an arm to carefully open the door the entire way, before stepping right through the broken line of Sacred Ash on the floor. The way the Revenant was able to mimic so human a behaviour, but was beset by animalistic tendencies the rest of the time, was truly unnerving.

I tried to manipulate Sumi to follow behind it as it moved further into the house and closer to me and the trap on the floor, but my heart was beating so fast that I struggled to maintain concentration, then suddenly my connection to the familiar broke.

A moment later, a horrific shriek sounded from right next to me.

I carefully opened my eyes, my body like stone. In front of me hovered Armen with his blurry plated arms flung wide to shield me and a metre away stood the Skinstealer, frozen in place and half-way through opening the terrible maw that ran down the length of its face and torso.

From the other room, Owl and Rana came running with a lit lantern. They stopped just a couple metres from the edge of the sigil trap.

“Wow, it’s uglier than I thought,” Owl commented.

I got up from the chair and sidled along the wall at my back until I was over next to them.

“Let’s exorcise it!” I said, wanting the monster to go away as fast as possible. Even though it was frozen in place, there was no assurances that it would stay that way for long.

“Do you remember the verses of the ritual?”

“Yes, let’s do it, quickly, before it breaks loose!”

“Relax,” he said nonchalantly. “We have at least two minutes of free time.”

I almost yelled at him for not taking it seriously, but then he flipped his heavy coat back and drew a folded-up staff from his lower back where it had been hidden away until now. It was made from some type of black metal and was folded into three equally-long pieces that snapped together to become a two-metre staff. It had no adornment at its tip, but then he pulled something from a pocket and slipped it over the end of his staff, such that a strange flat triangle broken into three parts with increasingly-smaller triangles within became the equivalent to the ring of bells on my staff-tip.

With our staves in hand, we stood on the edge of the ritual circle and then half-sang the verses of the Ritual of Obsequy. The verses consisted of a bunch of repeated mentions of the soul passing on to the afterlife and releasing all earthly ties, and to embrace peace and find comfort in letting go. Unlike other Exorcisms that featured the Ritual of Obsequy, we did not need esoteric ingredients for it to work on the Skinstealer.

We continued the verses for over a minute, until it started to take effect on the Skinstealer who had nowhere to run from our ritual, locked in stasis by the trap. A strange glowing smoke, which I was pretty sure was only visible thanks to my Spirit Goggles, started billowing from the monster, while it began slowly cycling through the various guises of the people it had devoured. Its horrific screeching was like a damned orchestra to our song-verse, but, with every new repetition, it was almost like the monster’s voice became more human.

As I repeated the verses with Master Owl and Rana watched in dumbstruck fascination, I counted the number of forms that the Skinstealer cycled through, until, at the end, it came to the little girl that I’d first seen by the tree. It was the very last of its guises, though this one seemed to be its real form, meaning that it was a revenant caused by this young girl’s death, a thought which made my chest hurt.

As we finished another repetition, all that remained was a lifeless body. A corpse into which a Vengeful Spirit had taken hold.

I didn't know what to do as Master Owl brought the ritual to its end, so I just stood there, as he leant down and picked up the body, before leaving the house with it in his arms.

A couple hours later, Master Owl returned, his hands covered in dirt. He nodded bleakly, then said, “It's done. Good work, Ryūta.”

After closing the front door and correcting the line of ash, he walked past us and into the bedroom, where a *creak* from the bed made it obvious that he'd gone to sleep.

I looked at Rana and she looked at me, then we both picked a leaning chair and tried to find some rest as well. It wasn't until that moment that I realised that I hadn't eaten in over a day.

The next day, Master Owl woke me up and told me to gather as much of the Sacred Corpse Ash back into the pouch as I could, repeating several times how expensive the stuff was.

Rana went out to hunt for food, although she didn't leave until after getting Master Owl to assure her that we were no longer in danger and that I didn't need to be protected.

When she returned, she carried two pheasant-looking birds that she had chopped the heads off of, reminding me of how dangerous she actually was when facing something that didn't require an elaborate ritual to kill.

“What did you think of your *first time*?” Master Owl asked with a filthy smile, as he bit into a piece of charred meat.

We were sitting out in front of the house we'd stayed in for two days, grilling the skinned pheasants over a campfire. It was almost cozy.

“I somehow felt bad for the Skinstealer at the end,” I said, certain that he would mock my answer.

“That's a normal feeling,” he replied in a serious tone. “As you work this job, you will learn that most of the evils in this world are wrought by human hands. So many of the monsters we deal with are the direct result of human brutality and cruelty.”

“What happens when there are wars?” I asked, assuming that this world also had its fair share of fighting between nations and petty squabbles, despite all the very real monsters that existed.

“I've only been unlucky enough to witness the aftermath of two battlefields, but it's not pretty. The cleanup takes years for us Exorcists, as there are countless apparitions spawned from such a mass-scale loss of life and expression of misery and pain. War between humans is a fecund and virulent seedbed for monsters to grow out of.”

“I haven’t seen any wars yet,” Rana said. I could tell she didn’t look forward to such an event either, but why would she? As a Vanguard and a Mercenary, she was no doubt one of the first people who would be put on the field, while someone like an Exorcist was probably sufficiently-useless and not called upon unless all hope was already lost.

“The last one was twelve years ago,” Owl replied. “I don’t remember what the cause was, but thousands died because of it, and I don’t even think that any borders shifted or any wrongs were righted. It’s a pointless game of bored power-hungry aristocrats and royalty,” he said bleakly, before using his teeth to pull another chunk of meat from the piece in his hands.

I couldn’t help but look at the palm of my hand in fascination, while the monotony of the journey back made me constantly replay the events of last night over-and-over.

“You keep looking at your hand,” Rana remarked as we were following the road back to where the carriage had dropped us off. Master Owl had left us behind, eager to get back to Lundia, though if we had to walk the entire way, it would take several days... I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“I had to cut open my hand to summon my last familiar,” I told her truthfully. “For some reason, the moment I formed a Pact with it, my wound healed.”

I’d expected her to look put off, but instead she just asked, “Does it hurt?”

“No. There isn’t even a scar.”

“Maybe your familiar healed your injuries?”

“I don’t know if they’re supposed to be able to do that,” I replied and looked around nervously.

“We are being watched, but your Master cannot hear what is said.”

Thank you Armen. I probably shouldn’t have been surprised that the Guardian Wraith was so in tune with my thoughts, but it was quite unnerving. Everything still felt like some absurd fever dream that I’d one day wake up from and return to my normal life in Japan.

That’s seeming less-and-less likely the more time passes...

I moved a bit closer to Rana, then whispered, “I’m afraid I summoned something forbidden.”

“You didn’t mean to, right?”

“I just followed Owl’s instructions.”

“Then what’s the harm?”

“It seems like Exorcists who break the rules are hunted down...”

“Oh.”

“Yeah... and Owl is very suspicious of me.”

“If he tries anything, I’ll protect you.”

Suddenly I became very conscious of how close she was to me. Part of me felt like she was the overprotective sister that I’d never had in the real world, but another part of me hoped that she could become something else...

No, that’s wrong. Think of Inoue! What if she’s waiting to reciprocate your feelings!?

But I won’t ever be able to go back! What’s wrong with letting go of my feelings and trying to move on!?

You’re just being lonely and responding too strongly to someone with no such intentions!

“Are you okay, Ryūta?” Rana asked. “You have a really weird look on your face.”

“Erm... I was just arguing with myself about something,” I blurted out, before realising how weird that was.

She smiled in return, which was not what I had expected. *That* response made me bold, so I said, without thinking:

“You’re a lot nicer than you looked the first time I saw you.”

My heart stopped and the blood drained from my face as it sunk in that I’d actually said that out loud.

Rana simply laughed in response.

“It’s hard being a capable-looking warrior,” she replied. “I moved on from Adventuring work to become a Mercenary, but I quickly discovered that no one would hire me if I looked friendly. When people pay someone to guard them, they want someone capable and strong.”

“Is that why those guys next to you were busy showing off their oily muscles and polished armour?”

“Everyone has their own strategy,” she said, not denigrating her fellow mercenaries. “I’m really a very shy person in reality. Before I came here I was the type of girl who was always in the background.”

Then why does your aura radiate such danger?

“Didn’t you stand out being *that* tall?” I asked, this time managing to keep my true words hidden.

“Oh, I wasn’t *this* tall before I came here,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked, super confused.

“You *do* know that people’s appearances change when they come here, right?”

“Erm...”

“Oh my god,” she whispered. “Have you not had a look at yourself in a mirror since you came here?”

“Now that you mention it... no. There aren’t many mirrors around to look at. Worse yet, I haven’t taken a bath since I got here either...”

“The hygiene levels in Lundia are pretty low,” she commented. “But your appearance must not have changed much if you haven’t felt the change. For me it was quite obvious. I grew half a metre, you know!”

I pulled on a bit of my hair. “My hair-colour is the same and height-wise seems no different. I was the same height before I came here too. What kind of impression do I give off when you look at me though?”

She paused on the road and seem to think about it really hard for a while. Then she said, straight-faced, “Like an adorable younger brother, I guess?”

Words could not describe how much that sentence hurt me emotionally. I had by no means been an outstandingly-handsome guy before I came here, but *that* was certainly not how I would have described myself. It was possible that nothing had changed since coming here and that I’d just been delusional about my appearance, but if I gave off a little-brother vibe, then it was goodbye to any aspirations of building more than platonic relationships with women in this world...

Maybe that’s okay? I considered. *Am I really focused on finding a girlfriend in this world, when my Role is like a massive red flag to anyone who meets me? Perhaps I should just aim to find a good friend like Renji. Maybe someone like Harleigh?*

“But,” Rana added, giving me sudden hope, “Your eyes are really intense.”

Oh...

“That’s just the Goggles, I think.”

“I noticed it even when you took them off. They give off the impression that you can see right through all pretence.”

“Isn’t it the same with Owl?” I asked. It was probably just an Exorcist thing.

“I don’t like the way he looks at people. His eyes are really cold. Whenever he laughs or smiles, it never reaches his eyes.”

I hadn’t realised until now, but I had in fact noticed this subconsciously. Maybe it was why I also found him so off-putting. Certainly his vacillating moods weren’t helping.

Maybe I should try and distance myself from him when we return to Lundia.

After about an hour, we caught up to Master Owl, who was standing by the sign pointing back to Lundia. Although I was still as exhausted as with the hike to Hamsel’s Rest, this return-trip had been a bit easier thanks to Rana keeping pace with me.

“You two lovebirds done flirting?” he asked jokingly. The Vanguard shot him a dangerous glare, which only made him smile more. His comment also felt a bit disturbing to me, since I knew from Armen that he’d been watching us with his familiar.

“Are we going to wait here for a carriage to take us back?” I asked.

“We could walk all the way to Lundia,” he teased, “But yes, that was the idea. There are plenty of carriages travelling back-and-forth on this road every day, so, bar a goblin ambush like what we experienced, we should see one heading our direction within a few hours.”

“Fine by me,” I replied. I didn’t mind waiting on the side of the road. The weather was nice and I was still kind of tired from lack of sleep, not to mention the long hike had taken its toll on my body. It felt as though I was still recovering from the first hike.

Man, I’m really out of shape...

“While we wait, I’ll teach you how to use your ‘Soul Barrier’ ability, since you’ll need it for our next job. Also,” he stepped closer and handed me a pouch identical to the one holding the Sacred Corpse Ash, “Take *this*.”

“What’s it for?”

“It’s called ‘Sinner’s Ash’ and is used to reveal unseen things. It can be used to break illusions or to reveal things like the spectral handprints we saw in the village. Your Spirit Sight makes it obsolete in a lot of situations, but there are times where you need to show something to another person, and that’s when it comes in handy.”

“What’s with all this ash and blood-based stuff?” I asked. “Why is it all so grim?”

“Just be glad you’re not a summoner,” he replied as if that was supposed to make me feel any better. “Anyway, prepare yourself.”

Master Owl took a step back and, before I could ask “What for?”, he flung the palm of his right hand towards me. I had no idea what was happening until it hit me. Suddenly fear and dread washed over me and I took an involuntary step back, falling to my ass on the dirt when my legs gave out.

“Did you just use Repel on me!”

Why didn’t you guard me? I scolded Armen.

“You said not to protect you from him,” he replied.

Okay, forget that, help me as much as you can here!

“My forte is in defending against physical attacks. I can offer you no aid with attacks that target your mind and spirit.”

Great...

“Now you know how the spell feels in its weakest form,” he said, as though I’d been taught a meaningful lesson. “You have the means to defend yourself from its effects however.”

I frowned. I didn’t like this form of teaching. It was unnecessarily cruel I thought.

“Don’t look at me *like that*. Stand up and prepare to defend yourself.”

Rising from the ground and dusting myself off, I reached out a hand to stop him, but he immediately took up a stance and did the same palm-strike into the air in front of him.

I tried to imagine my energy, *that* light inside my body, pooling in my chest and then moving out in front of my body like a barrier, but then his Repel hit me again and this time my legs just straight-up collapsed underneath me.

Rana took a step towards me, but he stopped her. “He won’t learn from being coddled! Don’t interfere with this!”

“But he’s shaking! Look at him!”

I got up from the ground again, not wanting to be pitied by her. I realised that the bell staff in my hand wasn’t doing anything to help me, so I pulled the Wire Orb Focus from its hook on my belt and squeezed it tightly.

Owl grinned and repeated the palm-strike motion again. I tried to focus on the mental image of projecting my soul out in front of me like a shield again and, this time, I felt the impact through the Focus in my hand like a sudden vibration.

“Much better,” he praised me, then he reached for his belt and pulled a black dagger-like talisman from it, holding it in his right hand in the same way I held my Focus. I had not noticed it before, but it also blended in with his dark attire quite well. My immediate guess was that something with so aggressive a shape had to be offensive in the nature of its speciality, like how the bell-shaped Foci was best suited for summoning and lantern-shapes worked best for projection spells.

“Prepare yourself,” Master Owl said seriously.

A Repel with his full strength might do some serious damage, I realised. I thought back to the target dummy that I’d obliterated on my first attempt while Harleigh oversaw my training.

“The more precise the image in your mind’s eye, the stronger the barrier,” Armen suddenly said.

Owl took up a stance and then slashed the air in front of him with his dagger talisman.

In my mind’s eye I thought of the only thing I could fully picture: Armen in his plated armour, arms spread wide like a true Protector. I channelled all my spirit into this mental image.

Then everything went dark.

I came to sometime later with Rana shaking me awake. As I opened my eyes, she looked very relieved. The colours of the world looked odd for a few moments after I came to and a strange pressure filled my head, making it feel heavy.

“What happened?” I asked drowsily.

“You just suddenly passed out.” Her expression was very worried, though there was also something like *fear* beneath it, which was echoed by her red aura.

She helped me sit up and I felt something sticky on my lips. Rana quickly put a handkerchief up to my nose.

“You’ve got a pretty serious nosebleed,” she told me.

I looked over to where Owl was sitting nearby, holding his wrist with a pained expression.

“What happened to him?”

“You broke my wrist, you little shit!” he yelled back.

How?

Without turning to look at the Old Exorcist, Rana said, clearly furious at the man, “He tried to reach into your bag while you were unconscious and it was as though some floating knight appeared out of thin air and grabbed him by the wrist, then threw him four metres across the road.”

Now that I looked closer at the old man, there was a clear scrape on the side of his face from where he had no doubt hit the rough dirt.

Armen, you can protect me even when I’m unconscious?

“Of course. My duty does not end, just because you are asleep. Only in death doth my duty come to an end.”

I suppose that’s good to know...

I felt incredibly conflicted. On one hand it was a clear violation of my privacy that Owl had tried to search my bag, but, on the other hand, my familiar had broken his wrist and the old man seemed like someone who could hold a grudge...

“You were trying to look at my Guild Card, weren’t you!”

“You ungrateful cretin!” he yelled back. “You owe me for taking you under my wing, but you’re keeping secrets from me!”

Rana got up from where she knelt and walked over to the sitting Exorcist, then she pulled her blade from her sheath and levelled it at his throat. According to Armen, Owl had a powerful Protector himself, but I wondered if it was a match for Rana’s blade. After all, she had S-tier in Strength.

“If you try anything like *that* again, I will cut your head off.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” he yelled back at her, thinking he had the upper hand.

Rana didn’t flinch. “Do you really think anyone would care if an Exorcist *like you* died!?”

Although I knew she was saying it to protect me, her words also hurt me. No one would care if I died either...

9 - The Margrave's Quest

The carriage ride back to Lundia was incredibly awkward. Rana had taken the seat next to me, while Master Owl sat at the far end, having bound his wrist with a supporting bandage, though I saw how the colour drained from his face every time we hit a bump in the road.

Surprisingly, I felt neither good nor bad about having been the cause of his injury. He had tried to take a look at my Guild Card without my permission and had paid the price. He himself had taught me that it was foolish to show it to people, but apparently he was above his own rules. I still hadn't seen his Card, and his ability to hide his aura from me was as impeccable as ever. Even while in constant pain he let no sign of it slip out.

During the long return-trip, I used a pencil Rana had lent me to sketch a simple drawing of the Skinstealer onto the entry in the Encyclopaedia, since the entry didn't have an illustration.

Rana looked over my shoulder. “That's pretty good,” she praised me.

“Thanks. I used to draw monsters a lot in my notebooks during middle school.”

“I suck at drawing,” she told me, “but I'm pretty confident in my ability to sing.”

“Really? I wish I could hear you sing something.”

Rana looked away.

Is she blushing?

“I haven't sung in front of people before.”

Too bad there aren't any karaoke bars in this world...

The carriage only had three other people besides us and they were all Natives of this world. Their weak auras showed me their proficiencies, but, as I'd been told, only people from outside this world had the ability to have a Role Assignment to unlock their full potential. Although, from the way I understood it, the Assignment didn't alter anything about one's physicality or abilities, rather, it just revealed what was already there. Maybe it wasn't so much an ironclad fact that Natives couldn't have a Role Assignment, but rather that something prevented them from utilising their potential to utilise their magical and pseudo-magical powers? There were bound to be people who wanted to become Adventurers and Mercenaries among the Natives, but I didn't fully understand what separated me from them, so I couldn't tell what made only Otherworlders able to gain Roles. When I looked at them with my Spirit Sight, their auras were sometimes as strong as some of the Adventurers hanging about in the Guild Hall, so it seemed weird.

“Rana?”

“Yeah?”

“What made you switch to the Mercenary Guild?”

The Vanguard seemed to waver on whether or not to answer, but then she said, “I didn’t like the groupwork of the Adventurers’ Guild and a lot of quests were far more dangerous than their brief descriptions hinted at, plus the pay is bad, especially when you have to split it with three or four other people. And, as a Vanguard, I was heavily relied on to protect my group and blamed heavily when I let someone get injured. It was very stressful.”

“And Mercenary work is different?”

“It’s simpler, for one. And instead of vague quests, you deal directly with your clients and get a better understanding of what’s required of you.”

“How long have you been a Mercenary?”

“Only seven months or so,” she replied, surprisingly. “I haven’t had as many jobs as when I was an Adventurer, but due to the better payouts I haven’t needed to frantically take dozens of quests each week just to be able to have a place to stay overnight and food to put in my belly. I actually have my own apartment and everything.”

I couldn’t help but nod. After some brief calculations of quest rewards and the cost of things in Lundia, a Novitiate Adventurer would have to average two Simple quests daily just to be able to pay for food and lodging, which didn’t even touch on the cost of gear, as even For-Rent weapons were a recurring cost. After a while, a Novitiate would rank up and have a better selection of quests with higher rewards, but it went hand-in-hand with higher risk. It only required one slip-up and you’d be dead, and when you worked ten-plus hour days every day, it was just a matter of time before you made a mistake.

“Vanguards are a dime-a-dozen,” she continued. “Priests are probably the luckiest of everyone. They get to join almost any group, even ones with high-ranked Adventurers, because of how in-demand they are, and they are the only ones who have access to super-easy Healing Quests, which pay really well.”

I frowned. Exorcism jobs paid outrageously-well by comparison to all other quests, but I knew that if Owl and Rana hadn’t been with me, I would’ve died in Hamsel’s Rest. Actually, I might’ve died on the way there, thanks to the goblin ambush.

Although I felt a sense of accomplishment from completing my first Exorcism, it was obvious in hindsight that I’d been helped a lot. Expecting any new Exorcist to pull off their first quest without hand-holding the entire time was quite absurd.

“I’ve been thinking of moving out west,” Rana then said.

“Really? Is there work out there?”

“There are plenty of cities like Lundia, though Lundia is the most competitive for people like us, seeing as it’s where nearly every Otherworlder ends up. Due to the influx of willing Adventurers and Mercenaries, reward pay is far lower here, since there’s almost always someone willing to take a job for a lower payout than what is fair.

“Of course, treatment of Otherworlders in other cities and nations is much worse than Lundia.”

“I thought it was already quite bad here,” I replied.

“Here people just look at you with contempt, but no one tries to steal from you nor falsely accuse you of crimes or whatever. I did some quests in the southern part of Hallem a year-and-a-half ago with my party back then, and it was pretty bad. I’ve heard the west is more relaxed, plus there’s supposed to be nice beaches and great food.”

“You think they have hot springs too?” I asked. “I feel disgusting having not taken a bath in all this time. It’s nearly been a week!”

Rana nodded. “I know what you mean. The port city of Ochre to the east has some pretty nice bathhouses, so you could try and visit that place.”

The way she said it made me think she would leave after this job. I got bold and quickly asked, “Do you want to stick with me a bit longer after we hand in the quest?”

She looked surprised, then smiled. “I don’t see why not. I won’t need to work for a while after this payout, so I suppose I could accompany you for a bit longer.”

Her reply made me quite happy, though it reminded me that our relationship was still a transactional one. It was a bittersweet feeling, but if I could take on another well-paying job, I could keep paying her to protect me. Even though I had Armen, it was clear that the familiar only fought to protect me, and I had no offensive spells besides Repel so I was screwed if I got into a fight by myself.

Maybe I should look into getting a Fighter familiar as well...

We finally arrived to Lundia late that afternoon, with the sunlight waning fast and the city Lamplighters already beginning their journey to light the torches and lanterns that lined the busier parts of the city.

The three of us made for the Adventurers’ Guild together to immediately hand in our quests: the Novitiate-ranked one for discovering what kind of entity was terrorising Hamsel’s Rest, and the one Master Owl had for exorcising it.

As we entered into the Guild Hall, the tavern-part of the bottom floor became a flurry of murmurs. It was not difficult to notice that most of the talk was centred around me. I suppose that, if only one-in-twenty-five Exorcists made it back from their first quest and Exorcists were so rare to the point that Master Owl and I were the only ones in the city, then this was like witnessing a once-in-a-century cosmic event to many of the people here.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Owl said as we pushed through to the Quest Counter, where the same blonde woman we’d gotten the quest from awaited us.

Master Owl pulled the crinkled quest scroll from a coat pocket and shoved it into my hand, then pushed me towards the counter.

“I have completed the Quest,” I told the Guild Representative. “The Haunter at Hamsel’s Rest was a Skinstealer Revenant.”

“Was?” she asked in return, taking my proffered Guild Card and the crinkled scroll.

Owl came up next to me with the other Quest and also handed her his card with his left hand. I didn’t try to sneak a peek this time, since it would be hypocritical of me. Besides, I doubted I wanted to know what it said.

“We have successfully Exorcised the Skinstealer,” he answered. “The little pipsqueak here did a good job of his first time,” he said and patted me on the back. The way he was pretending to be a gregarious mentor really threw me for a loop, but I guessed that it served him well to be two-faced when it came to his public image. He made sure to hide his injury with his coat and I was sure that only I noticed how he kept wincing every-now-and-then.

“I see,” the Representative replied. “We will send a team to ensure that the place is safe, but I have no reason to doubt your words, Master Owl.”

“Thank you, Lia,” he replied. “If it is not too much to ask, if we can receive the payment right away it would be most beneficial. I’m sure the pipsqueak will also be happy to rank up.”

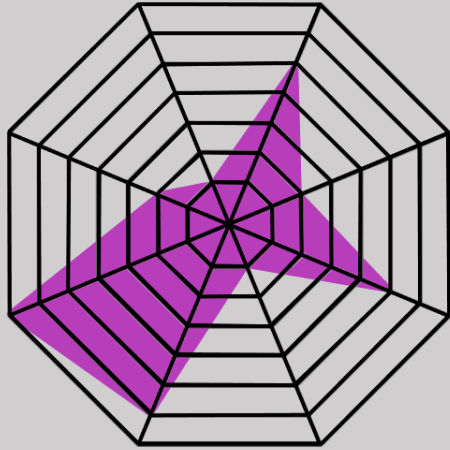
“Of course, Master Owl.” Lia called over one of the other clerks and told her to gather the reward money, which was kept in a room behind the counter it seemed.

As the clerk went to fetch the money, Lia brought out a wide soul-stone tablet which she placed our cards on, face-down, alongside the quests, apparently marking us as having completed the quests. I noticed that she only used Owl’s card for the quest he had brought, which I guessed was because I did not meet the rank requirements.

Afterwards, she brought out a disc-shaped soul-stone tablet and placed only my Card on it, before handing it back to me, face-up.

“Congratulations, you have ranked up to Initiate and can now take quests of this rank.”

I looked at my upgraded Guild Card:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Initiate</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Watcher)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i>			

Alongside the Rank up to Initiate, I also noticed that Armen was listed as a ‘Greater Protector’, which made me breathe a sigh of relief, as I had worried it would say something weird like ‘Forbidden Familiar’ or something that would draw undue attention to it. I didn’t feel so worried now about Owl seeing my Card, but his attention seemed to not be on me, as he moved closer to the counter and started complaining:

“Why did he only rank up once!? Isn’t it common practice to give the rank of Seeker to an Exorcist who completes their first Exorcism Quest??”

“The Hallem Adventurers’ Guild Council have changed things recently, such that quests where an Adventurer of much higher rank helps out are not rewarded as strongly in terms of rank. It is to discourage exploitation, but also to prevent deaths caused by thrusting our members into dangerous situations they are not fully prepared for.”

“That’s ridiculous! You know how difficult it is for an Exorcist to get ahead in this world!”

“Even so, Master Owl! We have no assurances that Mister Ryūta completed the quest entirely by himself.”

“If he had been by himself he would have died!”

“I understand your frustration, Master Owl, but please try to calm down. These are the rules and I only follow them, lest I lose my job.”

“Fine! If you want him to prove himself capable, give him the Margrave’s Quest.”

Uh oh... what’s he doing...!?

“But Master Owl, that was one specifically issued for you by the Margrave himself—”

“And I think I’ve told you four times now that I won’t do it. Surely the Margrave will not complain if my apprentice takes the quest.”

Lia seemed very troubled. “I will make some inquiries, so if you return tomorrow around noon, I should have an answer for you.”

Just then, the clerk Lia had sent to fetch the reward came out with a tray of coins. On one side was a single gold coin and four ten-silver coins, and on the other side was a single ten-gold coin. Upon seeing the money, a different kind of background murmur rose in the Guild Hall.

Suddenly I didn’t want the money. It was like being at an ATM and the people behind you all seeing how much you withdrew, with the distressing paranoia that, as you left to walk home alone, someone might follow close behind and rob you.

Master Owl quickly nabbed the large gold coin and stuck it in a pocket, while I took my reward money with more reverence and care. Then I remembered what Owl had told me when we hired Rana, and I shoved the gold coin into her hand, before putting the four ten-silvers in my right trouser pocket.

Rana cast me a smile and together the three of us left the Guild Hall. Thankfully, no one seemed to follow after us, but I did wonder if some kind of target had been painted on my head now.

After all this isn’t Japan... who knows how common robberies are here??

We had scarcely made it outside, when Owl stopped in front of me and reached out with his left hand and said, “Give me the forty silvers.”

“Why!?” I replied, offended. “You said this was mine to keep!”

“That was before you broke my fucking wrist!”

It was hard to argue with that, so while it hurt me, I reached into my pocket and handed him the coins I’d just gotten. Rana looked poised to argue back, but I just shook my head.

After getting his injury compensation, Master Owl said, “Meet me by the Guild at noon tomorrow.” Then he left.

Rana scowled as she looked at him leaving into the night, then she told me, “Having a Healer fix a broken wrist doesn’t cost more than twenty silvers. He just cheated you out of your hard-earned money!”

“It’s fine,” I replied despondently.

“It’s not fine! What are you going to do now? How are you gonna afford food and a place to sleep?”

“I still have a little bit of money left from what Æmos lent me.”

“The Genius lent you money??” she asked, surprised.

I shrugged and made to leave to return to the inn that I’d stayed at before going on the quest, but she stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. Just the strength of her hand was enough to keep me firmly in place.

“I’ll treat you to dinner,” she said. “I know a good place.”

“Really? You’d do that?”

“Of course! After all,” she replied with a grin, “I just made a lot of money.”

I chuckled in response and let her lead me towards a part of Lundia known as the Residential Ward.

“Your new boyfriend?” asked the owner of the restaurant as way of greeting when Rana and I entered. She laughed politely at his joke, neither confirming nor denying it, which I thought was just inviting trouble.

Since she was treating me, I let her decide what to order for us and was surprised when something very close to Karaage was served before us. Famished as I was, I immediately dug into the crunchy deep-fried exterior of the chicken, nearly swallowing pieces in one gulp, and by the time I looked up, I had finished the first serving.

Rana was just drinking from a mug of frothy beer and looking at me with a smile.

“Nice food here, right?”

I nodded eagerly. “If only they had rice, it would be perfect.”

“You really should go to Ochre,” she replied. “They have rice, fish, all manner of foods.”

“Sounds like paradise,” I said excitedly. Though it hadn’t hit me until now, I really missed Japanese food. It was much easier to deal with my situation here if I could at least eat delicious food to unwind from the stress of being hunted down by monsters. For the first time since I came here, I felt something akin to happiness, or at the very least contentedness.

“Where are you staying tonight?” Rana asked.

“I was thinking of going back to—”

“You should stay at my place for the night. It’s only two streets away.”

I swallowed hard on reflex as I heard the words. Though I hadn’t realised it, she had taken off most of her plate armour, leaving it in a bag by her feet, and wore just her arming jacket and hide pants. The top two buttons of the jacket were undone and I could tell that she wasn’t wearing a bra...

Something *more than* contentedness was starting to rise in me.

After a few hours at the restaurant, I supported Rana after she had indulged a bit too heavily in the bountiful beer that the owner had been far too willing to refill again-and-again without any sense of propriety. It must have been quite an awkward sight to behold, as I, at the height of one-metre-sixty supported a two-metre-tall red-haired Amazonian warrior like her down the street. Fortunately, she retained some innate sense of direction and was able to guide me to where her apartment lay.

I borrowed her key to let myself in, then retrieved her from the hallway outside her door and helped her to a bed, after I had left her bag of dismantled armour next to the entrance.

When she was safely in bed, I closed the door to her bedroom and sat in the main room feeling incredibly out of place. I spent maybe ten minutes looking around and checking that the windows and the main door were locked, before wondering if I should just leave and find an inn.

However, a sense of chivalry made me stay. Well, *that* and some other lingering *thing* I couldn’t quite dismiss, but felt too awkward to acknowledge...

I need to stay and make sure she’s alright, I lied to myself. But I knew that wasn’t why I stayed.

Eventually, I retired to the couch in her main room. It was as hard as stone, but I’d spent the previous two days sleeping in a wooden chair, so by that comparison it was like pure luxury. Her apartment was quite something though. The equivalent in Japan would’ve cost over a hundred thousand yen per month, and *here* I was sure that it would no doubt be more than twenty silver per week, if not more.

That’s good, keep focusing on pointless things and don’t think about the fact that she’s sleeping in the next room...

“Good morning.”

I shot upright so fast that my neck made a strange *pop* sound and my vision flickered dangerously black for a moment. With wide terrified eyes, I looked up at Rana’s face.

“Do you want breakfast?” she asked, oblivious to my inner turmoil. “I think I have some bread and some eggs and sausage. Maybe even some cheese if you’re lucky.”

I blinked a few times, then replied deadpan, “My luck is F-tier.”

She laughed in surprise at my joke. “I forgot.”

“I hope it wasn’t presumptuous of me to stay overnight.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, as she went into the kitchen that was separated from the main room by a half-wall. “I invited you over, didn’t I?”

“I guess, but it’s just...”

“I got pretty drunk last night,” she replied. “Sorry.”

“No that’s not it,” I quickly said. “It just felt weird I guess. Like, you don’t even know me *that* well and I don’t really know you...”

“It’s okay, Ryūta, I trust you.”

I felt a weird sensation in my stomach. Was it happiness? It felt strange.

“So? What’ll you have?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“For breakfast.”

“Oh. I could eat some eggs I guess.”

Master Owl glared at me when he saw me draw up to the Guild building.

“You’re late...”

“Sorry, I—”

“I got you the quest,” he replied and handed me a neatly-folded scroll with his right hand.

“Quest?”

“An Exorcism for the Margrave of Lundia. Once you beat it, you’ll be ranked up to Seeker and can finally help me with *something*.”

His eyes narrowed. “Why are you looking at me like *that*?”

“I thought you were done with me after yesterday.”

“Water under the bridge, boyo. Besides, I have plans, and your awkward little piece fits into the puzzle. Head in and accept the quest. It should only take you a day to complete, but I won’t be there to hold your hand for this one.”

I frowned. “If you need me for something, isn’t it counterintuitive to send me off to get eaten by a Banshee?”

“It’s a simple matter. Besides, with a Protector like yours, you should be fine. In truth, this ought to be the kind of Exorcism Quest that all Exorcists should start off with as Novitiates, but hauntings such as this one are so often dealt with by established Exorcists instead.”

“Why?”

“Dig deep enough into this quest and you’ll see.” He sighed in annoyance. “This is why I haven’t taken on this stupid request. It’s below me and it’s full of the worst type of monsters.”

“What monsters are that?” I asked, worried.

“Aristocrats...”

10 - Ghost in the Castle I

I scratched my chin as I walked back to Rana’s apartment, looking at the quest that had been thrust upon me. From the description, I already had a few guesses about what kind of apparition could be behind it, and, according to Owl, I didn’t have to worry about being eaten or anything. That said, I wondered if I had what it took to exorcise this entity that was troubling the Margrave of Lundia.

<i>‘Ghost in the Castle’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Complex</i>	RANK: <i>Initiate</i>
<p><i>The Esteemed Margrave Finn Serelliam has been troubled by a Haunting in the East Wing of his Castle since being appointed as the Lord of Lundia three years ago.</i></p> <p><i>Although some builders and servants have been injured as a result of the Spectre in the East Wing, there are no recorded deaths and thus the East Wing has simply been abandoned instead of bringing in an Exorcist and making it a public embarrassment.</i></p> <p><i>None of the servants, guards, or other people in the Castle have ever seen the Spectre in person, though most of the rooms of the East Wing are affected by its presence, as sounds of footsteps and shifting furniture are a daily occurrence.</i></p> <p><i>The Esteemed Margrave’s new wife has raised concerns about the Haunting in recent weeks and you were therefore appointed to deal with it. It is of the utmost importance that you ensure your work is as discreet as possible.</i></p> <p><i>The full reward is only paid out after a successful Exorcism of the Haunting Spectre can be confirmed. There is no partial reward for the identification of the Spectre.</i></p>		
REWARD: <i>2 Gold & 50 Silver Crowns</i>		

Still, if I could pull it off, I could expect a pretty sizeable payout. With that, I wouldn’t have to worry about money for a while, although Master Owl had advised I invest the money into a better Staff and Focus, since, by his own admission, the For-Rent ones I had were worthless and hindering

my full potential. Most of all I wanted to replace the hand-me-down Spirit Goggles. True to my own promise, I hadn’t taken them off since Hamsel’s Rest, but they were far from comfortable and the brass had begun causing some serious skin irritation around my eyes.

“That doesn’t sound too bad,” Rana commented after I arrived to her apartment and showed her the quest flier.

“Maybe you don’t need to accompany me,” I said, even though I wanted her to come. But saying how I felt might put her off.

“No, I’ll go with you. Margrave Serelliam has a bad reputation. And just because the quest says that no one has died, you can’t be sure with these things. After all, rule one of Guild Quests is: ‘*Never trust the quest info*.’”

“Nobody told me that,” I replied with a frown.

“They really ought to put it right next to the Quest Board... A lot of Adventurers die as a result of taking a quest by its word. You’re always dealing with unreliable information at the best of times, and, in the worst cases, you might have Quest Givers who understate the danger of their requests.”

“Why would they do that? Also, I thought quests were issued by the Guild itself.”

“Most quests are from a third-party that goes through the Guild to have it resolved and they pay the reward money, except in the cases where it affects the region, as those are sponsored by a local Lord. For example, I’m fairly sure that last Exorcism Quest was funded by the Margrave, since Hamsel’s Rest was a productive village that supplied crops and livestock to Lundia and thus he wanted it made hospitable again.”

“But why would someone lie about their quest?”

“The reward for a quest is proportional to its difficulty type and required rank, so by lying and understating the danger, the Quest Giver pays less to the Guild. It’s not a huge problem anymore, but it still happens, especially from people whose social standing makes them impervious to a rebuke from the Guild...”

“Like the Margrave?”

“Yeah. And I mean, for a ‘Complex’ Initiate quest, this reward is way too high.”

“Maybe it’s seen as hush money?” I guessed.

“It wouldn’t be the first time an aristocrat has done something like that.”

“Apparently he only wanted Owl to take the quest.”

“That’s highly suspect,” she replied ominously. “But, if you complete the quest, you might end up in the Margrave’s good graces, which is not a bad place to be. In the Guilds, your reputation is more important than your Rank, Role, and accomplishments after all.”

“Really? That seems illogical.”

“Yeah. There have been many rising stars in the Guild who crossed the wrong aristocrat or had nasty rumours spread about them and ended up not being able to take on any quests.”

“Sounds like you have personal experience with it,” I replied boldly.

The expression on Rana’s face said it all and I regretted my words.

“I’ve seen it happen to good people more than once,” she replied after a moment of silence.

“What happened to them?” I asked, but she shook her head, not wanting to answer the question.

“I’ll put my armour on, then we can go to the Castle,” she said, forcefully shifting the topic.

I sat on the hard couch in the main room for twenty minutes, regretting being so brazen with my words. I’d clearly brought up some bad memories for her.

Eventually, Rana emerged from her bedroom, her dark plate-armour covering her body over the arming jacket and hide pants she always wore. It was impressive that she was able to put on all the armour by herself, especially the parts that covered her back where her hands would have a hard time reaching.

Before I could get up from the couch, she seemed to remember something and went back into her room, returning a moment later with a square mirror that was half-a-metre wide and long. It had a little metal stand and she placed it on the table next to the couch.

“You wanted to see your reflection right?”

I was surprised she remembered. “Isn’t a mirror *this size* super expensive?”

She nodded. “This one is probably worth five gold crowns.”

I nearly choked on my own spit.

Before I could ask why she’d spend so much money on vanity, she quickly added, “It was a gift.”

“Ah,” I mumbled, “that’s a nice gift.”

She seemed to blush quite a lot at that. The response made me feel a knot of dread form in the pit of my stomach. Whoever had gifted her *this* was clearly a past lover. Or maybe a present one? I didn’t like the thought, so I tried to shove it out of my mind, as I looked into the mirror and saw my face.

I blinked in surprise. The face that stared back at me wasn’t mine.

Rana watched in silence as I put my fingers up to my face and poked-and-prodded it. My jawline was more pronounced, though my cheeks were rounder, and the shape of my eyes had changed into

something less charming and more sinister-looking. But most surprising were my irises, as they had become like tiny dark-blue galaxies full of multi-coloured stars, with a single black hole in the centre. Now I understood why she had made *that* comment about my eyes, because, even staring at them myself, I felt my attention pulled into them.

My hair had also changed a bit. It still had the same black colour, but it was fuller and messy, as though untameable by any comb. Even my skin was spotless and perfect, as though I was looking at a filtered image of myself, like those from a photo booth.

“I look like a model,” I blurted out, which made her laugh.

I blushed a bit, when I realised how conceited *that* sounded. “Does this happen to everyone?” I asked.

“The way I understand it, your changes are according to your Attributes. Height and build are governed by Dexterity, Strength, and Vitality, while your face and hair seem to be governed by Soul, Acumen, and Intelligence.”

“What about Pact and Luck?” I asked.

She shrugged in response.

I frowned. No wonder Harleigh had such a perfect appearance, since his stats were high all around... *Life truly is unfair.*

“I feel like I’m staring at a different person,” I told her. From the rest of my body I could tell nothing much had changed, but it was as though someone else’s head had been put on my neck... It was very disorienting and damaging to my self-image, but maybe I could come to like this new face of mine eventually? After all, I did look markedly more handsome than before coming here. Now that I thought about it though, most Adventurers I had seen were quite good-looking. Master Owl might even have looked decent, if he hadn’t seemingly abandoned personal hygiene and welfare.

“My face didn’t change much,” she said. “For me it was just my build that changed. I was kind of pudgy before I came here.”

“Pudgy?” I asked and couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Hey!” she complained with a smile.

“Nothing wrong with pudgy,” I replied.

We stood outside a small island connected to the rest of the Noble Ward by a single bridge. Around the island was a four-metre-wide moat and upon the island itself stood a horse-shoe-shaped castle, with a large central building and two smaller wings. At the centre of the island was a large courtyard

with a garden, which featured a small hedge maze and perfectly-trimmed trees and bushes, as well as flowerbeds in dozens of colours.

At the opposite side of the bridge from us stood two imposing guards, whose aura was comparable to Rana’s, meaning that, if they were Adventurers or Mercenaries, they’d be Vanguard. As though reading my exact thoughts, Rana said, “I recognise those guys. They’re in the Mercenary Guild. I think they’re at least Seeker rank, might even be Eminent rank.”

“Why would anyone of such high rank work as guards?” I wondered.

She looked at me as though wondering if my question was serious. “It’s probably well-paid. And just because someone is strong or experienced, it doesn’t mean they wouldn’t jump at the opportunity for an easy job.”

“I suppose I can understand that,” I replied after a moment. I looked back at the guards, then asked, “Shall we?”

Rana nodded and immediately adopted a screw-off-with-you expression like the first time I’d seen her in the Market Ward.

As we crossed the bridge, one of the men halted us with a hand and gave a curt nod to Rana, perhaps as a sign of respect for a fellow Guild member. She returned it with an up-nod. Giving her attributes, she was actually taller than them, though as guys they had bulkier bodies. I wondered if she could take on both in a fight, but one look at their stances made me feel fairly confident that she could. After all, they appraised her like one might size-up a dangerous foe.

“You’re here for the Exorcism?” the right one asked in a gruff voice. Though I couldn’t see his face behind the helmet, his voice made me think he was at least forty. Perhaps such a job wasn’t bad to take once you got older, although, given that this was a fantasy world with magic absurdity, I wondered if retirement was really a necessity for Adventurers and Mercenaries. Master Owl looked like he was over fifty, but he still moved with far more athleticism than I.

I fumbled with the button of my belt bag, then extracted the folded-up quest flier and showed it to him.

“Guild Cards please,” he said in a tone that invited no argument after reading the flier. I shared a tense glance with Rana, but then begrudgingly obliged.

The Guard looked at our Cards, seeming most interested in Rana’s information, which, although it bothered me, made me feel that there was nothing wrong with my familiars. It was, of course, quite possible that they didn’t know a lot about familiars and thus didn’t notice that Armen, who floated next to me, was a peculiarity.

After handing back our Cards, the other Guard left his post to fetch someone from the West Wing. While we waited for his return, the other man said to Rana, “You really ought to give the Arena another chance.”

My companion didn’t deign him with a reply, so he instead turned to me and said, as though she wasn’t standing *right there*, “*Lady Thorn* here is one of the best fighters the Arena has ever seen. I never lost a bet on her, but, for some reason, she decided to leave the scene. We were all very disappointed by that...”

“That’s all in the past,” she suddenly replied in a dangerous tone.

“Can’t have been more than a year,” he said.

I could tell she didn’t want to talk about it. It was clearly some dark history that was better left unacknowledged. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious, but I knew that it would be rude to pry, so I tried to square up my shoulders as much as I could and took on what I hoped was menacing and professional glare.

“We’re not here to talk about the past,” I said. “I have a job to do, and the more we talk the more time I waste.”

The Guard let out a huff and seemed poised to make some scathing remark, but then the other man returned with a stern-looking woman in a fancy blue dress. She had a weak blue aura that seemed to take on the shape of thorns. Her grey-blond hair was done up into a shape most analogous to a beehive.

“Come with me,” she said and the two of us walked past the Guards without another word.

As we entered into the courtyard, we walked past the colourful flowerbeds and the hedge maze, while being steered towards the East Wing of the Castle. As I truly appreciated the size of it, I realised how ridiculous it was for the Margrave to have left it abandoned due to a Haunting.

We came to a stop before a large set of doors and she turned to face us.

“You may only enter the East Wing and you may only use this door. There will be consequences if you venture into the main Castle or loiter around the courtyard.”

“Understood,” I replied. The rules seemed arbitrary and controlling, but I felt that simple obedience would go further here than any sort of argumentative obstinance.

She then waved a young blonde boy over from where he’d been working on one of the flower beds, pruning the dead buds and removing weeds.

“Lukas here will be your guide and can be relied upon to answer questions about the layout of the East Wing and its rooms. Can’t you, Lukas?”

“Yes, Madam, of course!” the blonde boy replied eager. He had a very intense light-green aura that seemed far stronger than any Lundia Native I’d encountered thus far. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought he was an Otherworlder like me, although I had no idea what kind of Role his aura could indicate. But then again, he seemed only about twelve or thirteen, with a high-pitched voice that’d yet to undergo puberty, and, from my brief experience, all Otherworlders came to Mondus at my age or thereabouts, with puberty seeming to be the great decider. At least that’d been the case for all the people I’d seen stand in line at the Guild for their Role Assignment.

“Once you have completed your work, you may notify the Guards or you may send Lukas here to fetch me. You are to leave the premises immediately afterwards.”

“Understood,” I said again.

“Good. I leave you to it then,” she said and left.

Lukas did a mock bow in front of us and said, “I’m Lukas, nice to make your acquaintance Mister and Miss.”

“I’m Ryūta,” I said, “and this is my guard Rana.”

“I’ve never met an Exorcist before!” he said excitedly. “You have very strange glasses.”

Before I could reply, he turned to look at Rana who was almost twice his height. I had the sense that when Lukas grew up, he would easily stand a head above me.

“You look really strong!” he said in awe.

I indulged him and said, with a grin, “She can take down a goblin in a single strike and fight off a horde all by herself.”

“Wow!”

“Now, Lukas, would you mind showing us around the East Wing. If you know which areas are most affected by the Haunting, please take us there first.”

“Yes, Mister Exorcist!”

11 - Ghost in the Castle II

Like the main building of the Castle, the East Wing was made of stone for its outer walls as well as the walls that divided up the interior into rooms. The floor was made of strong wood that seemed to resist the fluctuations of temperatures as it neither creaked nor protested as we walked across it with our boots. There was a total of four floors to the Wing, and Lukas told us that it was identical in layout to the West Wing, although it showed clear signs of having been abandoned for years, as cobwebs and rat droppings could be found almost everywhere on the bottom floor.

The ground floor had a small basement that led to a wine cellar and cold storage for preserving food, though apart from some large barrels for wine, the space was fairly empty. The floor itself seemed mainly designed to house servants in small rooms with narrow beds, as well as the kitchen and laundry facilities such servants would be occupied in.

As we climbed the staircase to the first floor, the atmosphere changed from abandonment to something more difficult to describe. There were no obvious signs of rats, though large webs of spiders showed that insects still thrived here. Additionally, as we were shown to the other rooms on the floor, we found random furniture in the hallway, damaged objects that’d been thrown against the walls, and an overall mess comparable to a tornado passing by.

I noticed that Rana kept her right hand permanently glued to the pommel of her sheathed sword. Lukas, for his part, seemed only excited to be showing us around. I guessed that, to a boy his age, this was like going on an adventure in a place he was normally not allowed to access. It seemed clear that the boy, and maybe some of the other servants’ children, often made trips to the East Wing to explore, despite being forbidden from entering it. It was the sort of mischief children his age always got up to after all, and he didn’t seem phased by the clear signs of a Haunting.

“What are you looking at?” he asked, when I’d stopped next to an overturned chamberpot that’d been thrown so hard against the wall that it’d caved-in on one side.

I wasn’t sure how to explain it to him, but then I remembered the Sinner’s Ash that Master Owl had given me. I brought out the pouch and took a small bit of the dirt-brown ash into my fingers and smeared it over the corner of the chamberpot.

Rana took a step back in surprise, while Lukas said, “What’s that?”

“It’s a handprint,” the Vanguard said, perhaps remembering what I’d told her about the Haunting in Hamsel’s Rest.

I nodded. “It’s an important clue to figuring out what sort of apparition we’re dealing with.”

I lifted up my Spirit Goggles and confirmed that the ethereal glowing-blue handprint was visible without them, thanks to the Sinner’s Ash. Part of me wondered if perhaps it was a mistake to show this to Rana and Lukas, as it was sure to freak them out, knowing that there were things they could not see with their own eyes all around them.

Expectedly, Rana looked at the messy hallway and all the furniture and objects that lay strewn about. “Are they all like that? Covered in handprints?”

I nodded. A bit of cold sweat tickled down my back and I could feel my shirt become clammy where it touched my skin.

“Hey, Lukas?”

“Yes, Mister?”

“Has anyone died in here because of this Haunting?”

He shook his head. “No, but Old Man Potts broke his leg after a cabinet suddenly fell on him, while he was looking through the past Margrave’s room on the fourth floor. One of the Guards also lost a finger when his sword flew from his scabbard and tried to attack him.”

I swallowed hard, then shared a look with Rana. She quickly secured her sheathed blade by closing a strap that normally hung loose, such that it would be impossible to pull the blade out. Granted, it was no sure thing, but I was glad she at least took a precaution.

Then something hit me. “Did you say that the Margrave had a room in this Wing?”

Lukas nodded. “On the fourth floor. It’s reaaaally big!”

“How long have you been living and working here, Lukas? Since before the current Margrave?”

He nodded. “Yes. I have been here since I was...” He paused and began counting on his fingers. “Since I was six,” he then said. “I lived in the orphanage before that.”

I frowned. Perhaps it shouldn’t have surprised me that a world with a medieval setting employed child labour, but, then again, so did the real world, it had just been hidden better I suppose.

A sudden theory appeared in my mind. “What happened to the old Margrave?”

“He died from a sickness in his lungs.”

“And where is he buried?”

Rana seemed to catch on to what I was going for and leaned in closer.

“Margrave Reis Litterby was buried with his family in their crypt in the city of Helmstatter.”

“It lays to the south,” Rana replied. “It’s over eight-hundred kilometres away.”

So much for that theory... I thought to myself. It would have been simple if the old Margrave was to blame for lingering in this place.

Suddenly, the sound of knocking came from a room further down the hall. It sounded almost like someone was trapped in a closet and trying to get out.

Without being told, Rana moved in front of us both, but Lukas didn't seem bothered by the commotion.

“He really likes that room,” he commented while continuing to stare at the handprint on the chamberpot.

“He?” I asked, while Rana began moving a bit closer.

“The Ghost. It must be an angry man with all the noise he makes, says Madam Colleen.”

“I see...”

A loud metallic *bang* sounded from where Rana stood and I saw a stone brick fall to the ground after it had presumably collided with her shield.

“Ryūta! It's throwing things, we should go!”

“He's very angry today,” Lukas remarked in surprise. I wondered if the Haunter could sense that I was here to exorcise it, or maybe it reacted more aggressively because of Rana, given that it had attacked a Guard in the past.

“We need to see what's in that room!” I told her.

Armen, can you protect us from thrown objects?

“**As you desire,**” said the Guardian Wraith and moved in front of Rana, just in time to deflect a metal lantern, which fell to the floor as a crumbled heap.

Both Lukas and Rana looked at the lantern, which to their eyes must've hit the air and just crumpled by itself. To snap her out of it, I yelled, “My familiar is guarding us, keep moving! Lukas stay behind me.”

The apparition continued to throw things at us, but I couldn't see the creature itself, despite the fact that I saw the glowing handprints it left on every item it threw. As we advanced closer-and-closer to the room it had made all the banging sounds in, the onslaught of thrown objects became constant, though its arsenal of objects reduced to things such as chair-legs, books, and paintings.

Either exhausted of its supply or deterred by our advance, the Haunter suddenly stopped its attack and we came to the room it had seemingly appeared from. Rana remained by the door, with Armen hovering in front of her, while I looked through the room itself. Unlike the few other rooms I'd seen on this floor, the interior was organised and neither the bedside-table, chairs, desk, dresser, nor wall-mounted picture frames were tossed about. It was like the eye in a storm.

“Lukas, do you know who lived in this room?”

“That would be Madam Colleen’s daughter, Miss Cecilia.”

“And where is she now?”

“She has a room in the West Wing now, but only works here three days out of the week, with the rest in a tavern in the Noble Ward.”

I scratched my chin below my goggles in contemplation. “Does she have any dead relatives who used to live here?”

“I don’t think so,” he replied sincerely. I was fairly sure I could trust everything he said, but I wasn’t entirely sure it was a good idea to rely on his memory, as he would’ve been quite young back when this Wing was in use three years prior.

While sitting down on the bed, which had been made perfectly, I considered which of my tools might aid me here and realised that, since there was something keeping the spirit fascinated with this room that the Energy Stone was my best bet.

I pulled the quartz-like stone from my bag and immediately it began pulsing quickly while shining bright as a flashlight. As I moved it around the room, its pulse frequency and light volume shifted up-and-down, until I eventually aimed it at the desk that was neat and proper, with a full inkwell, a crisp new piece of vellum paper, and a silver-tipped feather pen.

While moving the stone around, Rana sneaked a peek from where she stood guard by the doorway and Lukas was eagerly following my motions. It was clear that there was something about the desk that the stone responded to, but I couldn’t tell which object it was. Then the blonde boy pulled open one of the drawers and the light intensified as I moved the stone over the papers that were inside.

He helpfully lifted them one-at-a-time in front of the Energy Stone, until one suddenly made it light up to the point that it was no longer pulsing. I put the stone away, sure that I’d found the proper object, then reverently took the folded paper from him and placed it on the desk. As I unfolded it, I expected to find a letter or something of that nature, but instead I found a dry red flower with triangular petals that’d been pressed flat and kept by the room’s former resident for some reason.

I looked to Lukas. “Do you know what *this* is?”

“That’s a Scarlet Vow,” he said, surprised.

“They don’t grow around here,” Rana remarked, surprisingly. When I gave her a quizzical look, she explained, “I did a Gathering Quest for such a flower a couple years back when I was in the south.”

“Old Man Potts said that they can’t be cultivated and only grow in the wild,” Lukas added.

“You know a lot about flowers?” I asked.

He nodded eagerly, “Old Man Potts has taught me a lot!”

“Is the name significant?” I asked them both.

Rana shrugged, but Lukas replied, “Old Man Potts says that Nobles often gift them to each other to represent a pre-marital gift, either to court someone or to showcase the sincerity of their love.”

“Do you know anyone that had romantic interest in Cecilia?” I asked.

He shook his head.

Of course not... what did I expect a child to know about romances about the castle, especially a boy his age?

I looked at the flower for a bit, wondering if this Haunting could be as simple as someone dying before they could fulfil a vow they had made to someone they admired or loved. I pulled the chair out from under the desk and sat down, then pulled my little Encyclopaedia out and began looking through the entries.

Lukas stood behind me and looked over my shoulder as I leafed through the pages.

“Can you read what it says?” I asked him, but he shook his head.

That’s probably for the best.

“What language is it written in?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied truthfully. The curling script was legible and perfectly known to me, but I had no idea what it was called, and from the few signs and such that I’d seen in Lundia, it was clearly of a different origin.

“That’s ‘Chthonic’,” Rana said, also looking over my shoulder, having left her post by the door after realising we were safe inside this room. “Magicians and Summoners often use this language.”

I wondered if it was related to the giants and titans of Greek myth, as they were at times known as the Chthonians: the ones of the earth. It might also refer the Underworld in Greek myth, as well as the gods and creatures that hailed from that place. Though I hadn’t called upon this sort of useless trivia information, it had endlessly fascinated me in middle school during my Chūnibyō phase. At any rate, it was an ominous connotation, even if it meant something entirely different in this world.

After some more searching, I had a few guesses as to what type of ghost I might be facing here, but each had slightly different requirements for their exorcism, so I didn’t want to accidentally enrage the ghost in the East Wing by attempting something incorrect to deal with it, like using my Sanctify ability on the Scarlet Vow flower. *That* would be the right decision if I was dealing with a Poltergeist, but it was not the only type of Shade to exhibit the sort of behaviour I’d seen, as it might as well represent an Obsessive Stalker, in which case the tampering with the Scarlet Vow, which had clear

significance for the spirit, would enrage it and make it manifest, turning it significantly more dangerous.

I scratched below my goggles as I thought about the best way to proceed. Eventually I decided to fold the paper back over the flower and carefully return it to the desk drawer.

“What now?” asked Rana.

“We’ll continue looking for clues. Make sure to return everything in this room to the way that it was.”

“Yes, Mister Exorcist!” Lukas obeyed and immediately began straightening out the bed linen and duvet, which I’d sat on. I myself return the chair to under the desk.

Hopefully this will be enough to placate the ghost.

The flower and this room were of significance to the Haunter, so I believed it prudent to be as respectful to the state it had been left in as possible.

We continued looking around on the first floor after leaving Cecilia’s room and were thankfully left alone by the spirit. Where the kitchen and laundry rooms were placed below us, the first floor instead had a sizeable library with a sort of lounge area, as well as study desks, for people to sit in while reading either fanciful tales or treaties on war and politics. Although the shelves of the tall bookcases were for the most part empty, as the abandonment of the East Wing had no doubt seen them removed.

In a world such as this, where the printing press was seemingly not invented yet, each book was a labour of months of hard work, meaning that a library of this size could contain a literal wealth of knowledge. As with the hallway, the furniture and few books left behind were scattered all about the place, with desks on their side and comfortable looking chairs battered to pieces by repeated violent throws across the room. I could imagine that the evacuation of the hundreds of books that must’ve been within the library had been the cause of the frantic mess, since I could imagine the Haunter attacking the servants all throughout their work.

For a while, I moved around with the Energy Stone, carefully checking the objects in the room, but eventually I relented, as it was simply too much to go through. I kept it in the palm of my right hand as we moved around, but while it reacted weakly to the ghostly handprints everywhere, it didn’t have any response similar to the Scarlet Vow.

We left the library and briefly looked through the few other rooms on the floor, before ascending to the second floor. If the first floor was for those of slightly higher status than servants, then the second floor was for guests or cherished retainers, with the rooms here being twice the size of those

below and three times the size of the servants’ rooms. The furniture was also more opulent and many of the rooms had their own fireplaces. All the rooms were a total mess of destroyed furniture, and it seemed the ghost had been especially harsh on this floor, which made me suspicious.

Sure enough, as we neared one of the rooms furthest down the hallway, there was loud banging and soon after we were beset by an artillery of furniture, lamps, chamberpots, and the like. The way it was throwing several objects at once, all of which were intercepted by Armen and Rana, reminded me of the image of the Poltergeist in the Encyclopaedia. However, its description didn’t line up with what we were experiencing, as it stated clearly that the Poltergeist had to be sufficiently disturbed to become enraged, and all we were doing was exploring and not tampering with things. I doubted that this behaviour would’ve been spelled out so succinctly if there was wriggle-room for what might be considered ‘sufficiently disturbed’.

Fortunately, having read the entries had reminded me that all Shade-type entities were repelled by the Blessed Golden Bell, so I brought it out and gave it a single *ding*, which seemed to echo all the way throughout the building far louder than my little gesture ought to have accomplished.

Immediately the onslaught stopped and I saw Rana breathe a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad we have your competent familiar,” she commented. “I don’t think I could intercept all these projectiles by myself.”

Good work, Armen.

“It is simply my duty.”

I handed her the bell. “This should deter it if it attacks again, though I have no idea how long the effect lasts nor if it will remain effective with every repetition.”

Rana nodded her thanks and secured it to a loop on her belt. Then we went to a room near the end of the hall, and, as soon as we entered, the Energy Stone in my left hand began pulsing. Rana once again took up guard by the doorway, while Lukas helped me scour the overturned furniture for clues. It surprised me that the Stone was reacting to a place that the ghost clearly had not tried to protect and keep neat and organised. In fact, as I looked at the furniture in the room, it had been utterly smashed to ruins, as though deliberately attacked over-and-over until it could be broken down no further. Sheets and pillows and curtains had been ripped to bits as though by flensing claws, and vellum paper and canvas paintings had been shredded to such fine bits that it might qualify as confetti.

While traversing the mess in the room, the Energy Stone continued to glow brighter-and-brighter, until I reached the fireplace by the backwall and it was blinking its light so rapidly I feared someone might experience an epileptic seizure.

Lukas poked through the little bit of debris in the fireplace with a fire-poker, as I scanned it with the Stone, but it seemed to react more to the wall on the right side of the fireplace. I noticed that the burnished white bricks of the fireplace extended all the way from wall to wall, which was unlike the other rooms, where the fireplace bricks only surrounded it and its chimney, while the rest of the wall was the same dull grey stone just like the outer walls.

“It might be in the other room next to this,” I said and the two of us rejoined Rana by the door, before going to the next room, where the furniture and interior was in a similar state. Strangely, the wall it shared with the previous room was not the white bricks, but rather the usual grey ones. I had an ominous and foreboding knot in my stomach as I went up to the wall and knocked on it with my knuckles.

The sound that returned told me only one thing: the wall was hollow.

12 - Ghost in the Castle III

Rana was using the fire-poker from the fireplace to repeatedly strike the white bricks of the suspicious wall, each of her powerful blows echoing throughout the entire East Wing, while bits of the stone bricks flew all around us.

“This is really bad! They’re gonna be very angry!” Lukas complained. I found it disturbing that he was more scared of the people in the Castle than the ghost trying to throw stuff at us. Then again, it seemed as if the apparition was mostly targeting Rana and I.

“No one said we couldn’t damage the building to exorcise this thing,” I replied calmly.

Each strike made my heart thump, as I wondered what exactly we might find in the hollow space between the two rooms. While Rana worked to open it up, I went to the opposite wall and tried to knock on it, but it was a completely different sound.

Something was deliberately hidden here...

“Lukas,” I started, while the pounding strikes continued in the background, “Who lived in this room?”

“No one, this was a guest room,” he replied, eyeing the wall with great concern.

“Why does this room alone have a different wall?” I asked him.

“I don’t know.”

“Was the fireplace here added later?”

“I don’t know. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. You can’t know everything.”

A loud crash of broken bricks hitting the wooden floor brought my attention back to the wall, just in time to see the hollow recess be revealed. With a gesture I halted Rana, as I went over to look. After her destructive work, I could easily pull a few of the bricks free and I brought out the Energy Stone and held it up in front of me like a flashlight. It was pulsing so fast it was impossible to see the breaks between the pulses and as I inserted it into the dark cavity and looked around, my eyes slowly adjusted to the pulsing light as it washed-over the interior.

The smell that came from inside the hollow space was rank and foul, with a heavy undertone of dust and powdered brickwork.

My heart froze as the light caught on a shape, a large shape, and it took me a second to realise what it was. Then Rana looked into the hole as well, after shifting some bricks out of the way, before saying:

“There’s a body in here.”

I forced myself to take in a breath and push it out again, the shock having momentarily made me forget my faculties. I swallowed hard and pulled my arm and head out of the hole in the wall, then looked to Rana.

“If the Energy Stone is reacting *this* strongly to that body, then it must be connected to the Haunter.”

“Let’s remove the wall and get it out,” she decided without a moment’s hesitation. I was glad she took the lead on this, because I suddenly felt very out of my depth again. I’d strolled around giving orders, but the reminder that I was just some inexperienced nobody reared its head and cowed me.

Knowing I’d just be in the way, I took a step back and let the Vanguard tear loose the bricks to the left of the hole she’d made, such that we could have direct access to the body.

The implications of what we’d found were slowly dawning on me. Suddenly the meaning of the word “discreet” in the Quest info was incredibly suspicious.

“Lukas, did anyone go missing in the Castle around the time that the new Margrave moved in? Or maybe just before then?”

He nodded. “A lot of the older servants suddenly just left one day. I don’t think they wanted to serve the new Margrave.”

“Were any of them involved with Cecilia?”

“I don’t know.”

“And there were none of them whose disappearance you were surprised by?”

“Most of them surprised me,” he replied sincerely.

I frowned. Perhaps it was fine not knowing the name of the person, although their identity could give clues to the sort of apparition they’d become after their death.

A crash of a large section of the brick wall made me suddenly jump and when I looked over to where Rana stood, I saw that, along with the section of the wall, the corpse had fallen out. It was unmistakably the corpse of a man, though what age he might’ve had in life was impossible to tell, as the airless and dry space he’d been confined to had sort of mummified his body.

“He was killed by a blow to the back of his head,” Rana remarked. Now that I looked closer, I could see how she came to that conclusion, as the back of his head had a devastating indent and old dried blood ran down his back.

“Why would someone kill this person and hide them in a wall?” I wondered out loud.

No sooner had I put the question out there than the entire East Wing awoke to a terrible earthquake, as though the very foundations were lifting themselves out of the ground. For the briefest of moments, I saw *something* in the dust of the ruined wall, just as the bricks began lifting into the air. One hurtled through the air and caught me right on my left thigh, sending me tumbling to the floor. Another flew for my head but was then battered out of the air.

“My apologies, but you are running out of energy for me to consume.”

Shit.

“We need to get out of here, fast!” I yelled and got up, grabbing Lukas by the wrist, while Rana tried to follow and guard us at the same time.

Another brick flew around her and aimed for me, but was knocked from the air as well, but along with the protecting move from Armen I felt a massive drain on my energy. One or two more of those and I’d be unable to stand on my feet, let alone run away from the enraged spirit.

Focus on protecting me from attacks that will kill me!

“As you desire.”

When Lukas and I dipped around the corner, the sounds coming from within made it obvious that it had shifted focus to Rana entirely.

“Use the bell!” I shouted, as I let Lukas lead me towards the stairs and up to the third floor.

I heard the *diiing* of the Blessed Bell as it reverberated throughout the Wing, but the quaking in the floor and the sounds of bricks hitting Rana’s metal armour and shield, as well as the walls, did not cease.

“In here!” Lukas yelled as I came up the steps after him. He was holding a fancy white-painted door with golden accents open for me and I quickly got in.

“You need to go get Rana,” I told him. He did not question my demand for a second and immediately ran back towards the staircase while yelling for her.

Keep him alive! I told Armen, while I frantically pulled the pouch of Sacred Corpse Ash from my bag and ran to the furthest door of the enormous room I was in, where I began spreading a line carelessly on the floor in front of it. I did the same for the windows, though only two of the five great windows had windowsills, so for the rest I did the line on the floor and hoped it would suffice. Then I ran to the door at the other end of the room, making another line, before returning to the large doors I’d entered through, just in time to see Lukas enter with Rana supporting her weight on his small frame. I quickly slammed the door behind them, before spreading a line in front of it as well.

As I finished I stood back and bade Armen return to my side.

“The room is secure,” he told me.

Can you cross those lines? I asked him.

“No, but your other familiar can.”

That seemed weird and illogical to me. *Why?* I asked him, while my heart thudded painfully in my chest, a mixture of exhaustion and dread fuelling its powerful rhythm. The floor was still quaking, but thus far the Haunter had not followed us into the room.

“Observers may go where they please.”

What an ominous turn of phrase... It also meant that no matter how much I tried to hide myself from someone’s watchful familiar, it would be meaningless.

Are there no ways to prevent an ‘Observer’ entry to a place?

“There are wards to steer away prying eyes,” he answered. I wondered what he meant by that, before remembering that I did actually have an Ability called ‘Ward Crafter’, though I’d never used it or been instructed about it. ‘Worship’ and ‘Contain Spirit’ were two other Abilities that I’d also never used.

“Are we safe?” Rana asked, looking at the lines of ash I’d drawn on the floor.

“I think so,” I replied and stepped away from the door.

For the first time, I had a proper look at the luxurious room we were in. Like Cecilia’s room on the first floor, it was left in pristine condition.

“Is this the former Margrave’s room?” I asked Lukas, to which he nodded in reply.

“Your stone is blinking again,” he then said.

I looked at the Energy Stone that I’d left on the floor in my frantic haste to secure the room with the Sacred Ash. After picking it up, I started looking around the room. When I spotted a handprint on a cabinet, I remembered that Lukas had said the man named ‘Potts’ had been attacked in this room while looking through it, but, unlike the other rooms, the cabinet had been placed back where it belonged.

“There has to be something of importance to the ghost in here,” I said out loud. “It seems to protect the rooms that means something to it.”

“Maybe it was a servant during its life?” Rana ventured. She was sitting on a couch with her right leg up. From the way she held it, it didn’t seem broken, though she might’ve sprained it or taken a hit there.

I nodded. It was a good guess. Perhaps the apparition had been a loyal servant of the old Margrave, before something had led to his murder, and now his vengeful spirit was protecting the East Wing

from intruders. I thought about it some more. If he had been murdered here and the murderers had been able to build an entire wall to cover up the crime, then there was no way they didn't have connections to the new Margrave.

It was making a lot of sense now why Master Owl hadn't taken this quest. To someone like him it would no doubt have been easy money, but he was probably well-versed enough in the politics of this world to know that this quest stank of foul play. In hindsight, I should've realised as much, but this was obviously a lesson he wanted me to learn. Rana had taught me that quests were unreliable, and he was teaching me that not all quests were worth the trouble.

After searching some more, I came to a large painting, where the Energy Stone absolutely lit up.

“Bingo,” I said. “Lukas, who are all the people in this?”

He came over to the two-and-a-half-metre-wide painting that hung on the wall above a commode with vases and fancy plates and cups.

“This was made four years ago, on the order of the past Margrave,” he said. “He knew he was dying, so he commissioned a painter to make a painting of him, his castle, and all his servants, family, and retainers.” He pointed to a corner and added, “That's me right there.”

I had to squint to really see the details, but I could sort of recognise his hair in the painting. Lukas was placed next to a lot of other children. It seemed fairly obvious that the man who had become the Haunter of the East Wing was in the painting, but when I moved the Spirit Stone back and forth along the small faces, there was no change in its reaction. Still, it was another clue to add to the list.

“The dead man we found downstairs might be in this picture,” I said. “If he is in fact the one whose spirit is now haunting this place.”

“Are you saying that the body might not belong to the ghost?” asked Rana.

“There's no way to be certain. The ghost may as well be the murderer of the man we found.”

I walked over to where she sat, needing to get some rest myself. I was about to put the Energy Stone away, when, strangely, it began turning brighter and pulsing faster after initially dimming from being removed from the painting.

“That's strange,” I said, looking at the object in my hand.

“What is it?”

“It's reacting as if there's more than one special object in here.”

I began searching around again, heading in the direction that made the glow and pulse intensify. “Lukas, come help me out.”

He ran over. “Are we looking for something else?”

“Yes, but,” I said and stopped, looking at the desk and bookcases that the Stone had brought me to. At the opposite end was a lounge and bedroom area in the enormous room, but in this end was a study or office. “But I need you to help locate something that the spirit might have a special connection to.”

He scratched his nose, where I noticed he had a faint white scar, which was only visible due to his naturally-tan skin. “Maybe it’s another letter again?”

“Let’s start with that,” I said and he helped me scan all the papers on the desk, before rifling through the drawers. Eventually he came to a drawer that was locked, but the key was nowhere to be found. I was just about to call Rana over to break it open, when Lukas knelt down and pulled two pieces of metal wire from his boots and began trying to pick the lock.

I blinked in surprise. I had a fairly good idea what his light-green aura now represented, given that I’d heard of a Role that featured ‘Lockpicking’ as a unique ability. With one of his metal wires, a flatter one, he kept tension on the lock, while using the narrower one to push the pins above the shear-line. After a minute-or-so, there came a click and the wire he used to tension with began to spin. He spun it around completely and then pulled open the drawer.

“Tadaah!” he said and I almost clapped. It was quite impressive.

Despite him being a Native to this world, I really wanted him to try and take the Role Assignment, since I was fairly confident his aura was strong enough to be picked up by the soul-stone slate. If there was any deciding factor for why Natives couldn’t become Adventurers, it seemed to just be that they had weaker auras, but Lukas’ was far stronger than any other Native’s.

We didn’t have to leaf through the contents of the drawer, as there was just a single letter within. Lukas pulled it out and placed it on the table and the Energy Stone once again lit up and confirmed it had a strong trace of spirit energy attached to it.

I unfolded the letter and the first line immediately read: “*I’m so sorry.*”

“Crap,” I commented, while continuing to read the letter.

“What is it?” Lukas asked.

“I think I know what sort of apparition we’re dealing with...”

13 - Ghost in the Castle IV

I reread the entry in the Encyclopaedia for the sixth time. There was no doubt about it, *this* had to be the Entity we were dealing with.

“Remorseful Betrayer,” I said, as I showed the page to Rana and Lukas. “The description lines up perfectly with what we’ve discovered: It’s highly territorial and protective of mementos from its past life; it’s mostly harmless towards those it knew in the past, which explains why Lukas could explore around in here without being attacked.”

The boy looked surprised that I’d figured that out about him, but it had been obvious from the way he moved around and the fact that the stern woman had made him our guide, meaning she’d clearly known he often ventured into the East Wing.

“Even this Potts guy made it to *this* room until he was attacked, and, I bet he wasn’t attacked until he found *this* letter and tried to leave with it.” I held up the letter we’d found in the drawer. Thanks to the protective Ash that lined all entryways to the old Margrave’s room, we were safe from such attacks.

Rana looked at the letter in my hand. “So, this man, Steffen, was a servant here, who, by his own admission in the letter, deliberately poisoned the old Margrave to make him sick. And because of his guilt, he is haunting this place?”

“That’s part of it,” I replied. Lukas had confirmed that Steffen was one of the servants who’d gone missing after the old Margrave died and the new one moved in. “His spirit would not be haunting this Castle if not for the fact that he was murdered, no doubt to silence him, and his body hidden away without a proper funeral.”

“So we just have to do the same thing you did to the Skinstealer in Hamsel’s Rest?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, it’s not as simple. There are some quite specific things we need to do in order to put this spirit to rest.”

Both Rana and Lukas seemed to wait with bated breath. Though I was just regurgitating the knowledge in the Encyclopaedia, it did feel nice to be treated like an expert.

“Firstly, we must collect all the objects associated with the spirit. Given that we have been thorough in our investigation of the East Wing and its rooms, and the fact that the ghost has been acting aggressively whenever we found something, I feel confident in saying that those items are: the Scarlet Vow given to Cecilia; the Painting; and the Confession Letter.

“Secondly, we need to burn all these objects alongside his corpse. And, lastly, we’ll need someone of importance from his life to witness his funeral pyre...”

“That’s...”

“A lot, yeah, I know.”

“How do we pull that off? He’ll attack if we try to leave this room with those mementos, and he’ll attack if we get near his body or try to take the Scarlet Vow.”

I rubbed my face tiredly. “I need to think about what the best way to pull this off is, but I think I know what we need to do to start with,” I said and looked at Lukas.

He blinked, uncomprehending.

“You need to find Cecilia and bring her to this room,” I told him.

“Okay!” he said and prepared to leave the room.

“Be careful not to disturb the ash on the floor,” I told him.

“You’re not seriously sending a kid out there,” Rana scolded me.

“He’ll be left unscathed,” I assured her, though it was gamble, but I didn’t want to tell her that.

After Lukas left the room I used Sumi to watch him descend the staircase and leave out the front of the East Wing. As predicted, he was left unscathed. Moments after seeing him leave, the same exhaustion that I’d experienced from the repeated usage of Armen reared its head again and I had to dismiss the Watcher and take a break.

While considering how best to proceed, I sat down on the floor facing out one of the big windows while taking up my Meditation pose and attempting to refuel my energy for what was to come. Through the window I could see the end of the island the Castle was placed on, as well as parts of the surrounding Noble Ward and the Market Ward beyond that. A bit towards the north-east in the distance was the unmistakable towering edifice of the Adventurers’ Guild. In the far distance lay the wall that surrounded the city.

Most of Lundia was comprised of two-storey buildings and though some areas were clearly poorer than others, there was no Ward that might be described as a Slum or anything, which I took to mean that the general populace might fare relatively well all things considered.

It must be weird to live in this world and have to rely on Otherworlders to protect you... I considered. It was almost like if Japan had to leave all of its police and emergency services to literal aliens, who only took on the jobs because they had no other way to make a living. It was a mutually-beneficial system I supposed, but fundamentally flawed. I could understand why the Natives looked

at us with such clear disdain, because no one liked to be subservient to someone else. At the same time, I wondered what was stopping the Natives from treating Otherworlders with more compassion and respect. We were expected to put our lives on the line for these people, so why didn't they try to make us feel a bit more at home?

Granted, it was no binary thing, as Rana had seemed well-liked by the owner of the restaurant she took me to. But a cynical part of me assumed that was just because he had figured out it was more beneficial for him, transactionally, to do that.

I hadn't met a lot of children in this world, but Lukas at least seemed sincere and kind, showing no ill will towards us.

Maybe it's just Lundia that's like this? I wondered, but then I remembered what Rana had said about the south. She had seemed to imply that Lundia was comparatively nice, since no one openly stole from you...

I hope there are better places than this. If I have to live in this world, I want to feel like I belong.

I'd been sitting by the window for about an hour with my hands in my lap and my legs folded. The energy reserves that I'd expended by repeatedly requiring Armen to protect me were now mostly restored, so I summoned Sumi to me and put a hand over my right eye, while mentally navigating the familiar to go through the floor and explore the East Wing, room-by-room.

Armen had told me that Watchers could see other familiars, so I was sure *that* all-seeing ability also extended to entities that were invisible to my eyes. Perhaps, once I became more proficient with Spirit Sight, I would be able to see more than just spectral handprints and auras.

It took quite a lot of concentration to move the Eye of the Observer around using just my thoughts, as I had to somehow imagine the inky and shadowy floating body as my own and give it very deliberate impulses to move in certain directions, to rotate, and such.

After Sumi finished scouting the second floor, it moved down to the first and began traversing the hallway. Immediately, I spotted a floating see-through and pale-white phantom at the end of the hall and I cautiously implored Sumi to move closer.

Through my left eye and the sight I shared with the familiar, I got an up-close look at the Haunter of the East Wing. Unlike the Skinstealer, its body was vague and barely humanoid. In fact, it looked more like a Teruterubōzu than anything: large featureless head that blended seamlessly into a robe-like body. From below the robe-like body hung a dozen hands, a few of which the spirit was using to tidy up the room it was in front of: Cecilia's room.

Keep following and observing it, I told Sumi and severed my connection to it. I’d realised belatedly that I didn’t need to keep banishing the familiar when I was done using it, as it only seemed to drain my energy when it actually shared its sight with me. Hopefully it would stick to the Remorseful Betrayer so I could check in on its location, but thus far Sumi had only moved when I explicitly commanded it to, so it was a test as much as a precaution. If Watcher familiars could autonomously follow any target, then it opened up the possibility for some pretty heinous stalking and might explain why Master Owl had seemingly known so much about me when we met, as it implied he had watched me for days...

I shook the thoughts from my head.

“Are you okay?” Rana asked from where she lay on the couch. “You were holding your eye weirdly. Do you have a headache?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking *that*? How’s your leg?”

“I think I broke my ankle when one of those bricks slammed into me as I was trying to escape the room downstairs.”

I frowned, feeling guilty. “I’ll pay for the treatment when we’re done here.”

“Have you come up with a plan?” she asked.

I nodded. “You’re probably not going to like it, but we need to bring the corpse up here. I’m thinking we can use the large fireplace to burn it alongside the mementos without setting the entire castle on fire.”

Rana’s face turned dark. “It’ll be dangerous. It’s capable of throwing those objects with devastating strength.”

“I’ve recouped my energy, so my familiar should be able to protect us as we transport the corpse. But I think I’ll have to count on you to do most of the lifting. There’s no way I can drag it up the stairs by myself.”

“I’ll endure the pain,” she promised. “When should we do it? Should we wait for Lukas to return with Cecilia?”

“I don’t know how long that’ll be,” I told her. “I think it’s best to do this now, while the ghost is downstairs.”

“You know where it is?” she asked, impressed, but also a bit sceptical.

“I’m using my other familiar to keep an eye on it.”

“You can do *that*?” she asked. Apparently she hadn’t caught on to this quirk of Exorcists and their familiars while we were in Hamsel’s Rest. Then again, she hadn’t been interested in observing my summoning rituals.

I nodded, full of the understanding that she would probably be far more suspicious of me and all other Exorcists now. After all, it was like we had the ability to control an invisible camera that could go wherever it pleased. I’d like to wish that I was above using Sumi to spy on people, but I couldn’t say for sure, after all, I’d contemplated using it to keep an eye on Master Owl on more than one occasion.

“I think if we use the Blessed Bell as soon as we leave this room and then run down the stairs to the room where the corpse is, we should be able to bring it back here before the Haunter goes completely crazy.”

“If and should,” she replied with a worried smile. Then she nodded and got up. Surprisingly, she put her full weight on her right leg and endured the pain. “Let’s do it then.”

I took the bell from her and we went over to the door. Ever so carefully, I pushed it open, then switched to Sumi’s vision to confirm that the Haunter was still downstairs, which it was.

“Alright, let’s go,” I said, making a tiny break in the Ash so Armen could follow me out, and then we left the room. No sooner had I crossed the threshold than I rang the Blessed Golden Bell once, sending its reverberating *ding* through the entire building.

I switched to Sumi’s view while following behind Rana, and though splitting my vision between my familiar and my actual sight was giving me a sudden migraine and making me super nauseous, I kept it up as we thundered down the stairs. From Sumi’s perspective, I could see that the Remorseful Betrayer had gone into a corner of Cecilia’s Room and had wrapped its many arms around itself, as though to escape the sound of the bell, which continued to echo in the air unnaturally.

Rana let out a grunt of pain as she hopped the last few steps to the second floor, which I thought was reckless, but she continued down the hallway as though her right foot wasn’t a total mess. Perhaps her metal boot was able to keep the broken ankle from impairing her too much, or maybe this was the sort of endurance someone with an S-tier in Vitality possessed.

As we came to the room where we’d broken down the wall and discovered the corpse of Steffen, I saw a sudden change from Sumi’s perspective, as the Haunter unfurled itself while it began to grow in shape and turn a deep-red hue. I immediately cut off the connection to the Watcher.

“We have to hurry!” I told Rana, as she had already picked up the corpse and thrown it over her shoulder like it was just a sack of flour.

“Is it coming?” she asked, while already making for the door.

“Yes, we don’t have a lot of—”

The ground began to quake and the whole building shook. I briefly shared Sumi’s sight again and saw, to my heart-dropping dismay, that the perspective came from inside the room we were in, and that the Haunter had tripled in size and its dozen arms were each reaching for the bricks that still lay strewn about the floor.

Armen! Do everything you can to protect us!

“Of course.”

“Go, go, go!” I yelled as I ran out of the room after Rana. She had made it to the stairs and seemed to be slowing down, so I ran up past her and said, “Put the corpse on my back, I’ll carry him the rest of the way!”

She obliged and, though it was quite a disgusting thing, I put my arms around the legs of the corpse, while its head and torso slumped against my back, then I began ascending the stairs. Armen was doing a superb job of intercepting every devastating throw sent our way, but I could feel the jolt of exhaustion with every brick he swatted from the air or caught in his gauntleted ghostly hands.

Rana had pulled up behind me, walking carefully backwards up the steps, preparing to defend against any object that might be thrown at us.

The going was slow up the stairs, and I cursed my horrible physical condition every damn step, but when I reached the top, Rana quickly moved ahead of me and took the corpse from my back and into her hands, before running down to the open door that led to the safety of the old Margrave’s room.

Armen, that’s enough! Return to my side!

The Guardian Wraith floated up the stairs to my side and hovered next to me as I ran the last few steps and all but leapt through the doorway, shutting the door behind me.

The quaking continued and then Armen said:

“It would be a good idea to repair the protection in front of the door.”

A sudden fear fell on me as I ran towards the doorway where I’d broken the line of Ash to let him out, because, in the same moment, the door was being opened from outside. I slid the last metre to the line of Sacred Ash and then quickly closed the tiny gap I’d made in it.

Terrified, I looked up at the half-open door, but no flying bricks came my way and the quaking had subsided.

“That was a terrible plan,” Rana commented from where she had collapsed on the floor, the corpse of the ghost right next to her.

It was absurd, but I couldn’t help but laugh in response.

With a shock I bolted upright in the chair that I’d dozed off in. It was early morning, based on the light outside, but it was still rather dark. A sound from outside the room had awoken me and I looked over and saw that Rana had gotten up from the couch as well and had her sword in hand.

A second later, the door to our room squeaked open and Lukas’ head popped into view.

“I brought Miss Cecilia with me,” he announced. A girl, slightly taller than me and with round cheeks and grey-blond shoulder-long hair stepped into the room. She was wearing a simple robe and I wondered if Lukas had roused her from her sleep to bring her here.

“I also brought *this*,” he announced, holding a folded paper in his hand, which I knew, without looking closely, had to contain the Scarlet Vow. I had no clue how he’d managed to bring it with him without angering the spirit, but maybe the presence of Cecilia had placated it?

After getting up from the chair, I took the Scarlet Vow from his hands and placed it with the corpse in the large fireplace, alongside the confession letter and the painting. I felt bad about having to burn Cecilia’s memento as well as the no doubt irreplaceable painting.

“Is... is that...?”

“I’m sorry,” I told the lady. She seemed to be in her thirties perhaps, but her expressions were very sincere and almost child-like in a way. “I have ascertained that the spirit in the East Wing belongs to the man known as Steffen, whose body we found hidden away on the second floor.”

“I always knew he wouldn’t have just run away,” she said sadly. “But, why am I here?”

“Unfortunately, his spirit cannot pass on without your presence,” I told her, twisting the truth somewhat. “His love for you was so strong that it keeps him bound to this place.”

Upon hearing those words, she froze, seeming on the verge of tears, though she remained stoic. “What must I do to help him find peace?”

“You simply need to witness as we burn his body,” I told her.

I had already prepared the wood, which had been stacked next to the fireplace in a little cupboard of sorts, and Rana had located a firestarter, which was a type of metal tool that could, with a simple gesture, cause sparks to fly, which in turn could light the flammable bits I’d stuffed around the wood. I was no expert, but Rana had said that the fire ought to take.

I double-checked the Encyclopaedia entry for the Remorseful Betrayer, where I’d added a sketch of the thing I’d witnessed through Sumi’s vision, and my eyes caught on the warning at the bottom near the exorcism details:

Take heed that when you attempt to exorcise a Remorseful Betrayer through funerary pyre that you have all the requisite mementos and people present, lest from the flames a Condemned Ifrit be born.

From the entry on the Condemned Ifrit, there was a further explanation that stated that it was often a vengeful and hateful spirit birthed out of a failed exorcism involving fire. From what I could understand, this meant that because the spirit did not pass on, but most of its earthly ties were burnt alongside its corpse, it became a fire elemental that would burn uncontrollably until it could be slain. It was only a concern for the flame-based exorcisms that involved Shade-type entities, but it almost made me want to scour the entire East Wing again to see if some additional memento wasn’t hiding away somewhere.

I swallowed hard as I took the firestarter and ran the two metallic pieces along each other, casting a shower of sparks onto the pile of wood and burnable items below the corpse, painting, letter, and flower. As the sparks took hold and a fire began to blossom, I took a step back.

Cecilia stood next to Lukas, holding her hands folded close to her heart. I didn’t want to pry, but it seemed obvious that she had loved Steffen, though probably for the sake of her own heart and sanity, she must’ve moved on after he disappeared. I didn’t want to tell her the reason why he had died, nor the sin he had committed. It seemed cruel enough to bring her here just for the exorcism to work.

The flames began to spread to the wood and the mementos were already consumed by the fire, while the mummified corpse slowly began to billow smoke. To my Spirit Sight, there was more than just smoke billowing from the corpse and its earthly ties as they were set on fire. I watched closely to see if I had done something wrong, but it was hard to tell for sure until it was over.

The room began to smell of burnt skin and charred bones, along with the powerful scent of wood smoke, but fortunately the majority of the smoke billowed up and out through the chimney. It wasn’t exactly the most honourable funeral pyre that I’d made, but I supposed that the act was more important than the appearance. After all, a burial was still a burial, even if it didn’t feature an expensive casket.

“I love you Steffen,” I heard Cecilia say to the fire.

I hope his spirit can finally find rest and that he can forgive himself for his sins.

14 - The Worst Type of Monsters

It had been a sombre affair, watching the body be slowly consumed by fire until just the bones and wood ash were left behind. For one brief moment I wondered if I ought to collect his ashes, as they might be considered a Sinner’s Ashes, though I pushed the consideration from my mind as the abhorrent impulse it was. That being said, I did find a large vase that I swept the ashes into, along with the bones, before handing it to Cecilia. She said that she would see to it that he received a burial. Then she left the old Margrave’s room and I wondered if I would ever see her again. It was probably for the best if I didn’t.

“What happens now?” Lukas asked. He was sitting on a cushioned footrest and balancing an empty bottle of the cold fruit tea I’d finished on his index finger with impressive deftness.

“Now we turn the quest in,” I replied. I’d used Sumi to look through the East Wing and there was no sign of the Teruterubōzu-looking Shade, so I felt confident in saying that we’d pulled off the Exorcism.

“Can I come?”

I blinked in surprise at the question. “I don’t see why not, but won’t Colleen be upset if you go missing?”

“She says she doesn’t really care where I go,” he replied and it made my chest hurt to hear.

“You know, I don’t want to get your hopes up, but I think you should try the Role Assignment at the Guild.”

“Really? I’ve always wanted to be an Adventurer!”

Rana looked at me seriously. “*What* are you doing? Don’t give him false hope like that, it’s cruel.”

“You can’t see it,” I told her, “but he has a very strong aura. To my eyes he already looks like an Adventurer.”

“Natives can’t obtain a Role,” she replied simply. Her voice wasn’t mean or cruel, but there was an ironclad certainty in it that didn’t invite room for *maybe* and *perhaps*.

“Why not?” I asked her, genuinely wondering.

“Why should I know?” she replied. “But it just doesn’t work *that way*.”

“I think we should try it,” I said stubbornly.

“Try it and fail and you’ll be the laughingstock of the city.”

“What’s new there?” I asked. “Not like anyone took me seriously before.”

She let out a sigh. “It’ll be detrimental to your reputation... but I suppose you’re an accomplished Exorcist with two Exorcisms under your belt, so maybe it won’t matter if people think you’re eccentric.”

I highly doubted two Exorcism Quests made me anything as fancy as ‘accomplished’, but I had a sense that, if the Role Assignment was based on the auras I could see, Lukas had a shot at becoming an Adventurer. Granted, he was still a kid and would need a steady hand to guide him, not to mention a competent teacher, but surely it was better to let a mischievous and adventurous soul like his soar free, right?

“Lukas,” I started and the boy stopped balancing the bottle on his finger and looked at me as though I was the only thing he could see. “How about we meet in front of the Adventurers’ Guild around noon?”

“Okay!”

“But first, I need you to go tell Colleen that we have finished with the Quest and will be taking our leave.”

As the blonde boy ran from the room to go find his mistress, I carefully collected all the Sacred Corpse Ash back into its pouch, before leaving the room alongside Rana. We took our time getting down the many stairs, as her broken ankle made the steps painful for her though she took it in stride.

We walked out the front door of the East Wing and I took in a deep gulp of fresh dawn air. Beads of morning dew covered the garden in the courtyard like a thousand jewels and reflected off the first questing rays of sunlight that broke across the sky.

By the bridge stood just a lone guard, someone different than the two we’d seen the day before, but his aura was much the same and, from the glare Rana shot him, I was sure that it was a fellow member of the Mercenary Guild. After we passed him and went out towards the Noble Ward, I couldn’t help but feel like eyes were tracking us the entire way.

When we neared the Guild Ward, Rana told me that she would go to the nearby Church to find a Priest to heal her ankle. I promised her that I’d pay her back what it cost from the Quest Reward.

“Let’s meet back at my apartment,” she said as a farewell and I just nodded lamely in response.

It felt like quite an awesome thing to have been able to exorcise a spirit without Master Owl holding my hand. Although, by his own words, it had been the kind of quest most suited for a new Exorcist and I reckoned that, aside from the pretty horrific consequences of screwing-up the exorcism, he was

probably right. Still, without the knowledge of the Encyclopaedia and what I’d learnt from Hamsel’s Rest, I would’ve probably suffered a lot of injuries, or perhaps even been killed.

But maybe it’s not so bad to feel like I did something amazing? I thought to myself as I crossed through an alleyway that lay three-or-four streets from the Adventurers’ Guild.

Suddenly the sound of boots running caught my attention, and I turned around just in time to see a fist being swung my way. Before it could connect and I could even register what was happening, my attacker was flung against the nearby wall. But no sooner had he been thrown aside than a second man came at me. Then a third and a fourth.

Each were repulsed in turn by Armen, whose autonomous defence kept me from harm and threw them away against the walls of the narrow alley.

“Fucker has some kind of familiar!” one of them yelled, and his voice triggered some recollection in my mind, though I wasn’t sure from where exactly.

One of them, a man with spiky leather armour swung a bat at my head and the bat shattered into a half-dozen pieces thanks to Armen’s powerful hands. Realising that I would quickly run out of energy before they gave up, I started running down the alley, while Armen covered me. But then two came at me at the same time and one managed to trip me up, before the Wraith slammed him face-first into a wall, knocking him out cold.

I don’t care if you have to hurt them bad, but don’t let them get to me!

“As you desire.”

The next man to come at me, while I got up from the ground, was picked up by his arm and tossed head-over-heels back the way I’d come, but he quickly recovered.

This is bad, they’re all Adventurers or Mercenaries!

Each of them had prominent auras. Two were red, meaning Vanguard, and the other two were auburn and yellow, which I didn’t know what meant, but they were clearly all high into the physical Attributes and all I had was Armen to protect me.

The yellow-aura one came for me next and my familiar grabbed his punching arm in such a way that when he pulled on it, it clearly came out of its shoulder socket, then he followed it up with what looked like a gentle palm strike, but which flung the man back against the Vanguard who was just getting up, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Then the auburn-aura came at me with a series of jabs like a boxer and somehow managed to evade all of Armen’s repulsing strikes. In the same moment, a terrible realisation hit me, as my vision began to blur.

I'm out of energy.

“**You should run,**” Armen advised.

A second later, the Boxer's fist passed through my Guardian Wraith and connected right against my chin, flinging me back into the nearby wall. I managed to stay upright until his second punch hit me in my stomach and keeled me over.

As I fell onto the ground, I tried to lift my arm and use my only offensive spell, but he quickly stomped on it, fracturing my forearm.

I heard someone come over to join him and then a powerful kick of a metallic boot connected with the side of my head and everything went black.

I came to sometime later. It was maybe early morning by then, although I couldn't tell. A sobbing whimper of pain was the only thing that came out of my mouth.

Everything hurts.

A migraine to beat all migraines stung painfully and I wanted to just bury my head in the dirt I was lying in, but there was a hatred in me at the injustice and cruelty that I'd just been dealt that made me struggle to my knees.

With a cough of dirt and blood, I spat out what must've been the fragments of at least four teeth and as I ran my tongue around my mouth, it felt all wrong, as though they'd kicked me in the mouth until all my teeth were broken.

It took me a moment to realise that my Spirit Goggles were gone... along with my rented Staff and Focus. But, worst of all, my bag was gone, wherein lay all the tools Master Owl had gifted me, as well as the Quest flier and my Guild Card.

“...Sumi, find those bastards...” I begged my Watcher familiar, but I had no energy and thus it did not respond to my command. In that moment I also did not realise that such a command would be a violation of my Pact.

“Gods, you look like a sack of shit,” said someone next to me.

I recognised the voice, but part of me was just wondering if it was a concussion-induced hallucination.

Then an arm grabbed me around my waist and pulled me to my legs. It made everything hurt ten times more.

“Ah, they really did a number on you,” he said, his warm breath flooding my nose.

“...They took my Guild Card,” I croaked out. “And all my things. My money. My tools...”

“I’ll get it back for you,” Owl said.

“Why? How?”

“Cause I can. Although let’s get you to a Priest first, huh?”

I wondered how he’d found me, but realised it didn’t matter. I leant against him as he walked us to a Church.

When I was taken to a simple wooden slab to lay on while a Priest tended to my broken bones, shattered teeth, and concussion, the self-pity, pain, and fear all came in a tsunami wave that washed over me.

I sobbed as the Priest used his magic to spread a warmth through my body, restoring my ruined right arm and somehow even regrowing my shattered teeth.

Master Owl sat nearby, just watching me. I had no idea how much my treatment cost, but all I could think about in this moment was revenge.

“Stop *that*,” he scolded me. “Go ahead and feel sad about your predicament, but don’t become focused on the hatred you feel right now. An Exorcist that becomes wound-up in their negative emotions will follow a dark path in life. Don’t become that person.”

I couldn’t simply let go of the anger, but I tried to push those feelings away, although they kept flowing back into my head, along with one simple question: Why?

The warmth moved through my body below the tip of the Priest’s staff, while he ran it up-and-down the length of my body like a heat-lamp.

After having my body healed, I was given a washbasin and a cloth to wipe down my body, which was covered in dirt and blood. Then I left the stone church with Master Owl. He knew exactly where we were going it seemed.

“How much did it cost, my treatment?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t want to owe you anything.”

“Bit too late for that, boyo. But I’ll take the blame for this, as I did tell you to accept the Quest.”

I paused. We were almost in the Market Ward by now and prospective vendors were busy setting up their stall for the crowds that’d arrive a few hours from now. “What do you mean?” I asked. “Did I get beaten up and robbed because of the Margrave’s Quest?”

Master Owl sighed. “I thought it’d be a teachable moment, but you really are daft sometimes.”

I frowned. “It’s because of what I found, isn’t it?”

“Of course.”

“And you knew it would be a troublesome quest.”

Owl nodded. “You should immediately assume foul play when you’re told there’s a Haunting but it’s been left alone for years, despite being in the middle of a goddamn city...”

I thought back to the letter that Steffen had written to the old Margrave, Reis Litterby, wherein he confessed his sins. He had poisoned his Master over several months, because his life and that of Cecilia had been threatened by the goons of the aspiring Margrave, Finn Serelliam. That guilt he felt had, following his murder to silence him, led to him becoming a haunting ghost. The new Margrave must’ve known the cause of the Haunting, but had not tried to have it dealt with, except through private requests to Master Owl.

“Why did he want you to do the exorcism?” I asked, suspiciously.

“Because I have a reputation. Undeserved I’d like to add! But everyone thinks I’m some morally-bankrupt Exorcist who’ll take on any job as long as the pay is good. Heck, I’ve even been propositioned to sic apparitions on some people or to curse them.”

My frown deepened. “And you knew the Margrave, Finn, was one such shady character, but still thrust me into his claws.”

“There are bigger things at play here than some egotistical and messed-up Margrave,” he replied. “I need you to be Seeker rank for my current headache, so, yes, I sent you on a bad quest. But we Exorcists must learn to deal with the quests we’re given, regardless of the circumstances.”

“I want to expose this Margrave and see his head chopped off,” I replied barbarically.

“As if that’ll happen,” he said. “The powerful stay powerful in this world. It takes a greater force to deal with them, and in Arley only the Prince is above the Margraves and petty Lords, but he doesn’t give a shit how corrupt or evil Finn is, so long as his tithe of gold flows the same as ever.”

I sighed and we continued heading towards wherever it was Owl was taken us.

Eventually he stopped in front of a random tavern. “There’s only one way to get powerful people off your back,” he said, then pulled out his dagger-like talisman and opened the door.

As I followed him inside, Armen hovered in front of me, though my energy was barely replenished, so he wouldn’t be good for much.

Although the tavern wasn’t that wide, it was deep, having a rectangular floorplan, with the bottom floor entirely used as a restaurant and bar. As we walked towards the back, I spotted four men laughing as they were eating some kind of grilled meat and slamming back frothing beers.

One of them, the guy who had punched me in the face, suddenly noticed us and got up from the table. The whole atmosphere of the tavern changed as his friends got up as well. Several people saw the writing on the wall and immediately left the back of the tavern to hover closer to the door, ready to bolt when things got crazy. The guy who stood behind the bar counter looked poised to make some comment like, “Take it outside!” but he was clearly not interested in drawing the four men’s ire.

As the Boxer stalked towards us, each of his steps landing heavily on the floor, Master Owl said in a calm voice that belied the intense fury that I could feel practically radiating from him: “My apprentice here seems to have lost some precious items and I hope you four gentlemen might be able to help locate them.”

The Boxer didn’t say anything and went straight for Owl with a rapid jab, only to be stopped by an invisible wall. His eyes widened in sudden terror, as though he saw something the rest of us could not, then his body was simply torn in two, sending blood and intestines raining all over the floor, furniture, and his friends.

One of them, the one who I recognised as having the yellow aura and whose arm Armen had dislocated though it had since been healed, screamed something and pulled a sword from his belt and charged at us, but then Owl pointed his talisman at the guy and said, “Repel.”

An invisible force took hold of the guy and then sent him flying backwards into the table they’d all been sitting by a moment prior. Before the other two could pull out their weapons and come at us, Owl ran the pointy end up his dagger talisman across his left palm and spilled his blood on the floor, before saying:

“Feast.”

A heavy pressure came over the tavern and the temperature dropped significantly, while the blood on the floor began frosting over. Then, for one terrifying moment, the creature he had summoned flickered into reality as it manifested: It was like a frost-blue shadow made physical and given life. It had an enormous maw within which were a thousand teeth running down the throat, as though anything it swallowed would be chewed all the way down to its stomach. Its lower half was legless and it supported itself on arms with enormous many-fingered hands, which dug into the floor as it dragged its enormous frame across the wooden floor, leaving hideous rends in the panels underneath. And its eyes... there were so many of them that it hurt my head to think about and made me nauseous, but in the very instant all those eyes shifted to look at the target Owl pointed to, one of the Vanguard, its entire body became invisible to me.

The man it was looking at seemed to be able to see it though, as he screamed and pleaded for his life. I tracked the rents in the floor and the heavy impacts its hands made as it moved towards the guy. Then, when it had locked him to a corner, he let out a final scream that was cut short, before his body simply vanished, leaving all his clothes and equipment behind and not shedding a single drop of blood.

The hideous and terrifying monstrosity became visible for a moment as its eyes moved about the room, but then Owl pointed his talisman to the downed yellow-aura guy who was still unconscious from the Repel. The creature became invisible again, and moments later, as furniture was pushed aside in its path towards the downed man, he too disappeared, leaving behind his clothes, coin pouch, and sword.

I saw as Master Owl pointed his talisman towards the last Vanguard and a moment later his screams filled the tavern, before he also vanished with a cry cut short, leaving behind only his equipment.

“*Banish.*”

The pressure vanished from the air and I let out a breath, realising I’d been holding it in out of pure terror. Master Owl reached into a pocket and extracted five golden crowns, then went over and placed it on the counter in front of the barman, who had soiled himself in fear.

“Go on and retrieve your stuff,” he told me. “It should all be here.”

I swallowed hard, then stepped around the frozen pool of blood and the Boxer’s severed body. Sure enough, amongst their possessions I found my bag, within which were all my tools. I found my Guild Card and the Quest flier on the remains of a different person than the one who had my bag, but my Staff and Focus were gone, perhaps having been tossed somewhere since they weren’t worth anything to the robbers. I also found my Spirit Goggles, which I put on.

For a brief moment, I thought I saw an aura around Master Owl, but then I blinked and it was gone.

It had been an aura of pure black.

He looked me in the eyes and said, “To keep powerful people off your back, you have to make them fear you.”

15 - The Gamble

Following the destructive aftermath by Master Owl’s hands, I went to Rana’s apartment, where, after knocking on the door a few times, she let me in with a worried expression on her face. I didn’t say anything, before finding my way to her couch and promptly passing out.

Rana awoke me sometime just before noon, reminding me of what I’d told Lukas. She once again tried to discourage me from making him take the Role Assignment, arguing that it would be humiliating to him and me when it failed.

“If it fails,” I replied stubbornly. “I just hope he shows up.”

“Why wouldn’t he show up?”

I sighed but didn’t elaborate. Part of me feared that he had received the same treatment as me and was lying somewhere in an alleyway bleeding onto the dirt, unseen by the people of the city. Granted, Rana had not been jumped and it was quite possible they had just targeted me, since I was the person who had taken the quest.

A body-quivering yawn escaped me. From the horrific events of the morning, plus the intense quest before that, and the lack of proper sleep since, I was deadly tired. But I wanted to go to the Guild and prove Rana wrong about Lukas, as well as to cash-in the Exorcism Quest, so I could buy myself a replacement Staff and Focus, and a clean set of clothes plus a bigger bag. I also wanted to pay back Rana for the injury that’d been my fault, and I was sure that since my For-Rent items had been stolen, I needed to report it to the Guild and perhaps pay a fine or something.

“You should come with me,” I told her. I didn’t add that it was because I wanted protection from potential reprisals from the Margrave.

“Let’s make a wager then,” she said. “If I’m right and the Role Assignment fails, you have to do something for me.”

“That’s unfair,” I replied, “You know I have terrible luck...”

“Those are the words of a coward,” she teased.

“Fine! But when I’m proven right, I’ll get the right to ask you to do one thing for me.”

Rana grinned fiercely. In that moment I realised that she loved to gamble. “Deal.”

“...Deal.”

I’m putting my faith in you, Lukas!

It was still before noon by the time I arrived to the Adventurers’ Guild. I didn’t see Lukas anywhere outside, so I peeked inside, though also did not spot him anywhere.

“Oy, pipsqueak,” Master Owl said from where he sat by a table, a mug of sweet mead in his sausage-fingered hands. “Why haven’t you handed the quest in yet?”

“I was just about to do *that*,” I told him. “But I’m waiting for someone to show up.”

“Who?” he asked, confused, as Rana took a seat next to him.

“It’s a servant boy from the Castle,” she said, her menacing façade up and her eyes like daggers.

“The blonde one that was with you in the East Wing?” Owl asked.

“You were stalking us?” I asked, although it didn’t surprise me.

“Listen here, you paranoid little shit, it’s not called stalking when I’m watching out for you.”

After the events of the morning I couldn’t argue with that. A cold sweat suddenly ran down my back as I recalled what I’d seen in the tavern. Behind his annoying personality and shabby appearance lay a true monster. I should be overjoyed to be able to call him my mentor, but he was a difficult man to respect.

“What do you want with this servant boy?” he asked, returning to the topic at hand.

Rana sighed, letting her imposing mask falter for a moment, then said, “He thinks the boy might be able to have successful Role Assignment, even though he’s a Native.”

Owl grinned, then said, “Are we betting on it?”

“We are,” Rana told him.

“How much is riding on this?”

When neither of us answered, he glanced between us with a lascivious look.

“It’s nothing like that!” I protested.

“I’ll bet a gold on failure,” he then said with a smirk.

“I’ll do the same,” Rana said.

“That’s not fair! I’d have to pay back two gold if I lose then!”

“Life’s not fair,” Owl replied.

Rana nodded, for once agreeing with the old man.

Then I spotted Lukas by the door and I saw a brief expression of surprise cross Master Owl’s face. In that moment, I realised that he hadn’t been able to see the boy’s aura while spying on us.

“Deal!” I quickly said.

“No, no, wait,” Owl began, but I quickly cut him off.

“Too late to change your bet now,” I said with a grin.

While I handed in my completed Quest, Lukas was waiting in the queue to the counter where Caroline performed the Role Assignments. He had drawn quite a few glances and mocking whispers, but I figured it was as much due to his Native appearance as his age. After all, he was several years younger than even the youngest person in the Hall. Two people were in front of him and he seemed eager. I wished I had his unfaltering optimism.

I sighed. After all, two gold coins were riding on whether his Assignment worked or not. Rana and Owl both knew this world and its rules far better than me, so it seemed all but certain it would fail, although I couldn't avoid thinking of the look of surprise on Owl's face when he'd seen the boy through his Goggles.

“Next,” said the lady by the Quest Counter. It was the woman that Master Owl had complained to when I didn't rank-up to Seeker following Hamsel's Rest. If I remembered correctly, her name was Lia.

I handed her the Quest flier, which had spatters of blood on it, and my Guild Card.

“I have completed the Exorcism at the Margrave's Castle,” I told her.

“Well done,” she replied. “We will have to send a runner to check the veracity, but Master Owl has already pestered me about this Quest four times today, so I do not doubt that you have successfully completed it.”

I nodded gratefully, as she sent a clerk to fetch the reward money. It seemed that it was a privilege to receive your reward immediately after handing-in a quest, at least in the cases when there was no clear proof of its completion presented. I suppose that a lot of people must've abused the Guild's trust and thus it was now necessary to verify the claim of a completed quest, at least for those below a certain rank.

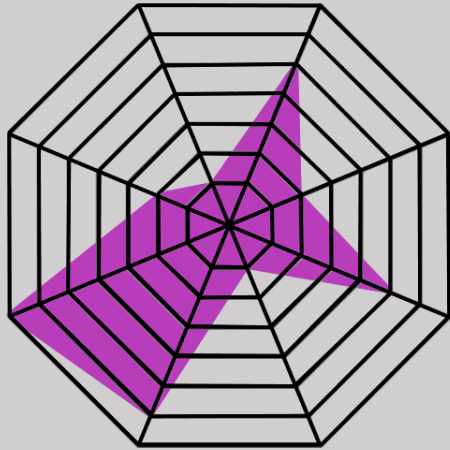
Just another perk of ranking up, I thought.

After she took my Card and the flier, putting them on the wide tablet, she then pulled out the soul-stone disc and placed my Card on there.

“Congratulations, you have ranked up to Seeker and can now take quests of this rank.”

“Thank you,” I replied and took my Card back.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>	
<i>ROLE: Exorcist</i>	<i>RANK: Seeker</i>
<i>GENDER: Male</i>	<i>AGE: 17</i>

ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Watcher)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i>			

Seeing the new rank did make a sense of pride swell in my chest. I’d only been in the Guild for about a week and I’d already reached the same Rank as Rana.

Then a terrible thought wormed its way into my head: *If the Skinstealer and Remorseful Betrayer were considered beginner-level Exorcisms, what manner of Quests might I face now?*

A moment later the clerk came out of the backroom with a tray upon which lay two gold crowns and five ten-silver coins. I gratefully took the money and put them in my pocket.

I’ll need to get more belt-bags, I thought. And maybe a coat like Owl’s, with a bunch of pockets.

After leaving the counter I went over to Lukas’ side. There was only one person in front of him now: a tough-looking youth with frizzy dark-brown hair and pale skin, whose aura was red and hazy.

“Vanguard,” Caroline announced to the man and the Hall full of people who always paid attention to the newly-assigned.

Some words were spoken between the Representative and the new Vanguard, then he took his Guild Card and left. I got the sense that the guy had been briefed about what to expect before taking his Role Assignment, because he seemed very sure of himself and not at all a bumbling-and-confused fool like what I had been.

“Next.”

Lukas walked up to the counter and said to Caroline, “Hi! I’m here to take the Role Assignment!”

“Name, please?”

“Lukas!”

She nodded, then showed him how she’d written it down and he nodded to confirm that it was correct. It was hard not to be envious of Lukas’ confidence and positive attitude. I wished someone would’ve guided me through my first day in this Guild like I was doing for Lukas...

This is like night-and-day from what I experienced.

Caroline brought forth the black-grey soul-stone slate and, without prompting, Lukas put his right palm on it. The frost-blue glyphs began to pulse, before eventually speeding up their pattern. Then with a gesture she bade Lukas lift his hand away, while she studied the pulsing glyphs for a moment.

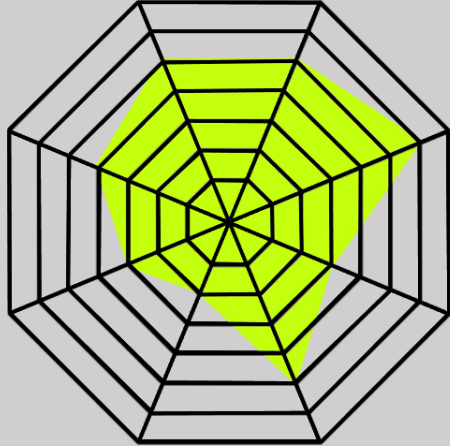
“Rogue,” she stated.

I blinked non-stop for a few moments, while muttering broke out across the room.

Then I heard the screech of a chair across the room and thundering steps as Rana came over.

“Welcome to the Adventurers’ Guild. Here is your Card.”

Lukas grabbed it and held it out proudly in front of himself, so both Rana and I could see:

<i>‘LUKAS’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Rogue</i>		RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>13</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>A</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>D</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>E</i>	SOUL: <i>D</i>	STRENGTH: <i>C</i>	VITALITY: <i>B</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Rogue I’</i> <i>‘Fleetfooted’</i> <i>‘Guardian Angel’</i>			

“You’re kidding me,” Rana complained, seeing the undeniable proof that the Role Assignment had worked.

In that moment, I realised I’d just gotten two gold crowns richer.

Maybe I’m not as unlucky as I thought?

As we moved away from the counter to let the next in line go up, I asked, “How come he starts with two abilities besides his Role skill set?” Now that I thought about it, I’d seen the ‘Guardian Angel’ Ability on Harleigh’s Guild Card as well.

“I think I know what happened,” Master Owl commented, suddenly standing next to us, while also looking at Lukas’ Card. “You’re an orphan, right?”

Lukas nodded uncomprehendingly.

“I bet one of your parents was an Otherworlder. It’s a rare thing, but it happens. Natives can’t get assigned a Role on account of their auras not being strong enough for them to tap into the potential that us Outsiders possess. But if an Otherworlder has a child with a Native, then there’s a possibility for them to pass on that powerful aura, as well as some of their abilities.”

His eyes lit up like stars at Master Owl’s words. “My parents were great people, weren’t they?”

Owl smiled a genuine smile, which was the first time I’d seen him wear such an expression, and said, “My guess is that one of your parents was a Paladin or a Priest, since they are the only ones who manifest the Guardian Angel ability. But I’ve only seen it on high-ranked Adventurers’ Cards.”

“What does it do?” I asked. “Harleigh has the same Ability.”

Owl shrugged. “No clue. My best bet would be something like a ‘Cheat Death’ thing.”

Lukas was holding on to the Card so tightly his fingers were turning white. I could tell from the way his aura was quivering that he was experiencing a lot of intense emotions all at once. As an orphan, I guessed that he’d been told over-and-over that he was unwanted. He’d worked as a servant for many years despite being a kid, because he had no one to look out for him but himself. When I thought about it *that way*, I felt guilty for thinking he was lucky. In his eyes, I was the lucky one for having grown up with parents that kept me safe and warm.

Rana put a hand on his back and said, “Come Lukas, I’ll help you find some equipment for your Role. A friend of mine was a Rogue, so I know a bit about it.”

Before she could leave, I told her, “Don’t worry about paying the bet. I owe you for the injury my actions led to and I’d rather you spent the money on making sure Lukas has the things he needs for his Role.”

She didn’t protest and instead just flashed me a grin, which made me feel momentarily wrong-footed and fuzzy inside. Then I turned to Owl, who seemed to be slinking away in a hurry, and said, “You, on the other hand, pay up.”

With my newfound money, my first order of business was visiting Æmos on the second floor and paying him back the ten silvers he had given me on my first day in this world.

“You really didn’t need to,” he complained.

“I did,” I told him, “for my own sake.”

“I heard you’ve now completed two Exorcisms.”

I bowed deeply. “I couldn’t have done it without your guidance.”

He waved a hand in front of him, from which hung a scroll, “Your mentor is more responsible for your success than I.”

“Nonsense,” I argued. “You were the first person to show me genuine kindness.”

Æmos adjusted his spectacles, perhaps to hide his embarrassment at my sincerity. Then he cleared his throat and took on a serious expression.

“Remember to face your tasks henceforth with a humble mindset. Success breeds complacency, and complacency is lethal in this business.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“I have heard of the Quest that Owl wants you to aid him with. I hope you will put aside your apprehensions and listen to his wisdom.”

That’s a very ominous warning...

After visiting Æmos I went to the For-Rent Armoury, where Rana was in the middle of helping Lukas pick the right kind of bow. Apparently his Role could wield one-handed weapons like daggers, knives, shortswords, and cudgels, as well as a select few types of bows.

I observed them for a while, then went to the counter and told the clerk that I’d had my rented weapons stolen. He asked for my Card, which I showed him, then asked me where they’d been stolen and by whom. I truthfully explained that the robbers had been killed, but that they must’ve tossed the weapons somewhere around the Market Ward.

He nodded. “I see. It should be a simple matter to retrieve them, then.”

“Is there a fee I need to pay?” I asked.

“Why? It’s not your fault they’ve been stolen.”

I sighed. It was somehow a relief that I wasn’t punished for their loss. To be honest, I had no idea why I had thought such a thing might happen, although perhaps it was just an assumption based on my perception of this world as ruthless and unfair.

“Where’s a good place to buy personalised weapons and equipment? I can afford to not rent items now, so I’d like something a bit more bespoke.”

I was unsure why, but Master Owl had decided to accompany me to the store that the Guild Clerk in the For-Rent Armoury had recommended. It seemed the Old Exorcist had used the same Staff and Focus for so long that he no longer knew of a good place to have them made in the city. From what little I could gather about his tools, they were apparently not made by human hands, though he would say no more than that.

“I need to buy some more clothes too,” I said.

“Running low on underwear?” he asked with a grin.

“Yes,” I replied, a bit embarrassed. For over a week I’d worn the pair that I’d been wearing since before being transported here. “I also need to find a bath or something, I’m absolutely filthy.”

I hadn’t noticed Lukas nor Rana smelling badly, but had been too self-conscious to ask the Vanguard about it, and I’d only just gotten to know Lukas, so it seemed a weird question to spring on him.

“Your Protector familiar is pretty powerful,” Owl suddenly remarked. “You fought off four Seeker-ranked Mercenaries at the same time. It would’ve been impressive if you hadn’t run out of steam so quickly.”

I frowned. “Where’s this coming from?”

“I was just thinking.”

“You were watching the entire thing, weren’t you?”

“Do you blame me for it?” he asked. “I keep tabs on a lot of people. Watcher familiars are useful for that.”

“I can’t say I don’t blame you somewhat,” I replied. “If you knew it would happen, I wish you’d have told me.”

The trauma hadn’t fully cemented itself and I truthfully couldn’t say that the punishment the attackers had received had been just. I didn’t believe in that sort of punishment and I was frankly quite terrified of upsetting Owl, knowing that he wielded such terrible power.

“The way you punished them was wrong,” I told him.

“I suppose I went overboard,” he replied meekly, which was unusual for him. “But,” he continued, staring me in the eyes, “every time I have not duly punished those who sought to exploit me, I have regretted it. I don’t know what your world was like before you came here, but in mine there was

nothing to be gained from sticking to a belief in justice. This world doesn't have such a concept either. Might makes right and everyone else is wrong.”

“You mean you're not from Earth?” I asked, and he shook his head slightly. “Well, the country I was from definitely wasn't perfect, but everyone more-or-less abided by the rules and we could all live in relative peace because of that. That's not to say that crimes didn't happen and that bad people didn't exist, because I'm sure they did, but there was a general sense of unity and respect that helped prioritise everyone's happiness over that of a single person.”

Owl sighed. “Sounds like a great place, I can understand why you want to go back.”

I hadn't ever told him such a thing, but if he'd been stalking me since day one then he must've heard me say it, or maybe he just inferred it somehow.

“There is one thing I do believe in though,” Owl started. “I believe in doing what I can to help the most people possible.”

“This quest you wanted me to be Seeker-rank for, is that one such thing?”

The Old Exorcist grinned frustratingly, “You better believe it, pipsqueak. If you make it out of that alive, then you'll be a proper Exorcist in my book.”

“If it's so bad, why do you need someone new like me?”

He laughed. “Scraping the bottom of the barrel, as the saying goes. I'd take an established Exorcist over you any day of the week, but there's so few of us and this problem is only growing worse every day, so desperate times lead to desperate measures, right?”

“But what sort of help can I realistically provide?” I asked sincerely. “It must be bad if you can't do it alone.”

“Even an expert needs an assistant sometimes. After all, I am but a man with two arms.”

“And a hundred familiars no doubt,” I commented.

“It is not the number of familiars that makes an Exorcist great, it is how they use them. I could potentially summon the kind of familiar that could aid me in the way I seek, but the price would be great. I'd like to live past the age of sixty you know. Times are not yet so desperate that I would sacrifice myself to fix them.”

“You're being very confusing,” I told him.

“In time you'll understand.”

16 - Gear Replacements

Before arriving to the store that made specialised Staves and Foci, I stopped by a jewellery store, in front of which was posted a guard with a tall lance, whose aura was a vague red.

Within the store were great display models and cases full of every imaginable type of jewellery, but there was also a section for the types of spectacles I’d seen Æmos wear. My visit to him earlier in the day had given me an idea for a problem that’d been bothering me for some days now.

“What can I help you with?” asked the pale and black-haired man behind the counter in the back of the room. Nearby were his tools for measuring and cutting jewels, as well as many other specialised tools that I had never seen before. From his appearance, it was clear that he was not a Native to Lundia, though judging by his weak vaguely-orange aura it was clear that he was still a Native to this world, though perhaps hailed from a different country.

I took off my Spirit Goggles and laid them on the stone counter before him. He immediately picked them up to admire the lenses.

“I’d like to have a pair of spectacles made with these lenses.”

Master Owl, who was behind me, scoffed. “Nothing wrong with goggles,” he muttered.

“I see. Spirit Quartz is not difficult to work with, but it is rare and expensive. I could no doubt fix this left lens and make a durable frame to hold them, but I would have to make adjustments to the lenses, and they may lose a bit of thickness, is that okay?”

I looked to my Mentor, who just shrugged. “Thickness doesn’t alter their effect, but they should be durable.”

The Jeweller nodded. “Purpose-built. Of course. Exorcists like you two no doubt see a lot of up-close fighting.”

“You’re familiar with what we do?”

The man nodded. “I have worked on Spirit Quartz for another Exorcist in the past, before I came to Arley,” he explained. The mention of coming to the Principality we were in made it clear that he was not originally from this part of the world, but I guessed that people might have his appearance in other parts of the Hallem continent. After all, it was supposed to be quite vast, perhaps comparable to the Americas of Earth.

“What sort of frame would you like? And what sort of metal?”

“How much would the work cost? And could you have it finished within a day?”

“Within a day?” he asked, seeming to consider it for a moment. “It can be done. The price varies greatly depending on the sort of metal you want the frame made out of, but if you were to say, go with steel, I could make them by tomorrow for eighty silver coins.”

I swallowed hard. That was a lot of money. Once again I looked to Owl for guidance.

“It’s a good deal,” he commented.

“I’ll go with a steel frame then,” I said. “Also, do you have something I can sketch on? I have an idea for how the frame should look.”

After handing over a gold crown and getting two ten-silvers in return, the Jeweller told me that I should return after dawn tomorrow to pick up my Spirit Glasses.

Owl was grumbling as we went to the store I’d originally been heading towards.

“Why didn’t you like the Goggles?”

“For starters, one lens was broken... and they were uncomfortable... and I think I may have a skin allergy to brass...”

“Your eyes are surrounded by green rings,” he stated, “and they do look puffy and irritated.”

I sighed. “So why did you ask if you could see *that*?”

“You’re gonna end up dropping your glasses,” he said, ignoring my question. “That’s why goggles are superior.”

I sighed deeper.

What a weird hill to die on.

“I have a strange question,” I said.

“About goggles?”

“No...”

“Then what?”

“Do any of your familiars ever speak to you?”

Master Owl halted on the spot, with a nearby civilian nearly bumping into him. Around us in this part of the Commerce Ward, where the Market Ward only lay a few streets away, were a heavy throng of people. Regardless, he had stopped in the middle of the pedestrian path and ignored the people who glared at him in annoyance as they moved around us.

“Do any of yours?” he asked with narrowed eyes behind the lenses of his Goggles.

“He is looking at me very intently.”

Can he hear you? I asked Armen.

“Only you can hear me, as I am speaking directly to your soul.”

“Yes,” I admitted, wondering if I was about to be punished for some sort of delinquency.

Master Owl shook his head frustrated.

“He says that you are observing him.”

“Familiars that can speak are abnormal and generally a bad sign, as in sentient-demon-who-will-most-definitely-eat-you kind of bad. Most of what we summon and form Pacts with are barely-formed remains of those who are long-dead or the offspring of absurd deities, with a rare few being spawned out of concentrated energy in the world or belonging to other worlds.

“The majority are of the long-dead category and basically never retain their personalities or will, but the few that do are what we define as demons usually. Looking at your Guardian Wraith, it clearly doesn’t seem demonic in nature, but if it retains a sentience then it is a rare thing indeed.”

“My Guild Card lists him as a ‘Greater Protector’,” I admitted.

“I noticed,” Owl said.

Of course he’d spied on my Card... damn hypocrite.

“But Greater familiars are nowhere near as rare as ones with an intact consciousness.” He narrowed his eyes even further, such that they were like tiny slits that glinted with the ever-shifting hue of his lenses. “Are you sure you have an F-tier in luck?”

I was becoming very conscious of all the people muttering obscenities as they had to walk around us and I deliberately pushed Owl to the side of the narrow path. “Maybe it isn’t based on luck?” I suggested. “My Pact Attribute is A-tier after all.”

“Mine is S-tier,” he replied dryly. “None of my familiars speak. A few of them gibber maybe, but that’s about it.”

“My apologies that my existence is a nuisance to your mentor.”

It’s not, I assured Armen. He’s just being petty and jealous.

“Pipsqueak. Bring out your Watcher for a moment and observe me through its eye.”

Sumi, come forth.

The ink-stain bubbled into existence out of the thin air and I poured my energy into our Pact-formed bond to gain its vision with my left eye. As I covered my right eye and my borrowed sight washed the world in grey, I saw Master Owl as he wished me to see him.

It was terrifying to behold.

A large six-armed headless-and-legless torso held on to Owl’s shoulders with two of its massive arms. I recognised it from the primitive drawing in the Encyclopaedia, though the drawing did not

capture its sheer size and abhorrent features. It was a mix between a decayed corpse and a ghost, since it was see-through but not in the blurry way that Armen embodied, such that all its surface details were clearly visible. This was the Protector Armen warned me about in the little cabin in Hamsel’s Rest. It was a type of Shade known as a Corpse Warden. As a Haunter, it sounded like a horrific Shade to deal with, because it always dismembered its victims and reanimated their disfigured bodies. Even as a Protector, it had easily torn one of the four robbers in half when the man had attacked Owl.

Alongside this Protector was the enormous Fighter that he’d used to devour the three remaining robbers, though I did not know what it was called, but figured it was one of the many entities in the Encyclopaedia that did not have a drawing, but then again, how did you go about capturing such an abomination’s appearance on paper? As when I’d seen it in the tavern, its eyes were flickering around and a few people nearby let out gasps as one of its eyes transfixed them and it became visible to their mortal eyes.

Master Owl patted the large monstrosity on its frost-blue back and Banished it before it caused chaos to spread in the street. “Can you guess what type of Fighter Familiar that was?”

“I have no idea,” I replied, my eyes shifting to the familiar by his right hip.

“It’s called ‘Spawn of Nwetrou’. They’ve got bottomless stomachs and an endless appetite, but fortunately I’ve never had to exorcise one. It’s supposed to be impossible, although you can learn the names they were summoned by and Banish them that way.”

I now remembered the entry. It was one of the ones marked with the trident-symbol in the first half of the Encyclopaedia, meaning they did not appear in this world unless deliberately summoned.

“...and that *thing* by your right hip?”

It was like an Axolotl mixed with a Komodo Dragon, but instead of the frills that an Axolotl would have protruding from its neck, it had tongue-like tentacles that swished around. It had no eyes on its elongated face, but it was covered in holes on its long top and bottom jaws, which were constantly opening and contracting at distinct intervals, almost like sniffing nostrils. Its mouth had no teeth in it, but there was a long tongue within that kept running saliva onto the dilating holes covering its head. The rest of its body was covered in leaf-shaped scales and its four legs were adorned with thick claws, meaning it could climb well, just like the Komodo Dragon. Given its powerful tail, I felt sure that it could track any prey, whether on land or in water, whether across plains or up into the canopies of forests.

“This is a Tracker Familiar called the ‘Scenting Tongue’. It’s in the peculiar category of familiars which are summoned from another world, in this case the world of Merriddia, where this fella is native to.”

I couldn’t stop staring at its unsettling face, but Owl dismissed it as well, then pointed his thumb to his left eye. “And in here is a Watcher Familiar like yours.”

It took me a second to realise what he meant, but then, as I saw him through Sumi’s vision, I realised that his fake eye housed an ‘Eye of the Observer’, though its inky mass was contained inside the glass sphere. The pupil and iris that moved around within that glass orb moved independently of his real eye, but seemed to still be controlled by his mind.

“You p-put it in your eye!?” I muttered in disgust.

“There are plenty of ways to utilise familiars,” he commented coolly.

I frowned. It was hard not to be put off by the extreme that he’d taken *that* line of thinking to. “Like Possessed Weapons?” I then asked.

Master Owl began fiddling with his right earlobe for some reason. “That’s not exactly the same.”

“Seems the same to me.”

“Well, it isn’t. Possessed Weapons are dangerous. You have to make a different sort of Pact to accomplish the creation of such a weapon and without the proper precautions they’re no different than releasing a dangerous entity into the wild. I know more than a few Exorcists who perished because of such damned weapons.”

“Is that why you need such a high rank to rent one from the Guild?”

“Yes, but even at the Rank of Eminent there are a lot of morons. Every year some new Exorcist gets themselves killed thanks to a Possessed Weapon, and then people like me have to go clean up the mess... so don’t even think about it.”

“Your Fighter Familiar didn’t seem much different.”

“Well, it is. I can control it directly. Maybe I should have you summon one so you understand.”

“I’m not sure I want to,” I told him.

“If you’d had one this morning then you wouldn’t have gotten beaten up, I promise you that.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone though.”

Master Owl shook his head disappointedly. “Pacifists don’t live long.”

We eventually reached the store that specialised in magical weapons like Staves, Foci, Spell-Tomes, and Enchanted Weapons, and I let Master Owl guide me through the selection of the best-suited weapons for me.

In the end he selected a metre-and-a-half-long bamboo-like Staff that was almost like a spear, thanks to a sharpened glass-like stone recessed into one end. Apparently, it was a type of staff that excelled in harnessing ambient magic to boost the spells I used. It seemed a great beginner staff, and I wondered why the For-Rent Armoury hadn't possessed such a staff, but figured that maybe it was just so popular that they were rented out permanently.

As for the Focus, he recommended a dagger-like talisman, similar to what he wielded, but I knew that I didn't want to focus on offensive power, when I only had Repel, although he argued that it would be a boon for when I had an offensive familiar like his Fighter. I recalled the image of him stabbing and slashing it through the air to send his terrifying Spawn to eat the robbers, and, honestly, *that picture* alone was enough to make me want to choose something else.

After some back-and-forth with the proprietor of the shop, who was, like the Jeweller, pale of skin and dark of hair, I ended up choosing a Focus that had a steel ball in the centre, within which was some sort of bell, and around which was a torus-shaped opaque glass ring. As I settled the strange Focus in my palm, the bell within the centre ball began to ring gentle, while the outer ring began to spin around.

Once again it was a type of weapon that hadn't been available in the For-Rent Armoury, but which was called a Barrier Ring. It was quite literally the opposite of the type of Focus that Master Owl had advocated for, but, for once, he did not complain about my choice.

As I took the two weapons to the counter, the proprietor said, “That'll be four-and-a-half gold crowns.”

I let out a sigh. It was far too expensive for the roughly two-and-a-half I had left. But then Master Owl came to the rescue.

“This kid is an up-and-comer and he'll no doubt come back here for when he wants an upgrade.”

I nodded enthusiastically.

“Best I can do is four gold,” the man replied.

“Maybe we'll just take the staff then,” Owl replied and took the Focus as though he was about to return it to the shelf we'd found it on.

“Alright, alright! You can have them both for three gold crowns!”

Business must be slow, I thought.

I looked to Master Owl, who placed one gold coin and five ten-silvers on the counter, then I placed the same amount.

“Thank you,” I said, as we left.

“You still need to buy some clothes, right?” he asked. “How much do you have left?”

“About one gold crown.”

He nodded. “That’s what I thought.” Then he looked to the sky which was darkening already. “Better hurry up though, your girlfriend wanted to see us by *that* restaurant when it got dark.”

I blushed. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

Master Owl grinned and said, dismissively, “*Sure, I believe you.*”

The sky was void of light and the lanterns were the only source of illumination in the darkness, as we left the Commerce Ward and arrived by the restaurant in the Residential Ward, near where Rana’s apartment lay. Neither she nor Lukas were waiting for us outside like she’d said they would, but based on the sounds emanating from within, it seemed obvious that they were already being treated nicely by the owner.

Owl and I came through the door, and the chatter of the few patrons, the owner, and our awaiting companions came to a halt, then after everyone had taken a good long look at us, they all resumed what they’d been merrily talking about.

“You’re late!” Rana complained, aiming at me with a chicken spear, upon which had also been impaled some tomato-looking vegetables and mushrooms.

“Pipsqueak here is such an indecisive one,” Owl commented.

“At least I now have some new weapons,” I said, patting the bamboo staff on my back. It hung over my new robe-like coat that I’d bought for twelve silver crowns.

“You’re not the only one with new clothes and gear,” Rana replied, nodding towards Lukas who was busy stuffing as much chicken into his mouth as possible. The way he ate reminded me of a starving dog. It made me wonder what sort of food he was normally used to.

Master Owl plopped down on the bench next to Lukas, almost sending the youth airborne with the impact. Then he flagged the owner down and asked for some deep-fried chicken and a bowl of steamed vegetables, along with the largest mug of beer they could muster.

I sat down next to Rana, who was already deep in the drink, though her faculties yet under control, but who knew how long that’d last?

“Have you been here before?” I asked Owl. He seemed to know the menu well enough.

“Sure, a few times in the past. Surprised the place is still around.”

When the owner returned with a beer for Owl, I asked to be served the same, although with a cold tea instead of a beer. The man gave me an odd look, then returned with a pitcher of tea and told me to just let it cool down before I drank it. I realised that the cold tea store might be the only place that sold *that* drink. But I wasn’t too bothered, tea still suited me better than sweet mead or beer.

As I ate with the people around me, I got a good look at Lukas’ new equipment. His basic and threadbare clothes given to him as a servant were replaced by a form-fitting off-white shirt over which he wore some leather padding, which covered the base of his neck, the front of his torso, and his flanks. His pants were also rather tight, but looked of high-quality thread, with a durable belt fastening them to his waist and from the back and side of which hung three pouch-like bags like the first one I’d gotten myself. As for weapons, he seemed to have gone for a long slender knife and a shortsword. It surprised me that he hadn’t picked a bow as well, but decided that I’d ask him about it later.

I was quite happy with my own purchases, as my new robe-like coat sported many small pockets on the inside, but was still breathable to the point that it didn’t feel too different from the clothes I’d had before, despite looking like I should be sweating to death while wearing it. I’d gotten two pairs of pants as well, plus two identical white shirts, some sturdy socks, and three pairs of underwear. I’d thrown out the original pair that I’d worn since coming to this world, but hoped that I could find a way to properly wash my clothes later, so I wouldn’t have to constantly buy replacements. Lastly, I’d gotten another belt-pouch, such that I could separate my quest fliers and Guild Card from my Exorcist Tools like the Black Candle, Energy Stone, and such.

I smiled to myself as I observed the chatter between my companions. This was such a comfortable moment, the four of us sharing a meal while trading stories, that I honestly wished it would never end.

After eating enough for my stomach to feel on the point of bursting, and listening to Lukas telling rumours and stories he’d heard in the Margrave’s Castle from the other servants, which greatly interested Owl, amusingly, I accompanied Rana to her apartment. To my surprise, Master Owl grabbed Lukas and told him about the inn he was staying at, then brought the boy along with him.

Rana seemed to have learnt from our last visit to the restaurant, since she was only sporting a minor buzz this time. After we went up the stairs to her apartment and she let us in, I headed straight for the couch. The lack of sleep was hitting me particularly hard after such a nice meal and cozy atmosphere. Of all the days in this world so far, today had been the craziest one of them all.

Surprisingly, she followed me to the couch as well and sat down next to me. It only just now dawned on me that she wasn't wearing anything other than her arming jacket and hide pants. Apparently she had left her armour in the apartment along with her weapons.

“You never told me what you want me to do for you.”

I blinked uncomprehendingly for a moment, then realised she was talking about our wager. “I thought we changed that to just betting money.”

“That was just for the old man's sake,” she answered. “So, what are you gonna ask of me?”

My heart began to beat in my chest like a steam engine about to explode.

“I erm, I... I want you to be in my party! Not just as a hired guard, but as a comrade.”

She grinned in surprise. “That's not what I expected you to ask,” she said, then leaned in closer, making my poor heart beat even faster. With only a handspan separating our faces, she then said, “Do you know you have green rings around your eyes?”

The surprise made me burst out laughing.

Then Rana put both hands on my face and pulled me in for a kiss.

My vision was filled with the dark freckled skin on her face and that red curly hair. Her eyes were closed, but I kept mine open as I wanted to absorb it all, while getting lost in the sensation of her warmth and the touch of her lips.

She got up from the couch and pulled me with her to her bedroom. Armen was floating nearby and I tried desperately to signal him with my eyes using morse code. He seemed to catch my drift, because he came to a halt in front of the door, which Rana closed behind me.

“**I will stay out here and keep guard,**” he announced, though I could tell there was a slight mocking tone to it.

I don't think I'll sleep tonight...

17 – My Party

I awoke within Rana’s naked embrace sometime the next morning. It took me a moment to realise that the events of last night hadn’t been some fever dream, but had in fact been real. Never in a million years had I imagined *it* would feel like *that*. I’d also always imagined that I’d be the taller person, but I couldn’t say that I disliked the way she had taken charge. For a ‘first time’ it had not been as awkward as I’d feared, and I looked at her sleeping body for a while, uncomprehending of my situation.

Maybe an F-tier in Luck doesn’t mean what I think it does...?

I shut my eyes and just revelled in the moment.

If I die now, I will have no regrets.

Although I’d prefer not to die...

... Wait, are you able to hear this, Armen?

“My apologies, but I have no way to ignore your thoughts. They enter into my mind with excruciating clarity.”

Oh god... does that mean?

“Unfortunately, yes. I believe it will be in our mutual interest to pretend I did not overhear your every thought.”

I grimaced. *A Pact such as this with a sentient being is quite an awkward thing...*

Eventually Rana woke up and went to the kitchen to get something to drink. I followed behind her lamely. She gave me a smile, but we didn’t talk about last night at all as we shared a breakfast of eggs and sausage.

I remembered belatedly that the Jeweller had promised to have my Spirit Glasses ready by dawn, so I told her that I’d meet up with her back at the Guild Hall, like Master Owl had requested before we parted ways after dinner yesterday.

The walk to the Jeweller’s store in the Commerce Ward was tense and fraught with paranoid fear that, given my recent good fortune, I was due for a calamity, but such a thing never manifested and I made it to his store in one piece.

“I am quite proud of the final result,” he commented on his work. “The design you drew was quite brilliant, though I must say I’ve never thought of such a frame for spectacles before.”

I held up the pair of glasses he had made. It was a fairly standard design I thought, but when I’d seen the few models on display in the Jeweller’s store, as well as the pair I’d seen Æmos wear, it was clear that this world had a far more archaic idea of what glasses were. Back on Earth I hadn’t ever worn glasses myself, but my mother wore them at home, so I had grown used to seeing them up-close my entire life. However, the design in this world were bizarre in that many had no limbs that could rest on the side of one’s ears, nor did it have a proper way to rest on one’s face, rather, they had a triangular nose-support that settled high on the nose-ridge, which I doubted was comfortable for prolonged periods of use.

“I didn’t come up with the design,” I admitted, “it’s just very common in the world I’m from.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Lundia, and Arley in general, is not a great seedbed for the wisdom of you Otherworlders. If you travel north of Arley’s border to the Kingdom of Lacksmey, you’ll find that a lot of technology brought by your kind has been implemented into the governance and daily routines of people there.” He sighed. “I miss having easy access to ice...”

“Why did you come here then?”

The Jeweller threw a hand in the air, kind of like a shrug, before saying, “The climate here is nicer and there’s more work for someone like me. The big cities in Lacksmey are all very competitive in the crafting markets, while there’s only two Jewellers here in Lundia, and the two of us have no need to fight over customers, because there’s plenty here.”

“Do you think there’d be work for an Exorcist like me in Lacksmey?” I asked, putting on the glasses. The Jeweller nodded self-satisfied when he saw that they fit me perfectly.

“Arley is rife with Adventurers because this is where you all seem to appear, but used to be that Otherworlders appeared in Lacksmey until about a hundred years ago, so they still struggle from the aftermath of losing access to cheap labour for menial and dangerous tasks. They’ve developed a fairly robust Explorers’ Guild since, but only you lot seem to have access to magical powers, so any imitation without those powers will be lacking. Of course, many Adventurers travel to Lacksmey because it is full of opportunity and they find their work rewarded greatly. So, in short, yes, you’d no doubt be swimming in work. Exorcisms cannot be performed by anyone but an Exorcist after all.”

“I see. I may just have to try going there sometime.”

“You’ll certainly find far less people suspicious or hostile towards you in Lacksmey,” he remarked. “If you have not been outside of Lundia yet, then you might not have realised that the treatment of Otherworlders *here* is the kindest you’ll find within Arley’s borders.”

“Why do you think people here are so distrustful of us?”

“Who can say? Suppose not all people are welcoming towards strangers, but I wish it’d change. I’d like to be able to drink ice-cold beverages again...”

I chuckled politely, though it did feel odd that people in the Principality of Arley didn’t like people like me, despite relying on us to keep them safe.

When I reached the Adventurers’ Guild half an hour later, Rana was standing outside, arms folded and staring menacingly at anyone who glanced her way, while wearing her full plate, with her shield attached to her left arm and her sword on her hip. Next to her stood Master Owl and Lukas.

Owl took one look at me and let out a huff. “Glasses, huh? Goggles are still superior.”

“I think they suit him,” Rana commented, which made me smile.

The Old Exorcist put on a lopsided grin at her words, which I found to be annoying, though I ignored it.

“Can I try them?” Lukas asked excitedly.

“Yes, but be careful with them.”

He put them on, though they were slightly too big for him. I was sure that in just a few more years he’d be a head taller than me. “They’re nothing at all like glasses the guy on the second floor wears,” he said, disappointed.

I put the glasses back on after he handed them back, then looked to Master Owl. “Why did you want us to gather here?” I asked him.

“Because we’re going to Ochre and you’re all coming.”

“Even Lukas?” I asked.

“Me?” he chimed in, surprised. We’d been telling him that he needed a mentor, so I felt that we were betraying his expectations.

“Rogues are valuable,” Owl said, then upon seeing our worried expressions added hastily, “Not in *that* way. I mean, a Rogue is a good support to have for your Party. They’ve got ‘Trap-Detection’, ‘Lockpicking’, ‘Lurk’ to spy on people or set up an ambush, as well as ‘Foresight’ which warns them of dangerous situations, plus they can be a decent addition to any Party’s arsenal. I’ve already had to swat away eight separate teams that wanted to scout him.”

I frowned. “Wouldn’t he be better off with a conventional team?”

Owl shrugged. “You found him, you decide how to use him.”

“I think the choice should be left to Lukas,” I replied.

The blonde boy looked between us, then just said, “I had fun in the Castle, so I want to follow you.”

“You know you don’t have to, right?” Rana said.

“But I want to,” he insisted. “You have been really nice to me and you believed I could be an Adventurer.”

“Alright, fine,” I said, “But we need to get him a proper mentor.”

“I can teach him what he needs to know,” Rana said. A pang of envy hit me, but I shoved it aside. It was no use being petty over something like *this*.

“You said you knew a Rogue in the past, right?” I asked.

“Yeah... he was a member of my Party before I joined the Mercenary Guild.”

The way she referred to him in past tense made it pretty obvious that the guy was no longer among us. “What happened to him?” I asked, but she shook her head.

“Maybe I’ll tell you some other time,” she said.

“Alright kiddos, we’d better get going. A carriage-ride to Ochre will take at least three days, maybe five if the weather takes a turn. The more days we idle, the worse the situation will be when we arrive.”

“We ought to buy some resources for the trip,” I said. Owl and Rana both gave me a look as if to say: “We’re counting on you for that.”

I let out a sigh of defeat, then added, “I’ll go buy some stuff, then I’ll meet you in the Market Ward by the carriages.”

“Attaboy,” Owl said with a grin.

“I’ll come with you!” Lukas decided and together we left to find food that wouldn’t spoil for the duration of our trip, as well as something to slake our thirst.

We linked back up with Owl and Rana, and I just managed to overhear the tail-end of Owl’s haggling with the carriage-driver. It cost fifteen silver crowns for each of us, but he got away with paying him an even fifty for all four of us, arguing that one was still a kid. When I asked him if he wanted us to help chip in, he told me not to worry about it. The way he had acted today and yesterday made me wonder if his past actions of taking my forty silver to pay for his injury and making me pay Rana’s one-gold retainer were meant as lessons, rather than him being miserly.

When we were some hours into the journey, I asked Owl if he had the quest flier for the Exorcism in Ochre and he seemed to vacillate between hiding it from me or showing me, in the end he reached

into a pocket and brought out a neatly-folded square vellum paper and handed it to me. I had no idea that they even printed quests on such expensive paper, after all, a single page of vellum was over four silvers in a lot of Lundia’s stores, so it seemed a waste.

I gaped in a mixture of surprise and horror, as I read the quest info:

<i>‘The Demon Galleon’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Calamity</i>	RANK: <i>Savant</i>
<p><i>Lord Peter Garfh of Ochre requests the aid of a veteran Exorcist of high standing in the Adventurers’ Guild to deal with a Haunting of extraordinary difficulty and complexity that is disrupting the port of Ochre and causing an unrest in the populace of the sprawling city.</i></p> <p><i>Little is known of the entity that plagues the merchant galleon known as ‘Fallow’s Fortune’, though it did not manifest itself until the vessel reached the port of Ochre, which seems to suggest an intelligent apparition. There are rumours that it was brought about by a malevolent curse, but there are also rumours that say the captain picked up a stranger from a foreign port and who turned out to be a demon in disguise.</i></p> <p><i>The Guild of Ochre, along with the Church, have their hands full containing the entity within the possessed vessel, as it spews forth a vast horde of malevolent spirits at midnight every day, though these are weak to Blessed Weapons and the unique powers of Crusaders, Paladins, and Priests.</i></p> <p><i>There is no telling if the daily attacks will eventually break through the cordon placed around the galleon, but it seems clear that if nothing is done then trade disruption will be the least of the problems.</i></p> <p><i>Given the fact that two Exorcists of Eminent Rank have succumbed to this entity already, the Adventurers’ Guild has decided that no Exorcist may attempt the</i></p>		

Exorcism alone, though the assistant may be of Seeker Rank, so long as the one accepting this quest is Savant or higher.

REWARD: 80 Gold Crowns

“I wish you’d have shown me this before I said yes,” I told Owl.

“It’s the most exciting quest I’ve gotten in years,” he remarked.

I shot him a glare, to which he replied, “I’m joking, obviously. Although from the descriptions I’ve heard of the Haunter, as well as having witnessed the nightly attacks a few days in a row, I can say with a hundred percent certainty that this is a new type of Demon.”

“But you’re sure it’s a Demon?” I asked.

He nodded. “Only Demons are weak to Blessed Weapons and attacks. Although, the spirits it summoned were like wraiths, but with fully-corporeal bodies that looked like soldiers. Unlike normal wraiths, they couldn’t go invisible though, and given that their weakness is one that only Demons are known to possess, I believe they are an extension of the Demon who resides within the bowels of the Galleon.”

“It must be bad if two high-ranked Exorcist have already died to this thing.”

“Died is not the word I would use,” Owl commented, “as their bodies have not been recovered. They simply vanished. Though you’re probably right that they must’ve perished.”

“Has it killed anyone else?”

“Oh yes, at least sixty people have died because of this thing. A lot of them were from the first few midnight attacks before the cordon was properly established, but even now they still see deaths from the spirit horde every few days.”

“Do you have any plan for how to deal with it?”

Owl shrugged, which made me frown. I couldn’t tell if he was taking it serious or not.

“The plan is to first ascertain what sort of Demon we are dealing with. As I say, I have never heard of one that might herald an army of spirits to attack on its behalf, but Demons are often quite unique.”

I reread the quest flier again and noticed the difficulty rank.

“I thought Perilous was the highest rating for a quest.”

Master Owl smirked. “Calamity is special, of course. It’s the sort of thing they might post in other nations just to get the proper team to deal with it. As a matter of fact, I came to Arley because of this quest. I was in Lacksmey when I saw it on a Quest Board.”

“I just heard about the Kingdom of Lacksmey from the Jeweller earlier today,” I told him. “Is it a good place to get work as an Adventurer?”

“If you’re an Exorcist who knows your stuff, Lacksmey is nothing but golden opportunities. But, y’see, I like having Lords and Margraves owe me favours, so I came to Ochre because Peter Garfh is a good man to know.”

“What about Finn Serelliam?” I asked.

“He’s a snake,” Owl said without hesitation, making Lukas, who sat next to him, cast him an odd glance. “He is responsible for many tragedies, but he’s been clever with how he hands out bribes and, given that he’s now a Margrave, there’s no one to stop him except the Prince himself. He’s not truly a useful man to have you owe a favour, because I doubt he would even return a favour owed, but, alas, he’s just a symptom of the greater problem plaguing the governance of the cities in this world.

“The world I came from, Oblus, was ruled by a meritocracy and decisions were based on what would benefit people the most. It was far from perfect, but at least it beat this world where every new ascension of a King or local Lord can drastically alter the livelihood of everyone.”

“My world, Midrealm, was the same as Mondus,” Rana interjected, “But my family, the Thorn Dynasty, were the rulers of my kingdom, so my perspective was too biased for me to say whether it was different or not.”

“You were royalty?” I asked in surprise.

“Sort of,” she answered. “My Aunt was the Queen of our kingdom, and I was the daughter of her third sister, so I was very much on the fringe of royalty.”

“I wonder if your blood would count as ‘Royal Blood’,” Owl commented creepily.

Rana put her palm on the pommel of her sword. “You won’t get a single drop from me without a fight,” she promised him.

Owl let out a phlegmy laugh that filled the entire carriage.

The following two days of travel passed without incident and for most of it I just listened to Rana explain to Lukas how to feel out his different abilities and whatnot, while also trying to teach him how to use Lurk, though he was unsuccessful at it. Apparently it required a similar state of mind as my Meditation ability.

On the third day, sometime before dusk, Owl nudged me in the arm and said, “Send out your Watcher to scout the road ahead, while I take a nap.”

No sooner had he said the words than he leaned back and immediately began to snore.

Sumi, I need your sight.

The inkblot appeared in front of me and I used my thoughts to send it out in front of our carriage, while it lent its vision to my left eye. Instead of covering my right eye, I closed both my eyes, as it still allowed me to see what Sumi saw, but was less straining on my mind.

As I floated the Watcher further out along the road, I saw nothing except a few birds and small critters. I lifted it higher into the air, far above the road and the forest we were travelling through. The green canopies of the forest spread out to either side of the narrow road that bisected its territory, but all was calm in the rapidly-darkening world. In the distant eastern horizon I noticed the glinting waves of the sea that reflected the sun’s waning light, as well as the outskirts of the city we were heading towards.

For maybe twenty minutes I scouted the road and the forest, but saw no signs of any ambushes or potential threats, so I recalled my familiar before I exhausted all of my energy on maintaining our bond. I hoped that, as I grew stronger, the strain on my reserves would lessen, such that I could maintain a link to my Watcher at all times like Master Owl seemed capable of. After all, it was a powerful tool to have.

I looked at my Mentor, seeing that Lukas had fallen asleep up against him, which looked like a mischievous fox daring to enter a bear’s den to snuggle up for warmth. Before I could take a look at Rana, her head suddenly fell on my left shoulder. I remained still as a statue, not wanting to disturb her rest, while her breath tickled my neck with every exhale.

18 – The Port of Ochre

Around noon on the fourth day of travel we finally arrived to the city of Ochre. As our carriage slowed to a halt in front of its large gate, we all disembarked to walk the last bit. Lukas and Rana were both full of energy as soon as they left the vehicle, but Owl and I both needed to stretch our legs first. I cast him a glance, wondering if I could expect to turn into a chubby and grumpy old man like him as I got older. He noticed me staring and grinned, as though he could read my thoughts.

“Where should we go? Do we make right for the Galleon?”

“Sure, if you feel like just diving headfirst into a Demon’s Lair... No, obviously we have preparations to make.”

“What sort?”

“First off, we need to find a good restaurant to eat at and an inn that we can stay in, preferably not too far from the Port District, but not within the splash zone of the nightly attacks either.”

Dinner first...? I contemplated, confused, although I was famished from living on travel rations, so I didn’t complain.

“I thought we’d make a sanctuary to stay at within the Galleon.”

Owl shook his head. “Generally it’s a bad idea to stay within the territory of the entity you’re trying to exorcise.”

I frowned. “You should perhaps have taught me that sooner. I did after all stay inside the haunted east wing of Lundia Castle... I thought *that* was normal.”

“With many of the weaker apparitions we come across it might be fine, and if you know what you’re doing it’s a good strategy to quickly figure out what sort of creature you’re dealing with, since they tend to show their hand when disturbed or enraged. But the best practice is to establish a point beyond the area of the Haunting where you are able to observe safely and which serves as a place to retreat to when things get dicey.”

“And we’re doing that here?”

“Oh yeah. Demons have a lot of nasty abilities and many of their ilk can trigger mind-loops that slowly fry your brain just by being close to them. So we’ll need to make a lot of wards, along with some other preparations, such as holy water baths and having our weapons blessed.”

“We’re not bringing Lukas inside with us, right?”

“No, that would be extraordinarily stupid. I’m thinking we leave Ms. Thorn outside as well, but fret not, because, as I understand it, the Church will give us a small retinue of Paladins to aid us.”

I chewed my lower lip. I wanted Rana to go with me, because her presence made me feel safe, but I also wanted to keep her out of harm’s way, especially given that this was a Calamity-rated Quest.

Just then the tall Vanguard came over and asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Strategy,” I replied.

“You wanted to try the rice in this world, right Ryūta?”

I nodded eagerly.

“Then come on, I know the perfect place to have dinner tonight.”

I looked to Owl briefly and he just shrugged. Then we both followed after Rana.

Ochre was a tremendously-beautiful city, which was perfectly accentuated by the gentle warmth of the sun and a crisp salty breeze that brushed across the city from the coast. The city itself looked like it was hewn from a single slab of marbled stone, with every street and building constructed out of the same yellow-white rock.

Compared to Lundia, Ochre seemed to be several eras of technology ahead, as brass pipes visibly pierced through the buildings and, according to Rana, the pipes carried water drawn from underground thermal reservoirs, allowing even the cheapest homes access to warm water by just turning a single valve.

She also told me that the poorest people in the city were employed to sweep the streets and maintain the façades of buildings, which were prone to erosion from the salty ocean wind. In Lundia, outright poverty hadn’t been a thing, as far as I could tell, but the general welfare was rather low, whereas Ochre seemed to have no such issue on the surface. Of course, such things were rarely visible at first glance.

“Does the Principality of Arley have a capital?” I asked her, as we crossed under a large arch that demarcated the border between the Marketplace District and the Comfort District that we were entering.

“Helmstatter is where the Prince has his castle,” she answered, “but, no, there is no clearly-defined capital in Arley. Lundia is what could be described as its centre and backbone, but Ochre is where the money is produced, and Helmstatter is where decisions are made.”

“Lacksmey is different,” Owl quickly added. “Where the Royal Family lives, the city of Evergreen, is also where money is produced and decisions are made.”

“How come Arley is different then?”

He shrugged and Rana didn’t seem to know either.

Suddenly the Vanguard stopped, announcing, “We’re here.”

In front of us was a three-storey stone slab of a building, with a rusty metal plaque above the door stating ‘*Home of the famous Fish-on-Rice dish!*’. My mouth was already watering at the promise of rice and fish.

After the four of us entered and found a table, we were quickly served stone cups of a sweet white wine or something of the sort. It was slightly alcoholic, but no one complained when Lukas began chugging it with glee. I wished to just have normal water someday, but it seemed that most water-sources were contaminated somehow, since everyone drank only alcoholic beverages or tea. Apparently no one had discovered that you could just boil water and let it cool down...

When we were served the only dish that the restaurant served: ‘fish-on-rice’, I was surprised to see something akin to nigiri but with grilled fish. The taste was pretty good, though I felt it lacked soy sauce. No sooner had the thought entered my mind than Rana pushed a stone vessel towards me and said, “Try it with *this*.”

I lifted the vessel up to sniff the contents and was greeted by a pungent fishy aroma. I poured a bit of the sauce inside onto one of my not-quite-nigiri fish-on-rice pieces and saw, to my surprise, that its colour was similar to soy sauce.

As I put the sauced-up piece into my mouth, the flavour that hit me was overwhelmingly fishy, though with a sort of umami that perfectly accompanied the rice and the grilled fish.

“Wow, that’s delicious,” I commented. “It’s not quite like soy sauce, but I might become addicted to *this*.”

“They sell it everywhere in Ochre,” Rana told me. “It’s called Garum.”

After our meal, Rana suggested that the four of us could stay in the rooms that lay above the restaurant, but Owl protested, saying that he wanted a place closer to the Port District, and given that the Comfort District was in the opposite end of the city, Rana didn’t protest.

We left the restaurant and Comfort District with our bellies full, while the sun set and the street sweepers switched to lighting the lanterns that lined all the streets. We retraced our steps to the Marketplace District, where the main thoroughfare led us to the Guild District.

Master Owl stopped me and told Rana and Lukas to go ahead to the Crafting District and find us a place to stay there, while he and I would visit the Adventurers’ Guild and announce that we were taking on the Exorcism Quest.

The Ochre Adventurers’ Guild building was similar in many ways to the one in Lundia, though it was made of the same stone as the rest of the city’s buildings and the large door was made of brass rather than red-painted wood, which was spotted green all over from the metal oxidising.

As we entered, I saw that the place was mostly empty, with the exception of a group of Adventurers huddled around a table in the tavern-section and deep in some important discussion. There were also a few loners who looked to be sleeping off their drunken stupors. From the appearances of the auras belonging to group, I noticed that one was a Crusader, another a Priest, the third was possibly a Spellhand although the colour was slightly wrong, and the last one was the same auburn hue as the Boxer, who had knocked me out and later been torn in two by Owl’s protector.

We handed our Guild Cards to the Guild Representative, who, unlike the few I’d interacted with in Lundia, had dark hair and pale skin, meaning she was native to Lacksmey. Her eyes widened as she saw the quest we were accepting.

“What does an Auburn aura mean?” I asked Owl, while we were waiting for the lady to register the quest for us.

“That’d be a Brawler,” he replied. “They’re focused on hand-to-hand, but are similar to Vanguard in a lot of ways. They usually utilise claws, daggers, axes, or special gauntlets.”

“Like the one who attacked me,” I muttered. “He seemed to be able to avoid my Protector’s defences.”

“Yeah, they have a kind of precognition for that sort of thing, but it’s hard to master...” he trailed off as he realised that I’d been looking at the group of adventurers in the tavern. “*That one* with the Aquamarine aura is an Elementalist. Quite a tough party that one, with two Advanced Roles in it...” he trailed off again, and I realised why, because the Crusader had stood up and I immediately recognised the man.

“Harleigh? What’s he doing here?”

Master Owl huffed as the tall and handsome man began to make his way to us.

“We are very pleased you have decided to take this Emergency Quest, Master Owl,” the Guild Representative said, making us turn back to face her. As she handed our Cards back, my Mentor mumbled some kind of answer that I didn’t catch, and then a moment later the Crusader’s shadow was looming over us.

“I didn’t expect to see you here, Ryūta.”

“Nor I,” I told him.

“I’m sorry that I just suddenly vanished without a word. I wanted to tell you, but my party suddenly received an urgent bounty we needed to take care of.”

“It’s okay,” I replied.

“I hear from my apprentice here that you grew a conscience, Harleigh,” Master Owl remarked bitingly.

Harleigh nodded, as though agreeing with the characterisation Owl was painting of him. “I have certainly not taken my duty as a Guild Veteran seriously before and, although it was brief, I was glad to be able to aid your apprentice slightly, but I am glad to find that Ryūta is in your capable hands now.”

Owl grinned. “You know that I can tell when you’re lying, right?”

Harleigh’s amiable façade faltered slightly, then he turned to me and asked, “Why are you in Ochre?”

“We’re going to Exorcise the Galleon,” I told him, puffing my chest up slightly.

“Don’t attempt it,” he warned. “You’ll die.”

“He won’t if he follows my teachings,” Owl answered before I had a chance to defend my own competency.

“I’ve already completed two Exorcisms,” I told Harleigh. “I’m a Seeker now.”

“Impressive,” he commented, though I noticed how there was a tiny tremor in his golden aura. “But it won’t be enough. The last two Exorcists to attempt dealing with the Demon Galleon both perished and they had more than a decade of experience each.”

“Your warning has been heard,” Owl said, “But we already accepted the Quest and Pipsqueak here is more capable than you believe.”

I blinked in surprise at Owl’s praise, then he grabbed me by the arm and we left the Guild Hall before Harleigh could say anything else.

As soon as the brass doors were behind us, Owl began grumbling, “Two-faced piece of shit!”

“Why do you hate Harleigh so much?” I asked.

“You’re not my first apprentice,” he revealed. “Guess what happened to the last one?”

“Eaten by a Banshee?” I guessed.

“Your idol, Holier-than-thou Harleigh, killed him along with his Witch Hunter friends...”

I swallowed hard, unable to say anything.

Why would he do something like that?

Lukas and Rana had found us a comfortable inn that lay just a few minutes from the tall arch that separated the Crafting District from the Port wherein lay the Haunted Galleon. Because Rana had been in charge of the rooms we were given, Lukas and Owl shared a room and we had one for ourselves. No sooner had we said goodnight to my Mentor and the Rogue than she pulled me into the room and closed door behind us.

She pulled me in for a kiss and I could scarcely object to it, though the revelation about Harleigh’s past was weighing heavy on me and I felt unable to fully reciprocate her embrace.

After pulling away, she looked at me with concern. Her normally-thorny aura was hazy and wavering, but I wasn’t sure how to interpret *that*. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” I told her. “Master Owl told me something bad about Harleigh.”

For just a split-second, I saw how her aura flickered at the mention of the Crusader. “Why were you talking about him?”

“We ran into him at the Guild Hall when we were accepting the quest and there was this really weird—”

“Harleigh is in Ochre?” she interrupted me.

I blinked. “Yes.”

“...Why do you have that look on your face?”

She didn’t reply so I pulled myself out of her grasp.

“You’re in love with Harleigh, aren’t you?” I asked, my chest tightening at the expectation of her answer.

“It’s not like that,” she replied. “It’s... complicated.”

I let out a sigh. “Of course.” The way her aura was shifting around made it clear that she was hiding something from me or maybe even lying. I could now guess who had gifted her the expensive mirror in her apartment.

Gritting my teeth, I put my robe, which she’d tossed on the floor, back on and left the room. She tried to stop me, but I didn’t listen and went into Owl and Lukas’ room, where I told the boy to switch beds with me.

“Okay!” he said cheerfully, though I could tell he was a bit curious as to why. Fortunately, he wasn’t the type to pry, which I appreciated.

After Lukas left the room, I crashed down on the bed with an annoyed sigh.

“Miss me already?” Owl teased.

“Shut up,” I told him.

19 – Demon Galleon I

It was maybe just around midnight when Owl woke me up and dragged me out of our room, barely allowing me to put my robe on. Before I could ask what was going on, we were outside and I saw the sky in the district beyond, as it lit up with wisps of unholy light. Owl continued to drag me by the wrist towards the arch that led to the Port District, but we were halted by guards before we could enter.

“No one is allowed inside,” one of the guards told us.

“It’s fine,” Master Owl responded, “we’ll just watch the fireworks from here.”

As we stood by the district arch, I saw the lights swell as they swirled from the distant port, before those lights condensed and took form, riding down from the heavens like vengeful ghosts wearing the guises of soldiers. Their armour and weapons did not match that of any guards I’d seen in Arley, as though they were of a past era, because the wraiths were dressed in padded armour and metal vambraces and helmets, wielding simple shields and metal-tipped spears. Some of them even wielded bows and shot ethereal arrows from the sky while ascending down into the district.

A lot of the ghosts never made it down to the ground, as spells flew up to meet them, along with arrows that shone with a golden light. Some were also caught in pillars of white energy or torn apart by invisible hands.

“Is it *like this* every night?” I asked, astounded.

“That’s right. I’ve never seen anything like it before. Certainly I’m no stranger to ghost armies, but to think that a single entity has the power to conjure these night-after-night, it’s unheard of.”

The guards around us were starting to get annoyed with our presence, so as soon as the lightshow ended, we were shooed away.

When we made it back to the room at the inn, Owl told me, “Find a Fighter familiar you like. You’ll be summoning and forming a pact with it before dawn.”

I sat on my bed, a frown on my face, as I leafed through the pages of the Encyclopaedia. Pretty much all the familiars labelled as ‘Fighter’ were dreadful-sounding and I couldn’t help but recall the story of how Owl had lost his eye to the ‘Crimson Nightingale’, nor could I forget the vision of his ‘Spawn of Nwetrou’ as it devoured the Mercenaries who’d attacked me.

Among the names of those I considered, were: ‘Writhing Prisoner’, ‘Priest of the Deep’, and ‘Formless Envoy’. Each sounded less difficult to manage than most of the other ones, but when I showed the entries to Owl, he commented:

“The Priest of the Deep will try to kill you or find a way to get you killed, so that’s a bad idea. The Writhing Prisoner hates forming pacts and will do *anything* to be set free, which includes killing you.”

“Awesome...” I replied sarcastically. “What about the Formless Envoy?”

“I don’t really know anything about that one, but it’s similar to the ‘Eye of the Observer’ and my ‘Spawn of Nwetrou’ in that it’s the offspring of one of the Old Gods. Some of them come with some bizarre requirements or tolls that may end up being pretty bad.”

I thought about it some more, then after twenty-minutes-or-so found another entry that sounded promising, based on the apparition’s behaviour that was listed both in the Familiar section and the Entity section.

“Corpse Tree,” Owl read aloud, nodding to himself. “I think that’d be a good pick.”

The Corpse Tree was a type of Revenant that was extremely rare to encounter in the wild, but which could be caused by a type of execution performed in this world where condemned men and women were hanged from a tree. Over time their flesh and souls would bond with the Hanging Tree and turn it into a living creature of their combined spirits. It was described as a tall entity with several legs and arms, which often had a single enormous eye in the centre of its body within a large gaping maw.

As a Haunter, it was described as territorial and vengeful, but was known to only target those who had condemned its constituent souls to death and it had even been observed guarding people, perhaps due to a lingering sentiment or something like that.

“I’ll choose the Corpse Tree,” I decided.

“Excellent, although, since you’ve chosen a Revenant, there are some requirements for summoning it.”

I read the description of the ritual and couldn’t help but furrow my brow. “How am I supposed to find all *this*...?”

The list went as follows: Remains of a Condemned Man; Putrid Flesh; Kindling of a Dead Tree; & Blood of the Invoker.

“Luckily for you, I always carry around some deadwood and aged meat.”

I didn’t want to know why.

“As for the Condemned Remains, your Sinner’s Ash will work.”

“I might need some help drawing this summoning circle,” I told him.

“You’re on your own,” he replied unhelpfully. “Though I’ll check your linework for you. Just so you don’t, y’know...” Owl did a slashed-throat gesture for emphasis.

I knelt on the floor of our room and got to work drawing the sigil described in the text. Hopefully I could wipe the remains off the floor and not incur a cleaning fee from the proprietor of the inn.

“Hmm,” Owl hummed to himself.

“What?” I asked and looked up at him where he sat on his bed across from me.

“Nothing.”

I sighed annoyed. “Just say it.”

“I was merely thinking that it may be a bad idea to summon the Corpse Tree into this room. I’m not sure how tall it will be.”

I looked up at the ceiling, we were on the top floor and had at least two-and-a-half metres from floor to ceiling. “Don’t you think we have enough room?”

Owl shrugged. “It might be fine.”

It was not fine.

After completing the strange summoning sigil with its head-scratching-bizarre design of overlapping lines and seemingly-random doodles, I had placed the three offerings in their allocated spots, before borrowing Owl’s knife to cut open my palm. Though I hesitated for a while, remembering the pain from summoning Armen, I eventually managed to spill my blood onto the Black Tallow Candle that served as the ritual’s conduit. Unlike when I summoned Armen, there was no invocation to read out loud, which I thought was odd, though it was possibly because I was summoning a Revenant.

The very moment that the summoning took hold, a massive creature emerged out of the floor and continued to grow-and-grow, until its enormous back pushed against the ceiling, making the rafters *creak* in protest and producing such an ungodly amount of noise that I was sure every lodger in the inn would awaken.

Though Master Owl had warned me against being too hasty with forming my Pact, I felt that time was not on my side, so I concentrated briefly, before extending my spirit outward to touch the hideous fleshy body of my summoned familiar. It felt like my body was gripped by dozens of hands as my soul connected with the entity I’d invoked with my blood.

Powerful and fierce Corpse Tree, whose spirit is formed of those condemned souls that were hanged from your branches, and whose vengeful fury forgets no transgression. In exchange for an offering of my spirit and blood, lend me thine aid as a warrior and allow me to wield thy fury.

My foes will tremble at the very utterance of thy name.

I name thee Kabanenoki.

The entity shuddered with some sort of glee as the Pact took hold. Just before I dismissed it with my Banish, I got a proper look at its horrifying visage.

The Corpse Tree had only a vague semblance to a tree, though its eight-or-more arms did slightly remind me of branches, albeit a nightmarish version. The middle of its body was a thick trunk-like pillar, where one lopsided and large slash of a maw gaped open with hundreds of bone-shards for teeth and a single enormous rheumy-and-bloodshot eye stared out from within. Each of its arms were twisted and gnarled, with a seemingly-random number of claw-like fingers each, as well as the impression of corded muscles under its fleshy exterior. The body was covered in a spongy and pustulant tough meaty exterior that lacked any sort of skin, as though the bark of the Hanging Tree from which it had been birthed was replaced by the soft tissue of the condemned who’d been hanged from it. The different donor bodies also resulted in a mismatch of colours, and was perhaps to blame for the way that the arms didn’t seem to match, not to mention the odd sewn-together appearance of the three thick legs upon which the body walked. Altogether, the Corpse Tree was easily three metres if it stood upright, but thanks to the confined space it was kind of just stuck between the floor and ceiling.

When my new familiar vanished, it was as though the whole house breathed a sigh of relief, given how there followed a drawn-out *creak* as the ceiling settled back into its normal place.

“I hope you’re naming your familiars something good,” Owl remarked. “Although knowing you, they probably all have really obvious names in your mother-tongue. Like translating the name of the creature directly or something silly.”

He must’ve realised that he hit the nail on the head, because he grinned triumphantly, before adopting a serious expression.

“I may or may not have mentioned this, but other Exorcists, Summoners, Spirit Callers, etc., can Banish your familiars for good if they know their names or even turn them against you if they’re skilled enough. You don’t want that to happen, trust me.”

I figured it was like a password and now felt rather dumb about the names I’d given my Watcher and now my most dangerous familiar, the Corpse Tree.

“How do I change their names?” I asked.

“You can’t. Just keep it in mind for next time.”

“But why would other Adventurers want to Banish or turn my familiars against me?”

Owl shrugged. “Sometimes people will discard their morals if the reward is good enough, and sometimes they just want to watch the world burn.”

I frowned at the image he was conjuring, while wrapping some cloth around my hand to staunch the bleeding. The wound was small enough that it ought to heal by itself without the need of surgery. “I thought Adventurers fought to help people in this world.”

“If only everyone else was as naïve and sincere, then it might be possible,” he mocked me. “You have to realise that a lot of people who come to this world have never experienced what it’s like to have *real* power before and it can go to their heads.

“You may not think much of it, but we are able to call upon terrible creatures to do our bidding with, honestly, rather simple and easy tolls. That Revenant you just summoned... do you even understand how dangerous it is? I’ve seen a Corpse Tree decimate an entire village. The way it fights is brutal and they’re really difficult to Exorcise, requiring a full team of Adventurers, preferably ones with fire-elemental abilities.”

I grimaced and wanted to, but didn’t say, “You told me it was a good idea to summon it!”

“Is it common for Adventurers to turn evil?” I asked instead.

“You’re looking at things in too simple of terms,” he answered. “It’s not like someone considers themselves evil because their moral compass is out of whack. I’ve seen truly despicable acts justified by people I normally would consider good. So it’s not a simple thing to explain. But you need to keep your guard up, because there are those who find joy in others’ misery. Heck, there are even Exorcists who deliberately cause Hauntings, just because they see the people of this world as having no value other than as sacrifices.”

I swallowed hard. When I thought about it, there wasn’t really anything that stopped me from causing a Haunting. After all, it seemed to just require me to summon an apparition and then not form a Pact with it. And, with the knowledge of the Encyclopaedia in my hands, I could even cause a Haunting to naturally occur, just by setting up the right conditions for someone’s death.

Suddenly, the thought of what my Exorcist Abilities could do in the wrong hands felt overwhelming and I struggled to find rest in my bed until dawn eventually came calling.

Owl and I were standing on a large pier that led to the Haunted Galleon. Along this particular pier, which was made to serve the largest possible vessels the city of Ochre might welcome, there were other ships that were larger than the Galleon, but none were as imposing nor impressive.

From what I’d overheard, while standing behind my Mentor as his dutiful-but-silent aide, ‘Fallow’s Fortune’, as the ship was known, had a distinguished history from the last war between the Principality of Arley and the nearby island nation of Goldentide. Following the war, wherein the Captain had died, Fallow I presumed though he was unnamed by the storyteller, the ship had been acquired by a rich merchant who wished to ply his craft on the open seas and its many cannons had been sold off. The vessel had been a favourite of Ochre’s Lord, Peter Garfh, as, every time it arrived in port, it always brought with it trinkets from faraway lands, as well as peculiar art and sculptures.

Owl seemed to take particular note of this nugget of information and I remembered that the quest had mentioned that there were rumours about *something* having been brought aboard, like a Demon in disguise or some curse. I also recalled the descriptions of some entities in the Encyclopaedia, which mentioned that they might be caused by a cursed artefact and I wondered if such a thing could be to blame for this.

When our briefing was over, the person in charge went to fetch us the retinue of four Paladins who would accompany us inside the Galleon, as we performed our investigation into the Demon.

Suddenly Owl grabbed my left hand, which sent a jolt of fresh pain through the wound in my palm, which I’d bound tightly with a simple cloth.

“I thought your Protector had regenerative abilities,” he commented upon seeing that I still had the wound from the ritual earlier that morning.

“I don’t think so,” I replied, pulling my hand out of his grasp.

“He can talk, right? So ask him.”

I almost argued back, but then realised that it was a silly impulse.

Armen, are you able to heal me?

“Indeed. In life I was a Priest Crusader and a lingering fragment of my once-powerful healing magic is still under my control.”

I blinked in surprise, then my expression soured.

“If you can heal, then why didn’t you do so after I was beaten up!?” I blurted out loud.

Owl grinned in response, but I paid it no attention, as my eyes were focused on the hovering wraith in front of me.

“It requires a substantial amount of your energy and you were depleted at the time. Further, I have not been instructed to perform such duties.”

I sighed in frustration. *How am I supposed to know you have such an ability if you don't tell me?*

“I understand the confusion,” Armen replied unhelpfully.

I'm telling you now that I desire for you to heal my wounds unless explicitly stated otherwise.

“Understood. My priority will still remain on the prevention of such injuries, but I will ensure that I utilise my powers to mend your wounds when you are not under attack.”

A weak glow started to envelop my left hand and I took off the makeshift bandage stained with my blood, just in time to see the wound knit itself shut as if my skin had come alive to mend the tear. The act drew a lot of energy out of me though, which was worrying.

“I'll be damned...” Master Owl muttered. “I think I can guess what sort of Wraith you've acquired. It's a former Adventurer, right?”

“He says he was a Priest Crusader.”

Owl tilted his head in confusion. “Huh. I didn't know *that* was a possible Specialisation for a Priest. Is he able to use his Heal on others? And does he have other Priest abilities like Cure and Blessing?”

“I can wield Heal and Cure, but I do not have the ability to utilise these abilities on anyone but you,” Armen answered before I could even ask. I was surprised that he could hear what Owl said as he had thus far only reacted to my words.

I shook my head.

“That's a shame. But still, what a rare find. If you ever grow tired of him and want a replacement, make sure you give me his name.”

“Not in a million years,” I replied with a smile.

“It was worth a try,” Owl replied.

A few minutes later, four tall and brawny men in polished plate armour came marching up to us. As expected, all four of them had yellow auras to match their shared Role.

The frontmost one stepped forward and said, “Master Owl, my name is Holm and I am the leader of your guard. It is an honour to be able to aid you in dealing with the foul Demon that has beset Ochre.”

The way he spoke made him seem courageous and trustworthy, but the way his aura trembled made me think that he was absolutely terrified. It wasn't obvious from his chiselled face what exactly his age was and I had no idea if it was common for people to become Crusaders or other Advanced

Roles around Harleigh’s age, though I got the impression that all four of these men were in his age-group.

Holm had curly black hair and intense pale-blue eyes, while the other three looked like triplets, with only differing eye colours separating them from each other, since each had semi-long dark-blond hair and angular chiselled features.

“These three are—”

“I don’t need to know your names,” Owl interrupted harshly. “Follow my orders and don’t get killed, that’s all I need from you.”

Holm paused, but then nodded simply.

“Understood.”

His aura was the same as before, but the men with him seemed to already be angry with my Mentor.

He needs to work on his people skills...

Before we could even step towards the ramp that led to the upper deck of the Galleon, Master Owl handed each of us a rectangular vellum paper strip with strange squiggles on it.

“What are these for?” I asked before Holm or his gang could.

“They’re Wards. We’re dealing with a Demon here so it will seek to assault your mind, either to possess you or trap you in a mind-loop. These are to prevent that... for a time. If you start to see the paper tarnish, then it’s time for you to leave the ship. Understood?”

“Understood,” the four Paladins said in unison, while I just nodded lamely.

“Make sure your weapons are ready. If you haven’t already, you should gather a waterskin of Holy Water from the Priest over there,” Owl told the four, while pointing to one of the many Adventurers who made up the cordon of the Port District.

“When are you gonna teach me how to make *these*?” I asked as the four men left us for a moment.

“Ward Crafting is no simple thing to teach,” he replied. “But, maybe after the Exorcism is done I can at least show you how to get started with learning it, though a lot of it you will have to discover for yourself.”

Moments later the Paladins returned.

“Alright, I want two of you as vanguard and the other two as rearguard. Make sure to keep your Ward on the front of your body so the rest of us can see them. If you start to feel weird, even though your Ward is in good condition, then you need to leave the ship immediately. Make sure to keep your mind fortified and strong, because a weak and insecure mind is like sweetmeat to a Demon.”

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

I swallowed hard. We were finally going into the Demon’s Lair.

20 – Demon Galleon II

The ramp leading from the marbled stone dock to Fallow’s Fortune creaked below the heavy steps of our Paladin guards, as we made our way up to the top deck of the ship.

As one, all of us froze when we stepped out onto the dock. A heavy weight had settled on each of us, and one of the Paladins let out an uncomfortable grunt. It felt like the intense pressure that I’d experienced when the Remorseful Betrayer had become enraged, but ten times stronger. My entire body was aching from just the raw presence of the Demon, while a whining tone filled my ears like tinnitus.

“Alright, we’re all still alive,” Owl remarked. “That means I didn’t screw up the wards.”

Holm let out a chuckle, though I could tell from his aura that he was as scared as his men.

The top deck of the Galleon was full of merchandise in barrels and boxes, which had been discarded in the middle of being transported off the ship. At the front of the vessel was a small raised section that led to the fore mast after climbing a ladder, as well as a small room where might be stored a few things, though which seemed to have held the fore cannons in the past. The deck we were on was about half the length of the vessel itself and behind the main mast next to us was a large section that raised up to a half-deck one floor above from where the ship was controlled and where the last of the three masts stood.

I’d never been on a ship such as this before, although it reminded me vaguely of my school trip to Hiroshima, where my class had taken a large ferry to visit Miyajima. I wasn’t great at the rocking motion of the waves, so I was glad that we were at least connected to dry land here, although the waves from the ocean still made the vessel bob ever-so-slightly in the port.

“There’s a ladder down from the deck hatch, but it’s locked. There are also ladders within the aft cabins and the upper gun-deck,” Holm told us. He had apparently studied the layout quite well, though it seemed that Master Owl was likewise informed, as he nodded in agreement.

“We’ll go through the cabins,” Owl said, but as soon as we took our first steps in that direction, the deck lit up with that light I’d seen the night before.

A moment later we were surrounded by spirits that looked like soldiers.

I was just about to summon Kabanenoki, when Owl put a hand on my shoulder. “Let them handle it. That’s why they’re here.”

The four Paladins spread out and used their golden-glowing weapons to dispatch the ghosts with ease, though one of them caught an ethereal arrow to his breastplate and stumbled back for a moment, before his comrade cut down the archer responsible.

When the ghosts were gone, Holm commented, “Good thing they’re weak to Blessed Weapons.”

I gaped in awe at their martial prowess. They’d taken down nearly twenty ghosts in an instant, without anyone being injured.

Maybe it only gets dangerous when we go deeper? I wondered.

Assured that no more ghosts were lurking on the deck, Holm led us towards the aft cabins. The door was already flung wide and within we found an upturned mess of papers, art merchandise, and furniture, as well as stains of blood, although no bodies nor foul stench to go along with it.

In fact, the whole ship smelled faintly aromatic, like a teashop. *That* smell was all I could really detect, which surprised me, given the powerful smell of the sea that’d been ever-present in the city up until now.

Behind the mess that greeted us was a staircase that led to the half-deck above, and past that was a ladder that led down into the bowels of the ship.

Master Owl pulled out his Energy Stone and I mimicked him, while we both swept it around the cabin. Mine pulsed faintly, though I couldn’t tell what exactly it was reacting to. Without a word, Owl pushed past the staircase and ladder to the main cabin further back. Holm and the three Paladins quickly followed, shoving me along, while ensuring that our rear was protected.

Any help you can give me here, Armen? I asked my Protector.

“My forte lies not in the investigation of spirits,” he replied.

It was worth a try, I guess.

When we caught up to Master Owl, he was rummaging through letters or something, his Energy Stone returned to its pocket.

“What are you looking for?” I asked, while the Paladins formed a ring around us to guard the entrance.

“If you’re gonna protect us from ghosts, you need to understand that they can move through walls,” Owl told the Paladins, and they immediately changed the pattern of their defence, while shifting closer to us. “And to answer your question, Pipsqueak. I’m looking for clues about what the captain brought on board.”

“You’re sure that it was something he brought with him?”

“It has to be,” Owl replied.

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just go deeper and find out what’s causing the Demon to manifest?” I wondered out loud.

“No.”

Before I could ask why, Holm interjected, back turned to me, “From all the reports, the last two Exorcists vanished after they ventured down into the ship. The same was the case with the parties of Paladins, Priests, and Crusaders that were sent in to exterminate it...”

“Basically,” Owl continued, while flicking through a leatherbound journal, “the Demon’s domain doesn’t truly begin until the lower deck.”

I didn’t get the time to reply, because suddenly ghosts began crawling out of the walls and floor. The Paladins immediately got to work cutting them down, but this time it was much harder, since we were in a cabin and the apparitions could just move through the objects in their path.

Suddenly Armen moved to my flank and intercepted a spear jabbed at my neck, breaking the ethereal weapon in half, before slamming the wraith into the wall. A moment later one of the Paladins slashed his blade through the pinned ghost.

Thanks.

“There are too many for me to guard you from effectively.”

Focus on just intercepting their attacks. The Paladins will kill them.

“As you command.”

Just then one of the four men let out a pained sound, and I turned just in time to see him swipe his blessed blade through a spear-wielding soldier who’d emerged out of the floor behind him, jabbing its weapon into the back of his knee.

Holm went over to aid his comrade, while the tide of soldier ghosts seemed unending. I looked to Master Owl for aid, but he was looking through the journal and letters as though there was nothing to worry about.

I bit my lip as I moved closer to him. The Paladins likewise moved closer, while the injured one leaned on Holm’s shoulder and muttered some kind of incantation.

As over three dozen apparitions emerged from the floor, walls, and doorway, the injured Paladin finished his spell by shouting: “Consecration!”

A golden light formed in a wide circle around him on the floor and created a barrier that not only kept the ghosts at bay, but seemed to actively harm them when they touched it.

“Have you found anything yet, Exorcist!?” Holm yelled at Master Owl.

“Still searching,” he mumbled. “Keep up the good work.”

After what felt like an hour, but which might only have been ten minutes, Owl announced that we were leaving.

“Holm, if you would, please clear the way to the ramp for us.” The Old Exorcist was carrying the journal with him, as well as some sort of ledger, while I was just sticking to him lamely.

As one, the Paladins each started chanting separate incantations, following some predetermined plan that I was not privy to.

“Repulse!” shouted the first, sending a golden wave of energy out in front of him, which pushed all the ghosts by the Consecration barrier several metres back.

Holm lifted his shield out in front of him, then slammed his blade into it with the flat side and yelled, “Spirit Bane!”

To my Spirit Sight it was as though an aura imbued his shield and continued to send out rings of light that, when it hit the ghosts, made them all recoil in pain.

The last Paladin ran forward while swinging his blade into any ghost that was in our way, then a second one followed suit, before Owl pushed me in the back and I followed after them. My Mentor, the injured Paladin, and Holm all brought up the rear, and the six of us ran out of the cabin, past the ladder down and the stairs up, out onto the deck and towards the ramp.

When we were only a couple metres away from the ramp that led back to the pier, the horde of ghosts broke free of their momentary stasis, before swarming us from below the deck and within the aft cabin. I waited by the ramp and watched as the wraiths were almost about to reach Holm and the injured Paladin, and then, because I had no other clue what to do, I pulled out the Blessed Golden Bell. When I rang it just once, its sound echoed outward like a church’s call to prayer, echoing impossibly around us and making all the charging ghosts cower and freeze. They broke free of the spell a moment later, but it had given the rearguard enough time to catch up before we all ran down off the ramp together.

With our feet on firm ground again, the four Paladins took up formation and waited for the wraiths to charge us from the ship, while Owl and I hid behind them, but they simply vanished.

Owl mumbled something.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I said, ‘Good thinking, using the Bell like that’.”

“Oh,” I replied, wrongfooted by his praise. “I just thought that since they looked like Wraiths it might work.”

Owl nodded. “I’ve been too focused on the fact that a Demon is behind it and hadn’t considered that its servants might still have the weaknesses of Wraiths, even if they also somehow share the Demon’s weakness.”

“But we’re sure it is in fact a Demon?” I asked. “No one has actually seen it, right?”

“No one has seen it and survived, that’s true, but *that sensation* we felt when we stepped onboard is a trademark of theirs, and the weakness to Blessed weapons and powers is a dead giveaway. Of course, there’s the possibility that it’s one of the kinds of entities that defy categorisation, in which case, we’re totally fucked.”

I frowned.

“But your action with the Bell gave me an idea,” he revealed. “But we’ll need more Sacred Corpse Ash for it, plus a lot of extra holy water.”

“What should I do?”

“Rest for now. We’ll go back in, four hours from now.”

I nodded and made to leave, but then couldn’t help but ask, “Why am I here? It seems like I can’t do anything to help.”

“You may be an utter novice, it’s true,” he started, twisting my words, “but I’ll need your aid for what comes when we delve below-deck. I’ve fought Demons before and they’re a handful, let me tell you, so having you nearby will be a boon, not to mention, it gives me peace of mind while I investigate.”

I couldn’t tell if he was speaking the truth or not, and a sceptical part of me thought that I was perhaps being used as bait again.

“Speaking of investigation,” he added. “I discovered something interesting in the main cabin.”

Owl showed me a page from the journal he had brought along:

Day 28 of our voyage to the isles

The weather is fair, though the waves are no less punishing than usual.

The meeting with the Benefactor in Goldentide went well and he was glad to hear that profits for this year would surpass those of latter years by quite a margin.

As a token of my hard work, he showed me a unique and beautiful piece that he said my esteemed Lord Garfh would be delighted to add to his collection. The sculpture is of

such uncanny likeness that I at first mistook it for a petrified boy, and the pearl clutched in the statue’s arms is of such brilliant and mesmerising lustre as what I have never before seen.

This is turning out to be a good year. Finally, Fallow’s Fortune is looking like a sound investment, even father will have to acknowledge that now, especially when Ochre’s Lord and retinue view my business and acquisitions of cultural artefacts with such rapturous excitement.

The rest of the page went on to talk about some particularly-troublesome venereal disease that the author had not yet managed to find an ointment for, followed by a long string of curses aimed at the brothels and prostitutes in some island town of Alegria...

“We’re looking for a statue then?” I asked, confused.

“The description matches an object noted in the ledger and in later pages the Captain goes on to state that his crew were starting to experience nightmares wherein the statue came to life.”

“And it was meant as a gift for Peter Garfh?”

Owl nodded. “There had to have been malicious intent behind the gift. No doubt the ‘Benefactor’ named in the journal is seeking to disrupt trade in Ochre, as well hopefully killing its Lord. And given that the statue was picked up in Goldentide, it’s not too far-fetched an idea.”

“Because they were once at war with Arley?”

“That’s right, glad to see you paid attention to the history lesson earlier.”

“How do you weaponise a Demon like *this* though?”

Master Owl’s expression changed into something very ominous.

“You don’t, not normally.”

“Then how?”

“There’s only one way someone could pull this off and it requires an ability that you’ve yet to use: ‘Contain Spirit’. But that only explains how someone was able to bind a Demon to a statue or whatever for the voyage from Goldentide to Ochre. The person responsible would also have needed to summon a Demon... an act that is deeply forbidden. Most of all the entities that we Exorcists are forbidden from forming Pacts with are Demons of one form or another.”

“Wait... you’re saying that another Exorcist like us is behind this?”

“Either that or this ‘Benefactor’ conveniently found a cursed relic that *just happened* to break down and release its Demon within as it hit the port of Ochre... But my guess is that it’s an Exorcist behind it, one with a *particular* Advanced Role.”

“What Role is that? First off, I don’t even know anything about Advanced Roles for Exorcists. Æmos told me that they’re not well-known, because so few manage to reach the level necessary.”

“Tell you what,” Owl started, “You go take your rest and I’ll explain it to you when you get back.”

I wondered if this was a strategy to get me to forget about it, so I said, “I’ll hold you to it.”

He grinned at me, in *that* frustrating manner of his.

“Do you know where I can find Rana and Lukas?” I asked.

“If they’re training still, then I’d recommend checking out the Guild.”

His grin spread further and then he tapped the lens of left eye.

I frowned. Of course he was watching them...

Sounds of clashing blades sounded from the Adventurers’ Guild courtyard that lay behind the Hall itself and I moved around the side of the stone edifice to see if it was Lukas and Rana sparring.

“That’s it!” someone said encouragingly and the voice sparked recognition in me, making me pause. “Focus on your footwork,” the person continued, while a series of *cling* and *clang* sounds echoed from beyond the courtyard wall that I was next to.

Sumi, I need your sight.

The ink-stain Watcher appeared beside me and shared its eye with me. I concentrated on maintaining my own vision alongside the shared one in my left eye, while trying to use my subconscious to control the familiar, but it was draining. I had no idea how Master Owl was able to maintain his, presumably, great number of Watchers with such ease, because it felt like I was trying to split my brain in half.

Instead of covering my right eye with my hand, I just tried to squint it slightly instead and that seemed to help stem the mental drain. Meanwhile, Sumi was lifting above the wall to stare into the courtyard from where the sounds of sparring and encouraging instructions still rang out.

As its grey-washed sight revealed the courtyard to me, I saw that it was similar in layout to the one in Lundia and I saw that three figures were in a small arena that was demarcated with an elliptical knee-high wooden fence. Further back was a Brawler practicing on a wooden dummy with a dozen branching arms, a bit like those used by Wing Chun martial artists back on Earth. There was also a

Priest overlooking a spell-caster who was rapid-firing shards of ice at ranged dummies, similar to the ones I’d practiced my Repel on.

I moved Sumi closer to the arena, where a red-haired woman in full armour sat atop the wooden fence, while a blonde teen repeatedly attacked and disengaged from a tall armoured knight, who was deflecting every strike of the boy’s shortsword and off-handed knife. The movements of the dazzling knight were simple and precise, as though he was a veteran of a thousand wars, while the boy fought like a street urchin whose life depended on it.

Letting out a sigh, I cut my connection to Sumi and continued walking along the wall of the courtyard, until I came to the brass gate that I pushed aside, before entering. As the auras of the six people within became visible to my Spirit Sight, it confirmed what I’d already known from Sumi’s spying: it was Rana and Lukas, as well as Harleigh and his party.

I saw the way that Rana watched Harleigh’s movements and nodded along to his instructions, and it made a ball of envy and anxiety form in my chest.

That night we shared had nothing to do with me... I realised. She just used me to try and forget about him... it’s so clear to me now...

In that moment, I realised that I wanted to believe in Master Owl’s characterisation of Harleigh, if only because believing he was a lying and backstabbing bastard was the only way I could justify the emotions inside me.

“Do not let yourself be overcome with envy.”

I sighed. I can’t help it, Armen. I think I love Rana, so this is painful to watch.

My Protector, who was hovering in front of me, actually seemed to nod in response, before he said, **“Unrequited love is painful, but sometimes you may wrongfully infer a truth that does not exist.”**

Look at her, she’s clearly in love with Harleigh! It’s obvious to anyone.

“Is he looking at her?”

Well... no. But there’s clearly something between them!

“I believe you would be best served asking her directly for an answer. Perhaps things were different in my time, but I do not believe she would have shown you such affection just because it was convenient or because you could serve as a distraction.”

I scoffed. I thought we weren’t going to talk about that night ever again.

Before he could reply, Armen suddenly moved around to my flank and shot his arm out to halt someone. I turned around on the spot, just in time to see a man avoid the defending strike Armen sent his way.

“Woah... *what* did you just try to do to me?” the man asked. I recognised him as the Brawler in Harleigh’s party. He was almost two metres tall, had very wide shoulders, rose-tanned skin, and his arms were like tree trunks of corded muscle, though his lower torso was narrower and his legs almost spindly, giving him a very top-heavy look. His facial features were sharp like a statue made of steel, his eyes were black with faintly-grey irises and his hair was a shock-white buzzcut. Most peculiarly, his ears were pointy at the top, like those of an elf from fantasy stories.

“You snuck up on me,” I said as calmly as I could, trying not to imagine what he could do to me if I tried to take him on in a fight. “My familiar acted accordingly and tried to protect me from you.”

The man grinned, exposing large canines and pearl-white teeth. “I was merely wondering why you were watching us so intently. It’s not nice to stare, y’know.”

“An odd way to approach someone, if your intentions were innocent,” I replied.

“I’m not sure I like your tone, *Exorcist*.” The way he said the last word was full of venom and hatred.

I took a step towards the arena that Harleigh, Lukas, and Rana were still training in, while oblivious to me and the Brawler’s tense chat. The Brawler made to put a hand on my shoulder and I felt my energy drain slightly at Armen’s deflection, though the Adventurer deftly avoided it again.

When he tried a third time though, my Protector seized his wrist and flung him over my back sending him tumbling across the gravel of the courtyard, though the Brawler quickly recovered and, as he got up, he pulled two axes from his belt. The clothes he wore were casual, a baby-blue sailor’s shirt and comfortable-looking shorts of some soft fabric, but his casual attire was overshadowed by the brutal weapons he pulled to his hands.

“**How do you wish to proceed?**” Armen asked me, for the first time seeking my direct command before he took any sort of action.

Just keep doing what you’re doing, I told him, drawing the Focus from its pouch on my belt.

As the Brawler charged towards me with thumping steps and axes gripped fiercely in his hands, Harleigh and Rana, as well as the Priest and Elementalist by the range, finally seemed to take notice.

“What are you doing, Gilliam!?” Harleigh yelled, but the Brawler didn’t even flinch at his name being called.

While he came closer and Armen repositioned himself in front of me, I tried to calmly imagine the energy building up within my body and flowing down my arm into the Focus I held.

As he was just three metres from me, I lifted my right hand with the Barrier Ring Focus and then I muttered the word: “Repel.”

21 – Some Truth and Rest

After the energy was expelled out of my hand it absorbed into the steel ball of the Barrier Ring, letting the small bell within the Focus reverberate with my power, before seeming to condense the power I’d fed it and lighting up the glass torus around the ball. All of this happened in half a second but was acutely obvious to me, somehow.

Then the Focus released the energy within as my Repel spell, shooting what to my eyes looked like a whirling sphere of air straight into the torso of the menacing Brawler. Following the impact, the Adventurer froze for a moment, a bizarre expression overtaking his face: somewhere between discomfort and dread. But then he revealed his gritted teeth and leapt for me.

A loud *claaang* of metal-on-metal sounded as Rana was suddenly in front of me, intercepting his descending axes with her forearm-mounted shield. Before Gilliam could strike again, she had lanced into his solar plexus with her right gauntleted fist, keeling him over.

Rana was about to pull her blade from her scabbard, when Harleigh and his two teammates came over. The Elementalist looked on the verge of invoking a spell, while the Priest gripped his glass-tipped white-and-gold staff fiercely.

“What the hell is going on!?” Harleigh demanded to know, while I was preparing to manifest Kabanenoki by running a small knife across my palm.

“I don’t believe escalating the situation is advisable.”

I may not have a choice... I told Armen.

A moment later Lukas was by my side, looking between me and the unconscious Brawler.

“Ryūta, what happened?” Rana asked softly, her right hand still on her pommel and her shield-arm lifted in front of her.

“This Brawler snuck up on me when I entered the courtyard. I was just looking for you.”

While the Priest used some sort of spell on the downed Brawler, Harleigh looked past Rana and into my eyes with a gaze sharp as flint. “Is that *all* that happened?”

“He tried to put his hands on me for some reason, and my familiar tried to protect me.”

At the mention of my familiar, the Elementalist’s face curled in disgust and he took a step towards me, but was halted by the Crusader’s armoured palm on his torso.

“You should teach your familiar to not be actively looking for trouble inside a city,” Harleigh scolded me.

“Last time I thought I was safe inside a city,” I started, almost raising my voice into a snarl, “I was beaten to a pulp by four Mercenaries, so when I’m approached *like that* I will take all the precautions I believe necessary! Besides, what cause did your *friend* have to apprehend me for just wanting to see my party members!?”

Rana turned to look at me with a worried expression.

Oh, right, I never told her that I was beaten up...

Harleigh relaxed his posture somewhat, but I could tell by the way his aura was moving that it was a faux gesture to deescalate the situation.

“I think we should leave,” Rana said.

“Listen to your babysitter, *Exorcist!*” yelled the Elementalist, no longer capable of holding his tongue. “Get the fuck out of here!”

I took a deep breath, before letting it out of my nostrils slowly.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Harleigh. “I thought you were better than *this*.”

Then I turned around and left. Rana and Lukas followed behind me shortly after. I wondered what sort of expression Harleigh was making, though I didn’t truly want to know.

“Slow down, Ryūta!” Rana called, while Lukas trailed behind her. “Where are you even going?”

I came to a sudden halt and she nearly bumped into me.

“Why were you training with them!?” I demanded of her.

Rana frowned. “They were already there when Lukas and I showed up earlier to practice some of his skills, and Harleigh just took over.”

“He was very strong,” Lukas just remarked, apparently not wanting to comment on the mess I’d brought into their practice session.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you!?” I said to Rana, my face flushed red with frustration and the embarrassment of the scene I was causing in the middle of the Marketplace District.

“It’s not like that. I told you it’s complicated,” she repeated.

“Then explain it to me! Because the way you were looking at him suggests something else!”

Rana folded her arms and looked down at me.

“Why are you acting *this way*, all of a sudden?” she asked, her expression hard to read, but her red aura vacillating between dangerously-spiky and hazy uncertainty.

I gritted my teeth and looked down at my feet. “I thought that after... *that night*, we were something special.”

Rana let out a sigh of relief, then put a hand on my head, which didn't make me feel better, but instead only exacerbated my embarrassment.

“Come on, I'll take us to a nice bathhouse, then we can talk about this in private.”

We returned to the Comfort District, with Rana leading the fore, walking past the places we'd seen yesterday, such as the fish-on-rice restaurant. Further into the district the street opened up and became like something very nostalgic to me: an onsen town.

The centre of the wide street had a stream with stone benches on either side of it. The water that ran along this stream was fed from five pipes at one end, before running down a very slight decline and letting a cascade of fragrant steam rise into the air. I noticed that this part of the city was especially crowded with the Street Sweepers, though they seemed mostly focused on wiping down the façades of the stone shops and houses, while also sweeping any errant water back into the central stream using specialised sweepers. Without their diligent work, the stones underfoot would've been very treacherous.

“I've been to a place slightly similar to this back in my world,” I told Rana and Lukas. The nostalgia alone caused me to calm down a bit, though there was also a sense of melancholy I couldn't avoid feeling.

I wonder if mom is sad about my disappearance? She'd been the one to take me to Arima Onsen, as a reward for getting into High School. And when I thought back, she was responsible for a lot of my best memories, as well as giving me a happy childhood, even after my dad had passed away.

The Vanguard seemed to be in a hurry to get to our destination, so she did not reply. Lukas was staring longingly at the stream, no doubt wanting to dip his feet in.

I wish I could have shown mom this place... The overwhelming nostalgia was making me almost teary-eyed at this point. *I really miss her*, I realised, even though the last few years of living with her had been extremely difficult, particularly when I didn't pass my entrance exam to uni.

Towards the end of the wide street, Rana came to a halt in front of a small building, the roof of which seemed to have a hole in the middle, as steam was rising from within. Without letting us ask any questions, she simply took us both by the hand and led us inside.

“Is there anyone else in?” she asked the proprietor, who shook his head. She let go of Lukas' hand to toss the guy five silver crowns that she pulled from a belt pouch. “We'll reserve it for two hours then.”

“Erm... is this a good idea?” I asked, as I used a very small towel to cover my body, while I slowly lowered myself into the steaming waters of the large open-air pool. It was perhaps half-a-metre deep on our side and a metre deep at the other end.

“Don’t be so hesitant,” she replied and I could tell she was smiling, though I dared not look directly at her. “There’s nothing I haven’t already seen.”

“Didn’t realise you were such a pervert,” I replied sarcastically.

Lukas was already swimming around near the deep end, not the slightest bit concerned with the fact that Rana was in here with us. She was sitting in the shallow end with her head and arm leaned over the lip of the pool, staring as I slowly sank into the water’s warm embrace. The water itself was opaque, perhaps because of the temperature or some underground minerals, but I could still see *everything* when I glanced her way.

“I shall keep guard by the entrance,” Armen decided, unprompted.

That’s not what this is! I tried to tell him, but the Wraith floated away nonetheless. I had a brief thought that perhaps he was put off by nudity, which would be somewhat odd, given that he was... well... dead. But then again, he yet retained his personality, so maybe it was a quirk from his real life as a human that’d carried over?

“I am not a prude.”

I couldn’t help but let out a chuckle, which seemed to surprise Rana. With a smile, she tapped the water near her with the palm of her right hand, indicating that I should move closer, but I stayed put.

“Did you tell the truth back in the courtyard?” she wondered. There was no accusation to her words.

“*That Brawler* tried to put his hands on me. And you heard how their Elementalist spoke to me. Those guys despise Exorcists. It’s like they wanted to fight me, even though I’ve done nothing to them!”

“They’ve had a bad experience in the past,” Rana told me, her expression turning grim. “Harleigh’s party used to have five members. Their current Priest, Mayhew, is a recent acquisition. In the past, they had a woman named Isadorre as their Priest and a Huntress called Bella, but both of them were killed by an Exorcist.”

My heart skipped a beat at her words. “...How?” was all I could manage to ask.

Rana scooted a bit closer to me, before letting herself sink down to just below her jaw. I tried very hard to just focus on her face, but I could tell that heat was rising to my head very quickly, so I instead averted my gaze upward to look at the cloudless sky above the bathhouse.

“It was a bit over four years ago, shortly after I came to this world. A string of unexplainable murders across the city of Helmstatter had led to a very unique Investigation & Tracking Quest being posted, which Harleigh’s party were able to take on, given that they had a Huntress with those two unique abilities.”

I could technically do a quest like that too, if I had a Tracker familiar, I considered, since Exorcists also had access to the Investigation ability, opening up that type of unique quest for me as well, although I hadn’t seen any on Lundia’s Quest Boards. From how I understood Investigation Quests, they were basically like solving a crime, whether it was theft, murder, or disappearance.

“I don’t know many of the specifics, other than the fact that the psycho, who was murdering people in the city, was a very powerful Exorcist with a thing for killing women and forcing his familiars’ spirits into their bodies, in order to reanimate them. The way I understand it, he ambushed and killed their Priest when she was alone one day, then used her reanimated body to lure their party into a trap, where their Huntress was then killed.

“They managed to take him down, but their party was irreparably destroyed. The Brawler Gilliam and Elementalist Zelser, though he was a Spellhand back then, ended up joining different parties for a couple years, while Harleigh ended up joining a group of Witch Hunters.

“In the end, however, Harleigh decided to take the Crusader specialisation over the Witch Hunter one. They only came back together last year and then found Mayhew, who was the sole survivor of his party after taking on a really terrible quest.”

I frowned. “They’ve all been through a lot.”

“Anyone in this world faces a lot of setbacks, yeah, but theirs have been an especially arduous path. To be honest, because of the tales I heard of the ‘Puppet Master’ Exorcist they faced, I’ve always been really apprehensive around Exorcists as well.”

“Exorcists can hardly be the only ones that turn to evil,” I said, then realised I was inadvertently defending the monster who had killed Harleigh’s friends, so I quickly added, “I mean, there must’ve been bad Crusaders, Spellhands, and whatnot too, right?”

“Sure, though it seems that the experiences faced by Exorcists and Summoners are especially conducive to creating monsters.”

My frown deepened, though I couldn't really argue with her. After all, I'd been moments away from invoking my Corpse Tree to fight back against Harleigh's teammates, an act that would surely have confirmed all their worst suspicions about me.

“We do have to contend with the control of malevolent spirits,” I replied, “But my Guardian Wraith is a good guy.”

Rana looked confused by this answer, but I quickly waved my hand in front of me.

“Forget it, it's too complicated to explain right now.”

“Isn't that why we're here, to talk about complicated things?”

“This is something I don't feel comfortable talking about here.”

“I see,” she replied.

For a few minutes we just lounged in the warm pool without saying anything. Meanwhile, Lukas had gotten out of the pool to drench himself in some cold water, before hopping back in. He seemed to be having fun. It struck me then that this might be his first visit to a place like this. After all, he had grown up an orphan and had to work for Lundia's Margrave since an early age...

A small smile settled on my lips. I was glad I'd taken a chance on him.

Rana seemed to notice my expression and scooted closer to me. We were almost rubbing shoulders at this point.

I let out a sigh, then turned to look into her dark-golden eyes, before asking, “What exactly is the deal between you and Harleigh?”

My chest tightened in dread of what her answer would be.

“He saved my life once, when my party took on a quest that turned out to be way harder than advertised. This was back when he was still with the Witch Hunters. I guess since then I began to really admire him and the way he fights.”

“Isn't that just another way of saying you fell in love?”

“It wasn't like that. Back then I was in a relationship with the Rogue in my party.”

“...Oh. The guy who...”

“Yeah. He died... But, anyway, even if I was in love with Harleigh, it would never work, cause, y'know, he's...”

“He's what?” I asked.

Just then Lukas swam close, emerging head-first from the water like a sealion scouting for land. “The Crusader is into other men,” he answered, having apparently followed our conversation while

swimming around. The way he was so unassuming and yet so clued-in was really unnerving, especially given his age.

“Really?”

“Yeah. The way he was looking at me while we were practicing was very intense.”

“I guess you’re his type,” Rana teased with a smile.

“He’s old enough to be my dad,” Lukas replied with disgusted expression, then flipped around in the water, kicked off the side of the pool and returned to the deeper end. I watched him frolic for a moment, then turned back to Rana.

“So Harleigh didn’t give you the mirror?”

“What? No. I got that from Hesh.”

“Your Rogue boyfriend?”

“Yeah...”

I put my hands over my face to hide my embarrassment. “I’m such an idiot,” I whispered.

When we left the bathhouse, my hair was all puffy, but I finally felt clean again, although now the next thing on my to-do list was finding a way to wash my clothes, especially my robe-coat, as it absorbed a lot of my sweat and odour, practically making bathing meaningless.

“What should we do now?” Rana asked me.

“I need to get back to Master Owl,” I told her. “We’re venturing back into the Galleon.”

“I see... be careful, okay?”

I nodded. “Thanks for bringing me here,” I told her. “Let’s return again tomorrow.”

“Are you some kind of bathing freak?” she teased.

I frowned. “No wonder hygiene here is *this bad* when bathing daily makes you a ‘freak’...”

22 – Demon Galleon III

When I returned to the pier, I only found Holm and one of the Paladins there. They were sitting on a raised bit of stone that was a minimalistic attempt at either a table or a bench.

“Where’s Master Owl?” I asked them.

“He went to get something from the Church,” Holm replied. “Think he said it was a type of Ash.”

“Sacred Corpse Ash,” the other man elaborated. I recognised him as the one who’d gotten injured in his knee, though he seemed better now.

“How’s your leg?” I asked him.

“It’s fine, thank you.”

“I never got to know your name,” I said and added, “I’m Ryūta.”

The Paladin reached a hand out and said, “I’m Frode.”

I grasped his hand and he looked surprised for a moment, then Holm let out a chuckle.

“It’s always curious how Otherworlders greet, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure I follow,” I responded confused.

Frode got up and then grasped me by my forearm instead of my hand. “This is how we do it where I’m from,” he explained.

“And where’s that?” I asked. “I’m from Earth.”

“Jörð, we call it, though I believe it must be the same world as yours. At least I have been told in the past that my world may be referred by such a name as well.”

“Is it possible we’re from different eras?” I asked, surprised that such a thing might even be possible. But, then again, we were in a world full of magic and monsters, so it was hardly a stretch to imagine those brought here against their will might hail from different worlds.

“Which King ruled the northern territories in your world?” he inquired.

“King?” I asked, confused. *This guy must be from the middle ages or something.*

“Did you have technology in your world?” I continued.

“Of what sort?” he responded.

Suddenly I was wondering if the words I were using were somehow translated into words he could comprehend, since he no doubt also had the Omniglot ability. Unfortunately, I didn’t know a lot about history to properly narrow down what era he might be from, let alone what country. And his appearance might be a red herring, given how this world could alter one’s visage.

“For example, were your lamps lit with electricity?”

He shook his head, slightly confused. “Ours were lit by fire.”

“It was the same in my world,” Holm replied. Again I had to wonder what the word ‘Electricity’ was translated into for them. Perhaps it sounded to them as though I’d asked if lightning was used for lanterns in their world.

“What world are you from?” I asked him.

“Midrealm, specifically the Winter Isles.”

“Midrealm?” I repeated. *That’s the same as Rana’s world.* “Do you know about the Thorn Dynasty?”

Holm nodded. “They’re the rulers of the Summer Isles.”

There was another thing I wanted to ask of them, since it was something that’d been floating around in the back of my mind ever since discovering that Otherworlders came from worlds other than Earth as well.

“Wasn’t it hard being brought *here* without a say in it?”

Holm shrugged and Frode just replied, “It’s more comfortable in this world.”

“I see...”

“You’re not from a world steeped in war, are you?” Holm asked.

“I suppose not. Everything was pretty safe, at least in my country. There were wars in other countries, but before coming here I’d never been in a fight for my life.”

Frode nodded as though he knew this already. “Otherworlders from peaceful worlds tend to have a harder time fitting in here.”

“My nation,” Holm started, “We were always at war, either with the creatures of our world or neighbouring kingdoms. The first time I held a sword was when I turned five.”

This explains so much... Suddenly my sense of feeling like an outsider, even amongst outsiders, had a good explanation. I had to wonder if Master Owl’s world of Oblus was the same as mine or not. He had said that it was ruled by a Meritocracy, which might have been conducive to peace or something close to it, after all, he seemed very denigrating of the political systems in this world.

“I’ve gotta say, though, you really drew the short straw,” Holm remarked. “It must be tough being an Exorcist.”

I nodded. It definitely wasn’t as glamorous as being a knight in shining armour, plus the way that Harleigh’s party had treated me had reminded me of how most people viewed my profession.

“Is it fun being a Paladin?” I asked.

“Like everything, it has its ups and downs. Generally, it feels like a blessing. In my own world, I had little worth and was expected to die for my Queen, but *here* people look up to me. At times it feels unearned and I’m at a loss on how to live up to their expectations...”

Frode cast his friend a weird look. “I never knew you felt that way.”

“You don’t feel the same, Frode?”

“Not really. To me, this just feels like one long glorious battle. I’ve never been so happy to have a purpose before. If people look up to me, why would I doubt their perception of me as being anything but true?”

“If only I could have your simple optimism,” Holm replied with a grin, clapping on friend on the shoulder.

I couldn’t help but smile at their comradery, although it reminded me of Renji and I, which made a wave of melancholy wash over me. *I wonder how he’s doing...*

Before I could ask anything else, Owl appeared with the two other Paladins, each of which were carrying a large sack of what I could only fear were the cremated remains of Sacred Corpses...

“Ready to get back in?” he asked with a devious grin. “I have *something* I want to try.”

While the four paladins protected us, we lined the length of the deck with Sacred Corpse Ash, as well as the doorways and ladders to the upper deck and raised area at the fore. It took maybe ten minutes, wherein we were consistently under attack from a ceaseless horde of ghastly soldiers, but this time around the Paladins were less sparing with their abilities, tearing through over two-hundred of the wraiths in the time it took us to lay down the tremendous amount of Ash.

“Phew,” Owl said as he finished the final line. I traced the entire thing, ensuring there were no gaps in the Ash, then returned to his side.

“It should be good,” I told him.

“What did you do?” Holm inquired. “The ghosts... they’ve stopped coming.”

“The deck should now be a safe place to retreat to,” Owl told him without really answering his question. “But make sure that you do not disturb the lines of Ash. Any breaks in the lines will allow them to enter this area.”

“What now?” I asked him.

“We give the cabins the same treatment.”

I frowned. It would be a lot harder to work in the narrow rooms, plus it would be impossible for Armen to follow me without having to break the lines. Then I realised that I could simply dismiss

him and summon him back after crossing the lines... it would be a pain, but it beat having to create gaps to allow him to follow me, since that also opened up the possibility of the wraiths getting in.

Owl used his Blessed Golden Bell as soon as he stepped over the line of Ash and entered the aft cabin with the upturned mess of furniture and sprays of blood coating the floor and walls. Following the reverberating echoes of his bell, the Paladins spread out, as Owl and I quickly made lines in the doorways, windows, and before the staircase leading up. We then moved on to the ladder down, which we surrounded with a ring of Ash, before moving to the larger main cabin in the back, repeating the procedure.

“Alright, this should hold,” Owl commented.

“How much Ash did we just use?” I asked him. “Will we have enough for the lower deck?”

“We’re not doing this down there,” he told me. “Demons have too many tricks to deal with Sacred Ash, so it’d be pointless to attempt. Plus, we need to stay focused, because it’ll try to exploit any opening it finds.”

I looked down at the ward on the front of my robes. Owl had safeguarded them after our first visit to the ship and had returned them to us before we boarded it the second time. I had to wonder just how useful it was though. It was just a slip of expensive paper with some writing and symbols on it.

It was strange though, despite my Omniglot ability, I couldn’t read what was written on the vellum slip.

“Are we finally going down there?”

Owl nodded gravely, but then put on his usual grin. I suddenly recalled how Rana had noticed that his smile never reached his eyes, and I couldn’t help but look at his goggled face and realise that she was absolutely right.

If I could see his aura, would I be able to tell his actual emotional state?

“Is everyone ready?” Owl asked. The four paladins looked concerned, but each nodded in turn.

He looked at me and said, “Don’t forget your Soul Barrier skill. It’s your best defence against a Demon trying sink its claws into your mind.”

“I’ll do my best,” I told him, remembering exactly how he’d taught me to use the ability... I’d promised myself that I wouldn’t have anything else to do with him after *that*, but look where I was...

I let out a sigh, then mimicked the other five as they pulled out their waterskins full of holy water. As one, we all dumped the water onto our heads, letting it drench our clothes and hair, or, in the case of the Paladins, cast a warm gleam to their plated armour.

“Alright, in we go,” Owl said, and Holm hopped straight down the hole, skipping the ladder altogether. After announcing that it was safe, Frode followed behind him. Then Owl took the ladder down and I followed suit.

With each wooden rung I stepped down into the dark bowels of the ship, the heavier the invisible burden on my body became, and I realised in horrified dismay that what we’d all experienced after setting foot on the deck was but a diluted version of the Demon’s oppressive aura.

As my feet touched down on the wooden floor and Frode lit a lantern he’d found, I did my best to stand tall despite the crushing sensation of the burdensome aura. Moments later, the last two Paladins jumped down the hole, landing behind me one after the other.

Owl went around inspecting our Wards.

“So far, so good,” he said.

I grimaced. Alongside the intense aura, the scent of teashop leaves had grown significantly stronger as well, giving me a headache with its complex smell of sweet and herby aromas.

Come on out again, Armen.

The Guardian Wraith appeared by my side.

“**I find this place suffocating,**” the Protector commented.

Glad I’m not the only one.

After finding and lighting a second lantern that was handed to the rear-guarding Paladins, Holm and Frode led us down the cramped spaces below the deck. The way the light from their lanterns bobbed over the surrounding wooden walls and floor seemed quite strange to my eyes. It was as if the shadows reached for the light, rather than simply being pushed back by its glow.

“Repulse,” said Holm, sending out a golden wave ahead of him. Surprisingly, the shadows seemed to move away, as though the holy power of the Paladin was able to dispel them. I then realised what had been odd about the lantern light, because the moment the encroaching shadows were repulsed, they glowed a lot brighter, like they ought to have from the beginning.

“The shadows are unnatural,” I commented.

“We are in the Demon’s domain,” Owl replied. “It can control everything.”

Our group of six split around the large pillar of the central mast, which pierced the ceiling and continued down through the floor. When we linked up on the other side of it, I noticed that something was slowly trickling out of one of Owl’s belt pouches.

He saw me looking and answered, “It’s on purpose. I’m leaving a trail of Sinner’s Ash so we can retrace our steps.”

The way he worded it made me think he was preparing to get lost in a labyrinth and not a linear series of rooms. No sooner had I thought *that* out loud than one of the rear-guarding Paladins let out a surprised gasp.

“Kat... he’s gone!”

We all stopped and looked back.

“He was just here,” the Paladin said, his face a mask of fear.

“It has already begun,” Owl said ominously. I couldn’t help but just stand there and gape. We’d been in the Demon’s lair for less than five minutes and already it had taken someone.

“It’s okay, Christian,” Holm told the guy, patting him on the shoulder. But I could see their auras and knew that he did not believe his own words.

“He still has the Ward,” my Mentor said. “If we can find him before it is destroyed, we can save him.”

They all nodded.

“But remember: our focus is still on finding the statue,” Owl continued. “Conserve your abilities for now, but if you get lost or taken, use them as much as you can.”

“He can’t have gone far,” said Frode encouragingly.

Owl shook his head though. “In a Demon’s domain, logic and reality are flexible concepts. For all we know, this space may be ten times as big as it truly is... It all depends on the strength of the Demon.”

I swallowed hard.

I don’t want to be here.

“**Leaving is no longer an option,**” Armen commented and I felt my heart sink.

After allowing for a couple minutes of recovering our spirit, Owl urged us on, but a sense of paranoia had fiercely gripped each of us and progress was slow. It also didn’t help that the ceiling was so low in places that even I had to hunch forward slightly to avoid bumping into the doorframes every time we passed into a new room. Strangely, some of the other rooms were over two metres from floor-to-ceiling.

While we walked in sombre silence, we passed crates of merchandise, which seemed full of everything from grain to artworks. A few of the crates held nothing but statues, while others contained carefully lined canvases in hand-carved frames.

We passed through another door and were then greeted by a three-metre-long pillar piercing the room.

“Are we already at the fore mast?” wondered Frode out loud.

“It’s the central mast again,” Holm replied, his voice full of genuine dread.

“We haven’t walked in circles,” Owl stated, “my trail of Sinner’s Ash would’ve been here otherwise.”

“Those crates are the same we’ve seen before!” I told them, inadvertently adding to the feeling of paranoia they felt. “It’s like the whole ship has looped...”

“There should only be six rooms spanning the lower deck,” Holm muttered. “But we’ve gone through at least sixteen.”

“Everyone, come here,” Owl said, and we all obliged. He looked over our wards, then nodded satisfied. “We keep going.”

“We’re supposed to go even deeper, right?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

“But we haven’t seen any ladders or stairs leading down yet,” I said.

Holm took on a look of consternation, then said, “There ought to have been one right here, next to the central mast...”

“Everyone, calm down. You are applying logic to an illogical place.”

His words had little affect on them, nor on me for that matter. It felt like I was stuck in a bizarre nightmare.

“*Help!*” a voice suddenly shouted from up ahead and I saw a spark of recognition enter the Paladins’ eyes. A second later the rearguard, Christian, ran off towards the sound, shouting, “Kat! We’re right here!”

“Stop him!” Owl yelled, but before either Holm nor Frode could react, the man had gone around the central mast and vanished.

There was a tense moment where the four of us looked at each other, after moving around the mast together and not seeing any sign of the Paladin, and it was clear that to the remaining two Paladins, their thoughts were on rescuing their comrades. But then they seemed to reach an unspoken agreement and looked to Owl for guidance.

“What should we do?” asked Holm, while Frode swung the one remaining lantern around, perhaps trying to drive away the encroaching shadows. Armen was hovering in front of me, and

though his blurred wraith body was hard to discern much emotion from, I could feel through our Pact that he was worried.

My Mentor seemed deep in thought for a bit, but then nodded to himself, before pulling something from a jacket pocket and tossing it into the air. I saw the object briefly as it tumbled towards the darkness ahead of us. It was like a small bone of some sort. From one moment to the next, a *thing* appeared out of thin air and chomped down on the bone with a loud *crunch*.

Holm and Frode both instantly drew their weapons, but Owl moved in front of them before they could attack his summoned familiar. He stretched a hand out towards it and it walked into the lantern light, before putting its strange head against his hand.

It was the Tracker he had shown me in Lundia: the Scenting Tongue. Unlike the first time he’d shown it to me, it was fully corporeal and visible without the need of my Watcher familiar. Its body was far larger than I remembered, being almost as long from head-to-tail-tip as a horse, with a standing height of a bit over half a metre. Its weird eyeless and nostril-covered head was no less disturbing than it’d been the first time I’d seen it.

An endlessly-overlapping chorus sniffing sounds emerged from its long head, while the slobbering tongue in its mouth continued applying saliva to its nostrils.

Owl patted the creature gently on its head, then, without turning to look at us, said, “These guys are immune to hallucinations and many of Demons’ other tricks. It’ll help us find a way down.”

I saw Holm struggle to suppress a shudder, while Frode looked less concerned.

“*Hunt*,” Owl then intoned, swiping his dagger-like talisman through the air once. I was sure that he gave it more specific instructions directly through his Pact-formed bond, just like I did with Armen, but we obviously weren’t privy to those.

Immediately the Scenting Tongue began circling around us, while we each tried to watch the two ends of the seemingly-endless tunnel of the first floor of the lower deck.

It took only about a minute before the otherworldly creature had locked-in on a scent, and then, surprisingly, it started climbing up the mast to get to the ceiling, where it began digging into the wood.

“Is it trying to escape?” wondered Frode.

“No... I think it’s showing us that we have to go up,” Holm replied.

“Fascinating,” Owl remarked. “I think I understand how this peculiar domain works now.”

A moment later the Komodo-Dragon-like creature had torn through the ceiling with its destructive claws and a strange floor was visible above us. Instead of revealing the central deck of the Galleon that we’d entered from, there was instead a different deck with its own ceiling.

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

We each shared a glance at one another, before Owl asked, “Anyone bring a rope?”

23 – Demon Galleon IV

Frode had been the first to climb up the mast that pierced through the room, such that he could get to the hole that Master Owl’s Tracker had clawed open. Once he was up there, he sent down a rope that Owl used to scale the mast with. Then it was my turn.

I gripped the coarse rope that we’d found conveniently lying nearby, feeling the pain in the soft skin of my palms immediately as I put all my weight on the rope and used it, in concert with my boots against the mast, to climb up through the hole. By the time I was just below the hole, I was already out of stamina and could feel my grip slipping, but then Frode reached his armoured arm down and pulled me up.

Holm was the last to climb up and he brought the lantern with him, so that we could see our surroundings. As the light pushed away the shadows for a moment, before they started encroaching on its glow again, I saw that the wood on this floor was gnarled and bowed in a lot of places, as though of some other sort of wood than what had been used on the rest of the ship. What’s more, the ceiling was suddenly really far above us, easily twice the height of the room below us. The mast was still there, but it was twisted like the branch of a very old tree.

“It’s like we’re on a different ship,” Holm remarked.

“Master, where’s your Tracker?” I asked.

Owl pointed left through a doorway so short we’d have to crawl to get through it.

“How are you able to tell where it went?”

“It leaves a trail behind only I can sense,” he replied.

Frode lifted the lantern off the ground where Holm had settled it, then moved it around a bit, before saying, “Let’s follow it.”

Owl and Holm nodded. I stuck close to them as they moved towards the tiny doorway, imagining that whatever had snatched away the other two Paladins was watching us from the darkness beyond our lantern light.

Frode was the first to crawl through the doorway, then Owl followed, before it was my turn. Frode had taken the lantern with him, so it was hard to see Holm, even though he was right next to me.

“Shout if you see anything,” I told him, trying to sound reassuring.

He put a hand on my shoulder, then pushed me towards the doorway. “Don’t worry. I’ll be right behind you,” he said.

I knelt down and felt for the opening, being careful not to bump my head against the low threshold, then I crawled through. I crawled on my hands and knees for a bit, then tried to lift my head when I assumed that I was through the doorway, only to knock into a low ceiling.

I froze.

“I thought this was just a tiny doorway,” I called down ahead of me. When there came no reply from Frode and Owl ahead or me, or any response from Holm who was surely behind me, panic started setting in. Worse still, my voice didn’t even echo, as though absorbed into the tunnel walls around me.

Up until now, I’d never experienced claustrophobia, but this was also the first time I’d ever crawled through a narrow tunnel in the dark. I immediately began trying to turn around, but it was too tight, so instead I began pushing myself backwards. A tremor of soul-clenching fear shot through me when my boots suddenly knocked into a wall behind me.

I began hyperventilating.

I’m trapped!

“**Do not be overcome with fear,**” Armen commented. I couldn’t see him, but he was somehow still around.

Where are you? I can’t see anything.

“**You are unscathed. I advise you proceed ahead.**”

I swallowed hard, but in the absence of any better options, I reluctantly began crawling forward again, scraping my hands and scuffing the knees of my pants as I hurried along the gnarled and rough wood under me.

The further I advanced, the narrower the tunnel became, until I had to suddenly lower myself down and almost drag myself forward, while pushing off the ground. The staff on my back, as well as my pouches and flowing robe-coat made it very troublesome.

I didn’t consider that I might end up lodging myself stuck in too narrow a space, because my mind was completely fixated on the thought that this tunnel had to have an end.

While almost prone against the floor, I dug my nails into the wooden boards under me, all to get just a slight bit of purchase, and then, suddenly, as my fingers dug into the floor, it began to crumble, cascading out from my hands to all the wood around me, until suddenly the walls and floor around me fell away. My body was then cast into freefall and it was as though I tumbled down a pitch-black ravine for kilometres.

I screamed myself hoarse as I fell farther and farther into that impossibly-deep space, tumbling head-over-heel, though there was no sound of rushing wind or anything.

With a painful impact, I collided with a body of water, my clothes soaked through instantly, as I struggled to stay afloat. I wondered if I’d gone blind, but before I could figure out the answer, it was as though a rope coiled around my right foot and dragged me into the water’s deep. I was already too winded and exhausted to put up a struggle as it took me away.

Help me, Armen! I screamed desperately in my mind.

I blinked myself awake.

Renji was looking at me sidelong from where he sat next to me, but when he noticed I was awake, he cast me a grin. A second later the teacher came over, saying my name in a stern voice.

Ah... I must’ve just dozed off in class again.

My faceless classmates laughed at me being singled out for not paying attention—

“Believe not the visions!”

I was walking past neatly-lined Sakura trees, the petals of which floated through the air like snow. The wind was still rather brisk, but the sunlight was warm on my skin. It’d be a hot spring this year, I could already tell.

Renji was walking in front of me, talking about the latest game he’d stayed up all night to complete. I wasn’t really paying attention to his explanation of his virtual struggle and ultimate victory, but nonetheless I was glad to be walking behind him like *this*. It was a very comfortable feeling.

Ahead of us lay the university we’d both gotten into, after a series of gruelling exams—

“Come to your senses!”

When I looked at my right hand, I saw that Kumi’s fingers were interlocked with mine. I turned to gaze into her amber-brown eyes and she smiled at me, while squeezing my hand slightly.

We were sitting on a bench that overlooked a nearby river. She was telling me about all the new friends she’d made, as well as one of the female professors whom she admired. I smiled in return.

I never knew that having my one-sided love reciprocated after so many years could feel *this* rewarding. I leaned in and kissed her—

“Wake up!”

I shot upright, coming to my senses in a courtyard with large braziers casting their warm light on everything and which was lined with large flagstones. Above was a night sky full of bright stars. Nearby, the ocean waves slapped against a rocky shore.

Did I fall asleep? What were those visions??

I looked at the apparition in front of me, my mind taking a second to catch up.

“Armen?” I asked, confused. “Where am I?”

The Wraith was floating in front of me restlessly.

“You need to run before they get you.”

I quickly got to my feet and looked around. Past the courtyard lay a large estate with the same warm light shining from its windows. I turned to look towards where the sounds of waves came, and saw that from below the dark waters came a glowing mass of transparent humans. It took me a second to realise that they were the wraith soldiers that’d attacked us when we first set foot on the ship.

When was that? It feels like weeks ago...

“No time to waste!” my Protector said. I heeded his advice and immediately took off towards the estate. But my body was sore and I’d never been a fast runner, so I did not get very far before the horde of ghost soldiers was right on my heels. Instead of continuing my vain attempt to outrun them, I stopped and spun to face them, pulling a small blade from my belt and slicing it across my left palm.

Kabanenoki, come forth and destroy my foes!

From the very moment that my blood hit the flagstones, my tall Corpse Tree Revenant emerged out of the ground, its strange and gnarled multitude of arms immediately getting to work crushing and slashing into the glowing wraiths that came from the ocean in an endless stream.

While my Revenant kept them at bay, I ran to the front gate of the large stone estate as fast as I could. By the time I put my hand on the handle of the front door, my Fighter familiar was fully surrounded by a glowing mass of soldiers, who were hammering their spears into its hide, while archers from the sides were pelting it with glowing arrows. Fortunately, my monstrosity was of a hardy sort, so it kept just mindlessly smashing the wraiths apart, though it was clearly a futile effort.

When I entered the estate and shut the gate behind me, I called Kabanenoki to me, commanding it to defend the entrance. Then I ran through the entrance hall of the estate, where paintings on the walls and human-like sculptures tracked me with their eyes, while braziers around me glowed brightly.

I suddenly slipped on the floor, and when I looked up I was in a mossy stone tunnel shrouded in darkness. A second later, a distant lantern came into view, lighting up a narrow doorway and bringing with it the familiar faces of the two Paladins that’d disappeared.

“There’s someone there!” said the guy holding the lantern excitedly. I remembered that Holm had called the guy ‘Christian’. Next to him was the Paladin who’d been the first to disappear: Kat.

I stood up and waved to them.

“It’s me!” I called.

The two Paladins looked at each other then carefully came towards me, both drawing their blades.

What should I do, Armen?

“They may have been possessed by the Demon,” the Guardian Wraith cautioned.

I pulled out my belt knife and prepared to make a second cut on my left palm to summon my Corpse Tree, but then saw that the first cut was gone.

What’s going on? I wondered in confusion, while taking a step away from the two approaching men.

“The Demon is playing tricks on your mind.”

How am I supposed to tell what’s real or not!?

Then I remembered that the Sinner’s Ash could be used for dispelling illusions and quickly dug my hand into the pouch on my belt, before flinging a handful at the two approaching men. It flew a lot further than expected, as though it was far heavier than ash had any right to be.

Like a wind wafting away a pile of leaves, a sense of change overcame the whole scene before me. On the floor lay Christian, dead from a wound in his torso and neck, while the other, Kat, was staring at the bloody sword in his hand. The hallway had changed too, becoming the familiar sight of wooden lower deck of the Galleon.

Carefully, I moved closer to the two Paladins.

“Are you okay?” I asked Kat.

He immediately turned towards me and I saw in the light of the lantern by his feet that the Ward on his chest was charred completely black. His eyes were wild and inhuman.

Armen deflected the bloody blade as it was swung at my head, disarming the Paladin in the same moment, sending the weapon flying off to the side, before violently shoving the man aside.

I picked up the lantern and then ran out of the room, not giving the deranged Paladin a chance to follow me. While trying to put as much distance between us, I remembered that Master Owl had told me to utilise my Soul Barrier. I had thus far not heeded his advice, but I stopped for just long enough to pull out my Barrier Ring Focus, and then did my best to try and send my energy into the tool. It was hard to do while also focusing on moving though, so after making it to the next room and making sure I wasn't being followed, I concentrated as best as I could and was able to conjure a simple image of a bubble surrounding my entire body.

I had no idea if it was working or not, but did get the feeling that the oppressive aura of the Demon eased off a little. After the insanity I'd just gone through, I allowed myself a sigh of relief.

“Any idea what to do now?” I asked Armen.

“If this is the real world and not the one made by the Demon’s powers, then perhaps you can find a way out.”

“What about Owl, Holm, and Frode? They should still be in here somewhere.”

“Those who cannot help themselves cannot help others.”

I frowned, but knew he was right.

Not knowing what else to do I moved forward ever so cautiously, trying very hard to maintain the image of my Soul Barrier in my mind. It surprised me, but I actually worried about Master Owl. It was hard to tell if he was out of his depth here or not, since he rarely let any sign of his true emotions slip, but it was clear that the Wards he had made were insufficient, because when I looked down at my own it was charred black, just like Kat's had been.

24 – Demon Galleon V

I looked at the staircase leading up with a heavy dose of suspicion. Though I was sure it was an expensive commodity and refilling my pouch would not be cheap, I took a handful of Sinner’s Ash and threw it at the stairs. The dirt-brown Ash settled on the steps and railing, confirming that it was not an illusion.

After walking around for what felt like hours with the lantern in the dark belly of the ship, I’d finally found the way out. I let out a heavy sigh and honestly felt like crying out of pure relief, before I began climbing the stairs, one careful step at a time.

The moment I reached the landing, wind wafted my hair and the setting sun licked me with its waning light and warmth. It surprised me that I had somehow found the staircase leading to the upper-deck before finding a doorway to the main deck itself. I leaned over the railing and looked down at the deck and the ramp to the pier.

Except... there was no pier. What’s more, the Sacred Ash we’d lined the deck with was gone.

Shit...

“It seems we are still within the Demon’s grasp,” Armen commented.

I bit my lower lip in frustration. It seemed there was no way I’d ever get out of this place, but I also knew that I didn’t want to go back into the dark bowels of the Galleon again, so I scaled the railing and dropped down to the main deck. My boots absorbed much of the impact, but I still felt a spike of pain lance up through my feet and calves.

I was still somehow maintaining my Soul Barrier, but it seemed that the Demon’s powers of illusion and warping reality were too strong for me to overcome at my current rank of abilities.

After walking to the edge of the main deck where the ramp ought to have been, I knelt down and looked over at the water below. It was as clear as a mirror, though my reflection was distorted and weird somehow.

“The entire ship has been twisted by its influence,” Armen remarked.

I turned my head to look towards the fore of the ship and quickly saw what he meant, because it was as though the fore cabin stretched into the distance, before curling down into the water itself. The aft of the ship was the same as well. I wondered if, due to the angle of the curvature, the twisted ship the Demon had made formed an entire circle. Or not a circle, a halo.

If *that* was the design of its domain, then it seemed obvious that its core, the statue described in the journal that Owl had found, was to be found at its centre.

“I do not recommend following that line of thought to its conclusion.”

“I’m not going back down there,” I told Armen. “Just because I may have figured out the logic of its domain, it does not mean that I have the power to use that information for anything...”

“How do you plan to proceed?”

I’d honestly grown despondent by now. It was clear that I did not possess the ability to fight back against the Demon in any meaningful way. It was just a matter of time before my Soul Barrier drained me of my last bit of energy and my mind was possessed by its visions again.

I sat down on the edge of the main deck, dangling my feet over. I let out a long exhale.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad to have my brain fried by the Demon?” I considered optimistically. After all, it’d given me some pleasant visions of what my future back on earth could’ve been in another universe; a universe in which I’d passed my university exams and Inoue Kumi had reciprocated the feelings I’d confessed to her.

Armen floated over and mimicked the way I was sitting on the edge.

“Sorry that I ended up being such a terrible master to you.”

“Though our time together has been brief, I have not found it unpleasant.”

I smiled weakly, then let my Soul Barrier fall off, while I continued staring into the horizon and the mirror sea that the Galleon was floating in without making any ripples.

In the distance, a large rift was forming in the sea, making its way towards me.

“That was fast,” I commented calmly about the impending vision that was about to overtake me.

The rift started splitting into branches, some ending, while others continued zig-zagging down the horizon along the mirror sea towards me, branching even further as they went.

Then the whole sea exploded into shards of reflective water, before I felt myself enter freefall, my stomach lurching as though I’d just leapt from a plane.

With a heavy *grunt* of pain, I ‘landed’ on the wooden floor of a cabin.

My entire body was sore, as though covered in a hundred bruises, and I was desperately gasping for air, while feeling the tickling sensation of liquid flowing freely from my nostrils and tear ducts. I managed to hold on to a gasp of air for a moment, then went into a coughing fit for almost two minutes, before regaining myself.

It took a lot of effort, but I managed to push myself off the floor and arrive at a kneeling position. I wiped my face with the back of my right hand and it came away covered in blood, snot, and tears.

“Ugh...” was all I managed to blurt out.

Then sounds from a nearby room brought me to my feet. I looked around and saw no sign of Armen anyway.

Return to me, Armen.

Nothing happened and I feared that I’d lost my ability to call upon my familiars or that my Pacts had somehow been broken. But then the Wraith materialise in front of me a moment later.

“It seems our Pact has survived this ordeal.”

I was about to ask what he meant, but then I realised that the oppressive aura was gone and that the smell of teashop leaves likewise had vanished.

“Owl actually did it...” I mumbled, although I couldn’t tell if *this* wasn’t still some part of the Demon’s illusions.

Then I saw Frode standing in the doorway. He was covered in wounds and his right arm hung limply by his side, but he grinned at me when our eyes met.

“I found him!” he yelled back over his shoulder. Seconds later, Holm was by his side, and then Owl came behind them. A strange creature that reminded me of the goblins that Rana had fought on our way to Hamsel’s Rest stood behind the three of them, carrying some strange object in a sack.

I walked up to them and the two Paladins padded me on the shoulder. Holm was slightly better off than Frode, but it was clear that both of them had been put through the ringer as well.

“What’s that thing?” I asked Owl, pointing to the not-quite goblin creature.

“A Greedling,” he replied. Then smile weakly, before saying, “Good job staying alive. It seems my Wards were in fact quite shit... sorry about that.”

I blinked at his apology. Part of me wanted to yell at him for promising that we’d be fine, but another part wanted to brush it off and say something basic like, “All’s well that ends well.” In the end, I ended up asking, “What’s it holding in its arms?”

The Greedling was like a lanky goblin covered in golden scales, with pointed and long ears, as well as nubby horns. It was gibbering to itself incoherently, while clutching something dark and shiny in its arms.

“It’s the statue we were looking for,” Owl said, before adding, “Greedlings are great pack mules and are capable of absorbing the power of anything they touch, which should hopefully keep the Demon trapped in the statue from being able to exert its influence. Granted, I also added some Wards to the vessel to hopefully limit its powers from leaking out, but who knows how long they’ll hold.”

“You didn’t manage to exorcise it?” I asked in surprise.

“Demons are a pain in the ass, I believe I’ve mentioned this before. I have no idea if an exorcism I attempt will actually work. It might even make it worse.”

“So what’s the plan now?”

“First, we get off this godforsaken ship.”

After returning to the stone pier of the Port District, the alarmed party of cordon guards who greeted us said that we’d been inside the Galleon for over three days. It was a disturbing revelation to me, because I felt neither hungry nor sleepy, although my battered mind and soul were past the point of exhaustion.

Several Priests, led by a single female Archpriest who’d come all the way from Helmstatter to aid in the cordon, were given charge of the Demon Statue, which, just like the journal had stated, looked like a young boy curling his body around a shiny black jewel. The statue’s body was sculpted with such perfect attention to detail that I had to wonder if it might not be the petrified remains of a real boy. Symbols of unknown meaning had also been carved deeply into his exposed back and shone with a malevolent purple glow, although it was apparently a much weaker glow than it had been before Master Owl slapped some Wards on it, according to Holm.

The Archpriest, whom Owl seemed to have some prior relationship with, told him to return early the following morning to aid in the analysis of the statue and giving his professional opinion on how best to deal with it. My Mentor let out a sigh at the demand, but didn’t argue back, which I found intriguing, since he was normally such a cantankerous sort.

As for the two Paladins, Kat and Christian, neither Owl, Holm, nor Frode had seen any sign of them, but it seemed that the Galleon would be scoured from top-to-bottom by a small army of Paladins and Priests now that the danger was contained. Owl suggested that they just scuttle the vessel, but the Lord of Ochre himself had apparently decreed that ‘Fallow’s Fortune’ would be put back into use as soon as the Demon was removed...

“That seems a bad idea,” I commented, as we were walking back to the place we were staying at in the Crafting District.

“He just really likes the ship,” Owl replied.

We’d said our farewells to Holm and Frode, and even Owl had managed to be almost polite.

“How did you manage to survive by yourself?”

I smirked at the genuine surprise in his voice. “I remembered the things you told me, which helped me a lot. But I also had my Protector. He managed to break me out of a hallucination I got stuck in.”

“I see. Despite your inexperience, you may have quite a lot of tolerance towards Demons,” he said. “Normally, once you start seeing things or getting lost in visions, it’s pretty much game over.”

“What do you think happened to Kat?” I asked.

He looked puzzled, which made me frown.

“The Paladin who was the first to disappear...”

“Oh.”

At least learn the names of the people you employ to protect you! I scolded him internally.

“I saw him after he’d killed the other Paladin, Christian.”

“It might all have been part of your visions,” he replied. “It’s best not to think too much about it.”

“But considering how many people have disappeared after entering the lower deck, shouldn’t it have been full of corpses??”

“Again, it’s best not to dwell on such things. It’s quite possible that if you die inside this particular Demon’s domain, then your entire body is consumed. Or maybe they’re all stacked on the bottom floor... who knows.”

I sighed. “I feel like I contributed nothing to this.”

Owl shrugged. “Possibly true, but you gained a lot.”

I couldn’t help but agree with that. Although perhaps I’d gained a lot more than I really wanted.

“What happens now? Do you have other Quests?”

Owl stopped and turned to look at me with his goggled eyes. Then he flashed me a grin of his ugly teeth. “This is the end of my tutelage. Good job, Pipsqueak, you didn’t die.”

“That’s very anticlimactic.”

“Would you prefer that I died in your arms and passed the mantle on to you?”

“No, but—”

He slapped me on the shoulder with a surprising amount of strength. “You did well, Ryūta.”

I frowned at the finality of his words. “You promised to tell me about Exorcist Specialisations, not to mention Ward Crafting.”

“How about we get something to eat first?”

“We should probably find Rana and Lukas before that. If we’ve been missing for three days they might think we’re dead...”

“Wanna play a prank on them?”

I shook my head in disbelief. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing that we’d be parting ways.

25 – Moving On

Rana was clutching me so tightly to her body that my vision began to flicker and I struggled to breathe, but, just before I passed out, she eased up somewhat and allowed me to gasp for air.

“I was really worried,” she said, before hugging me tightly again.

Lukas and Owl were standing nearby, watching in awkward silence.

“Do you want to hug too?” Owl asked Lukas and the boy let out a sound of disgust. “Eh, it was worth a try. Maybe I should go visit the Comfort District to find someone who wants to give me a hug *like that*.”

Rana released me slightly, then shot Owl a glare, before eventually saying, “Thank you for bringing him back alive.”

“I did no such thing,” he replied dismissively. “The Boy accomplished *that* himself.”

I didn’t want to tell them that the moment Owl had succeed in containing the Demon was the exact moment that I’d given up. Some things were best left unsaid, although it was hard not to feel guilty about the impressed look on Rana’s face.

Is it technically a lie if I don’t correct a misunderstanding?

“**Yes.**”

Then I’m fine being a liar, if this is my reward.

Before taking us to a fancy restaurant, Owl brought us to the Guild Hall so that we could receive the reward for completing the Quest. Granted, the Demon hadn’t been exorcised, but it *had* been neutralised, which seemed to still meet the requirements.

We were fortunately the only people inside the Guild Hall at the time, which I thought was comforting, considering the enormous sum of money that Master Owl was handed by the clerk. Lukas stared in yearning at the eight ten-gold crowns that was handed to my Mentor, and even Rana seemed impressed by the amount.

“I thought that I might receive a promotion again,” I admitted as we left the large stone building.

“Exorcists have a boost in terms of advancement up until Seeker Rank, but it will be a while before your next promotion. You have shown talent, which the Guild has acknowledged, but now they wish to see you accumulate experience. Many Exorcists don’t reach Eminent Rank until their Exorcist skill set is at level three. For most, *that* takes several years to reach.”

“I see.”

I suppose that there was no need for me to be hasty in reaching the next rank, since that would only bring with it more responsibility and more dangerous quests, as if the Exorcism Quests weren't dangerous enough already.

“Speaking of which. Have any of your abilities levelled up?”

I pulled out my Guild Card. “I haven't been keeping track,” I told him.

“You should at least have felt some change in how they work or how easy they are to utilise. My guess would be that your ‘Pact of the Familiar’ and ‘Spirit Sight’ abilities are at level two now.”

After touching the ‘Exorcism I’ ability to bring out my overview of skills, it looked something like this:

ABILITIES

‘Omniglot’

‘Exorcist I’:

- *Banish I*
- *Contain Spirit I*
- *Focus Wielder I*
- *Hymnal I*
- *Investigation I*
- *Invoke Ritual I*
- *Meditation I*
- *Offering I*
- *Pact of the Familiar II*
- *Possessed Weapon Wielder I*
- *Repel I*
- *Sanctify I*
- *Soul Barrier II*
- *Spirit Sight II*
- *Staff Wielder I*
- *Summon II*
- *Ward Crafter I*
- *Worship I*

‘Pact (Watcher)’

‘Pact (Greater Protector)’
‘Pact (Fighter)’

“Hm, four at level two already,” Owl commented, clearly impressed, while looking over my shoulder. “It would seem that surviving a Demon’s mental assault was good for your ‘Soul Barrier’.”

“I haven’t felt much change in any of the skills,” I replied. I was surprised to already be close to halfway towards ‘Exorcist II’.

“Sometimes it’s not a big shift, although your ‘Summon’ at level two should mean that using something like your Watcher won’t drain your energy as fast, and your Protector can guard you for longer. You should also have begun to notice more of the minutiae in people’s auras with your levelled-up Sight.”

“I think I’ve gotten better at it, yes. I can sort of tell when people are lying now.”

He nodded, satisfied. Like a proud teacher, almost.

While Owl and I dug into our meals of honey-glazed snapper with some kind of carrot-esque vegetable grated up and mixed together with a salad drenched in the wonderful Garum sauce, Rana and Lukas told us about their training. Apparently they’d also taken on a simple Gathering quest to find some herbs for a local alchemist. She seemed confident that Lukas would reach the rank of Initiate in no time.

“What should we do next?” Lukas suddenly asked, looking at me and Owl.

“I’ll have to stay behind here for a while to investigate the Demon Statue,” the Old Exorcist replied, “But I recommend you three go to Helmstatter next.”

Rana and Lukas both looked surprised.

“My apprenticeship is over,” I told them with a smile. Rana honestly looked relieved, but I couldn’t interpret how Lukas felt. It wasn’t like he was close to Owl or anything, but he looked kind of sad about the news.

After a moment, the random conversations started up again. Mostly just Rana telling Lukas and I about what we could expect from Helmstatter. It was supposedly a beautiful city, although, as I’d already been told, they were wary of Otherworlders. We decided that we’d spend a while longer in Ochre, since there were many unclaimed quests in the Adventurers’ Guild that’d been sitting around for a long time due to most Adventurers leaving when the trouble with the Galleon arrived.

“Here,” Owl suddenly said, handing me a coin. It was one of the ten-gold crowns he’d gotten for completing the quest.

I blinked in surprise. I hadn’t done anything to deserve such a large portion of the reward, but he said it was for my party, since we’d probably need it.

“I misjudged you,” Rana commented. Lukas nodded in agreement.

Owl smirked. “It’s not charity. Call it an investment. Besides, your merry band of misfits will have no one but each other to rely on once you leave the Adventurer-friendly cities behind.”

Rana and Lukas immediately began talking amongst themselves about what they could use the money for. Owl turned back to face me.

“Show me your Encyclopaedia for a moment.”

After handing it to him, he spent a few minutes scribbling on one of the blank pages in the back. I’d noticed there were at least twenty of such pages in the very back of the book, reserved for new entries. I doubted I’d ever manage to discover enough undocumented entities to fill it, but if such a thing did come to pass, I’d need to get my hand on another book to fill.

He gave me back the Encyclopaedia, showing me the new page.

“The Herald?” I asked, reading its title.

“Cool name, right?”

I didn’t reply, but instead started reading through the entry. It held info such as the Demon’s ability to call upon wraiths that it could send beyond its domain, but according to Owl, it could not manifest them within its own domain, meaning that what I’d seen on the beach had been a vision and I’d in fact never been chased by an army of wraiths.

I frowned. Demons were truly mind-boggling entities.

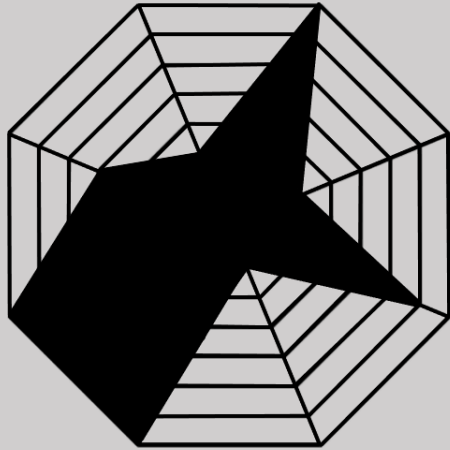
Besides its ability to summon wraiths, Owl had also written that it had a very complex domain, but was weak once its core was found. He speculated that the Demon could not exist in our world without some kind of artefact keeping it tethered here.

For the bit about exorcising it, he hadn’t written anything, and for the portrait, he’d just drawn a cloud with an angry smiley surrounded by dopey-looking stick-figures wielding spears and bows, with the word “wraith” written under them.

“Your drawing sucks.” I realised in that moment that the entries with nonsensical depictions of apparitions I’d noticed in the past were his doing.

“Thank you.”

Next he handed me something else. As I took the item into both hands, feeling the cold touch of the soul-stone, I gaped in surprise at what I saw. It was as though a frigid wind washed over me, but the feeling quickly subsided.

<i>‘OWL’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Adherent</i>		RANK: <i>Master</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>53</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>S</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>A</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>S</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>C</i>	VITALITY: <i>E</i>
<p style="text-align: center;">ABILITIES</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Omniglot’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Exorcist V’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Spirit Caller V’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Adherent II’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Soul-Broken’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Observer’s Chosen’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Flayed Lord’s Curse’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Pact (Watcher)’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Pact (Protector)’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Pact (Tracker)’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Pact (Fighter)’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Pact (Fighter)’</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>‘Pact (????)’</i></p>			

It’s pure black...

“...I thought you’d have more abilities,” I replied, staring at the Card in my hands. My grip was white-knuckled and iron-tight.

That last pact has to be a forbidden one... and how does he have three Roles?? What is that curse?? What does it mean to be a Chosen of the Observer? Isn’t that the ‘unfathomable’ entity from whom I received my Watcher??

“I sacrificed all my non-skill-set abilities to attain a third Role. Those remaining three are a blessing and two curses. And no, I’m not telling you what the last Pact is with.”

I became uncomfortably aware that Rana and Lukas were utterly ignorant to what I was seeing, still talking like it was any other day. It was as though somehow Owl and I had entered our very own domain, where no one could truly see us.

Has he put up an illusion or something?

“...Be very cautious...He is using strange magic...It warps perception around himself...”

I swallowed hard.

“What does it mean to be an Adherent?”

Owl didn’t smile as he replied, in fact his entire face was void of emotion. “It means to give yourself over to one of the Absolutes: the founding Deities of this world and the countless realms beyond it, your world and mine included.”

“What sort of powers does it give you?”

“The abilities it gives are few, but it comes with its very own unique tasks and rewards. Guiding you was one of the tasks.”

I frowned. This was starting to sound very bad. *Is he part of a disturbed cult or something?* The way his mannerisms had changed reminded me of an interview I’d once seen of a member from a religious sect that’d been taken down by the police in my country, after its followers had attempted a mass murder to ‘bring about a new era’.

“And your curse of the ‘Flayed Lord’, what does it do?”

“The Absolutes are manifold in purpose and spheres of influence. The Flayed Lord is the incarnation of Betrayal. I believe it is a rite of passage for all of the Observer’s Adherents to receive his curse. In short, it makes it so that everyone around me have an innate desire to betray and hurt me. It is possibly the reason why Harleigh killed my last apprentice. He and I used to have a rapport of sorts after all.”

I wasn’t sure that my treatment of Owl could truly be explained by some outside force compelling me to hurt him, but I was disturbed to realise that I also couldn’t totally discredit it either. After all, I’d never been an antagonistic person before coming to this world, but, when I thought back to how I’d treated Master Owl, there were things that were very out of character for me. I realised that Rana was the same, as she wasn’t the type to hate people without proper reason, at least not from my experience.

“Why are you showing me this?”

“You wanted to know what sort of Advanced Roles you might take on. Mine is but one of those paths. All Roles with access to the Worship and Offering abilities have the potential to become an Adherent; to serve a higher purpose in their otherwise meaningless existences.”

“You said that you thought an Exorcist might be behind the Demon Galleon,” I replied, bringing him to a topic I’d wanted an answer to for a while. “You said it was a specific type of Exorcist Specialisation.”

“The Benefactor behind the statue is a Demonologist, of that there can be no doubt. Like Adherents, their aura is black, although it’s technically rust-black, but visibly not very different to our Spirit Sight.”

“*Demonologist...*” I muttered. “So, when I have maxed out my Exorcist skill set, I can pick between Necromancer, Spirit Caller, Demonologist, or Adherent?”

“There is also Incarnate,” he added. “It is possible that others exist too, though, if so, the requirements for acquiring them must be rare. Demonologist and Incarnate both require that you form a Pact with a Demon, which is the epitome of folly.”

“They all sound super evil... You picked Spirit Caller though, is that one at least neutral?”

“It is,” Owl replied and smiled, but I could tell it was fake. It was simply a mannerism he had learnt to mimic in order to portray emotion, but, as I was looking at him and he was letting his void-black aura unfurl itself, I could tell that he felt nothing. His aura was unwavering and solid. I doubted I’d even be able to tell if he was lying to me.

“Hiding your aura is one of the abilities you gained from being an Adherent, isn’t it?”

“When serving the Observer, gaining control over perception is but one of the perks. If I wanted, I could make you see anything written on my Guild Card, but I decided to be truthful.”

I can’t tell if he’s lying about that...

I now wondered how exactly he had managed to locate the statue holding the Herald Demon. Holm and Frode hadn’t mentioned anything about what they experienced after I became separated from them, but maybe I should find them and ask about it.

It was likely that Owl’s Adherent skill set also came with immunity towards perception-altering magic. It was hard not to shudder at the terrifying power he might possess. Those moments of dread I’d experienced around Owl in the past now felt entirely warranted, even if I pitied him slightly for his curse.

“What is it you want me to accomplish in Helmstatter?” I asked him. “Is it another part of this great scheme you’re apparently part of?”

Owl shrugged. “Who can say?”

I blinked.

“Ryūta, are you okay?” Rana asked. “You had too much to drink, I think.”

I halted in my tracks and looked around. Lukas was balancing while walking along atop a stone fence a few metres ahead of us, but Master Owl was gone.

Part of me wanted to immediately tell her what I’d gone through with Master Owl in the restaurant, but I was worried she’d think I was crazy. Plus, I wasn’t entirely sure it was something I ought to tell people, and part of me was uncertain how much of it was real...

“Do you want to sleep in my room tonight?” she whispered into my ear.

I nodded lamely.

Lukas ended up taking the room that Owl and I had slept in, while I took his bed. Unlike hotels in Japan, the linens, pillows, and cover had not been changed out since we got here, so I felt bad that Lukas would have to sleep with a pillow and linens that had soaked up my sweat.

I’m going to go to a bathhouse tomorrow, I promised myself, uncomfortably aware of my own stench.

“You look unwell, are you okay?” Rana asked. She was sitting next to me on my bed, a hand on my lower back, rubbing me gently.

“The Galleon was hard,” I said. “I’ve never felt so terrified and weak in my life. I actually thought that I had become capable and I thought I could assist Master Owl somewhat, but in the end I almost died.”

“But you made it out of there,” she said, trying to comfort me.

I shook my head, tears of embarrassment forming clouding my eyes.

“That was a lie! I would’ve died if not for Master Owl. When he managed to subdue the Demon I’d already given up and was waiting for it to destroy my mind.”

Rana smiled. “You didn’t lie.”

“Omission is still lying,” I argued.

For some reason she laughed. “Says who?” she asked.

“Armen does. My familiar.”

“I believe it is also considered lying by Adjudicators in a trial.”

“He sounds like a real bore,” she shot back.

“He’s very righteous,” I replied with a tiny smile. “He was once a Priest Crusader.”

“Definitely a bore,” she decided.

Rana put her hands on my shoulders and turned me towards her so we were looking eye-to-eye. For some reason I looked away immediately, a sense of guilt overcoming me. Then I realised what it was that was causing it.

“The Demon... it showed me visions of what my life could’ve looked like if I hadn’t come here and if a big mistake I made hadn’t happened.”

She nodded.

“One of the things it showed me... Well, there was a girl that I’d gone to school with for three years and had a massive crush on. And after we graduated, I confessed my feelings to her. Anyway, the Demon showed me how my life could’ve been if she’d returned my love.”

Rana’s smile faltered slightly.

“It sounds really dumb, but it almost feels like being with you, while thinking of her, is something to be ashamed of.”

“I don’t think you have to be ashamed about that. I left behind people I cared deeply about when I was transported here. I think about them every day. Hesh, my past boyfriend, I think about him everyday too. But it’s not something to feel guilty about. Don’t let go of those feelings you have for that girl, because they’re part of you.”

“But, you and I, are we more than just friends? I don’t know if things are different here or in your world, but I would never have done *that* with someone that I didn’t have serious feelings for.”

Rana raised an eyebrow sceptically. “Are you asking if it’s part of my culture to bed any man I come across? Is that what you’re implying?”

I looked up at her in horror. “No, no! That’s not what I meant at all!”

She burst out laughing, then said, “Good. Because I’ve got serious feelings about you too.”

“But... you could probably get anyone. Why me?”

“Do I need a reason? Maybe I can’t truly explain it. It just felt right.”

I smiled a little. “I’m glad you feel that way.”

“You know, Lukas actually reminds me a lot of Hesh.”

She chuckled at my terrified expression.

“Not like that, doofus. More in the way that all Rogues have some innate mischievousness and astuteness to them. Hesh was always getting into trouble. He was always reckless. To be honest, I

really didn't like him at first, maybe because he was very different from me. We had only been together for a few months when he died.”

Rana looked down and it was my turn to put a comforting hand on her. My movements felt stiff. I wasn't really that good at being comforting to someone else to be honest. But I wanted her to entrust me her feelings and complaints. Knowing that she felt the same way about me as I felt about her made me feel an immense responsibility for her, and, even though she was stronger and more impressive than me, I wanted to protect her.

She ran the back of a hand over her eyes to wipe away the tears that'd formed and I leaned in and hugged her.

“You don't have to tell me if you're not ready.”

“No, it's okay. You deserve to know.”

“Besides Heshher and I, my team had a Ranger and a Priest. We'd all gotten to the rank of Seeker together and had begun getting really comfortable with an open Extermination Quest that was available to anyone of Initiate and above, where you were paid for each kill of a goblin that you could prove. At the time, one of the castle towns near Helmstatter was occupied by goblins, since a Hobgoblin Lord had brought his clan there.

“We mostly relied on ambush tactics to kill the goblins, since an open fight would lead to us being surrounded. Heshher and Blythe, our Ranger, were responsible for setting up the ambushes, while I hung back and protected our Priest, Sylvie. We'd been steadily killing off sentries and lone groups of goblins for weeks, making a decent amount of crowns off it, but I think maybe we'd gotten too comfortable.

“Goblins are really cunning, you know. And they seem to become smarter when they're with a Hobgoblin Lord. At any rate, we ended up being lured into an ambush ourselves and became surrounded by those devious cretins. I fought really hard to keep them off our Priest, so I didn't pay attention to protecting Heshher. I never even saw the strike that killed him, but I saw the aftermath and...”

Rana paused, swallowing hard and trying to hold back tears, but then they ran freely down her freckled skin. I immediately leaned in and hugged her tightly, just like she'd embraced me earlier.

Her warm tears soaked into the shoulder of my shirt, making me squeeze her even tighter. It was easy to forget that even someone with her powerful features was no less vulnerable than anyone else.

“I can't breathe,” she gasped after half a minute.

“That means it's working,” I told her, but eased up nonetheless.

She sniffed loudly, then pulled herself out of my embrace, but took my hands into hers.

“In the end, we were able to overcome the ambush and as a result of all the goblins I killed, I acquired my ‘Offensive Defender’ ability. Blythe ended up losing his hand, and, by the time we got back to Helmstatter, it was too late for the Church to regenerate it for him. Sylvie had been able to stop the bleeding, but she was not experienced enough with her Heal ability to be able to regrow lost limbs.

“I carried Heshher’s body the entire way back to the city and we gave him a proper burial, but after that our party fell apart. Blythe had become unable to wield a bow due to his amputation and I found out some months later that he’d joined a band of thieves afterwards. I think he was eventually caught by the guards of a city, or maybe Adventurers, because he was executed along with his gang.

“Sylvie ended up joining another party and she recently ranked up to Eminent, although they’re in Lacksmey now. I sometimes get letters from her to my apartment in Lundia, but I don’t think any of my messages have actually reached her.

“Anyway, that’s my sob story,” she said with a sad smile.

“I’m sorry,” I told her, squeezing her hands.

Rana sighed. “It’s unfortunately not an uncommon story. Life in this world is cruel. It’s not as though Midrealm was perfect, even as Royalty there were a lot of hardships, but it definitely wasn’t this bad.”

“My world wasn’t even close to Mondus in terms of hardships,” I admitted. “Before I came here, my biggest problem was that I’d failed the exam to a university and felt left behind by my friends who all got accepted into their universities...”

“It’s not a competition,” she told me. “Coming here and experiencing the life of an Adventurer puts a lot of things in perspective though.”

I nodded. “I wish I’d appreciated my life more before I came here.”

“Me too.”

“Let’s take it slow for a bit here in Ochre,” I said. “It’s not like we need to take on quests after all.”

“Ten gold crowns can buy the three of us maybe three months here,” she said.

“I wasn’t thinking we’d stay for *that* long,” I told her.

Besides, if Master Owl is right, my F-tier Luck will ensure that there is no rest for me...

Rana suddenly moved her right hand to my thigh. I peered down at it and then looked back up into her eyes.

“Maybe a few weeks of relaxation,” I said, as she slowly moved her hand higher.

“**I’ll stand guard outside,**” Armen commented and left.

Prude.

26 – Lazy Days in Ochre

Rana and I only really managed to get three days of utter relaxation, before Lukas demanded that we take on a quest from the Guild.

“There are so many unclaimed ones!” he argued. “I want to help the Guild and I want to become stronger!” I couldn’t help but feel that his passion was rather naïve, given that the Guild didn’t really seem to try very hard to prevent Adventurers’ deaths. The death rate that Æmos had told me still echoed in my head.

Rana and I shared a glance, before both turning to look at the Rogue, who stood before our lounge-chairs in the secluded rock beach that lay off a hidden path from the Port District’s southern coast wall. I’d used Sumi to locate a beach and thought this wasn’t exactly what I’d been hoping to find, it was seemingly unknown to the denizens of Ochre and the stones in the water were not too sharp, so it was possible to still go swimming, so long as you were careful not to slip.

“I suppose I was getting kind of bored of sitting still all day.”

I let out a sigh. I could’ve easily spent months like *this*, but my two teammates had other plans and I didn’t want to be left out. “Let’s stick to Simple ones, like Gathering Quests,” I said.

Lukas frowned, but conceded.

For the next week-and-a-half, the three of us took on Novitiate and Initiate-ranked quests. Lukas also took a few solo Delivery Quests within the city, and though they didn’t pay well, he seemed happy just to be able to decide the work he undertook.

For the Gathering Quests, we left the city and ventured into the forests that lay beyond Ochre’s walls. For these quests, Lukas proved to be a great boon, as his apprenticeship under the Margrave’s Gardener had imbued him with in-depth knowledge on plants, their habitats, and how best to harvest them. Even Rana, who had apparently done a lot of Gathering Quests, had a lot to learn from the bright-eyed and eager youth.

Lukas made it very clear that we should not overharvest the plants required for the quests, since it might lead to a local extinction, especially given that many of the ones we sought were wild flowers and fruits that no one had managed to grow reliably within the gardens of the cities.

Although it felt somewhat pointless to take on the menial quests, given that they paid out only a silver crown at most and did little to contribute to the progression of our abilities, it was comforting work to do alongside my companions.

On the first day of the second week after Owl had left us, Lukas brought a quest to our usual table in the corner of the Guild Hall. By now, news of the city’s port returning to normal function had travelled far enough to reach Lundia, and we were starting to see adventurers return slowly, although there were only three other parties besides ours in the hall at noon-time.

“You want to do *this one*?” Rana asked sceptically.

“Let me see it,” I told him and he handed me the flier he’d gotten.

<i>‘Bad Neighbours’</i>		
EXTERMINATION QUEST	TYPE: <i>Troublesome</i>	RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>
<p><i>The farming villages on the outskirts of Ochre have reported sightings of goblins entering their lands after dusk to steal cattle and crops. A few villagers have been injured trying to fend off the cretins and it is only a matter of time before someone is killed.</i></p> <p><i>Two caves on the northern coastline have been determined to be the nests of the goblins, but they have yet to settle in fully, meaning you still have the chance to completely eradicate this growing threat to Ochre’s food security, before it becomes a serious problem.</i></p> <p><i>The number of goblins is unknown, but it is thought that there are at least two dozen of them. To receive compensation for each kill, a trophy must be collected from the dead goblins, such as their nose or right ear.</i></p> <p><i>Only eligible for parties with at least two Novitiate-ranked Adventurers. Solo Adventurers must be of Seeker or higher Rank to take on this quest.</i></p>		
REWARD: <i>50 Copper Crowns per trophy collected</i>		
REWARD: <i>10 Silver Crowns for complete extermination</i>		

I frowned. I’d basically be useless for such a quest, unless I summoned Kabanenoki, which was probably inadvisable.

“You just ranked up yesterday,” I argued. “This seems a bit hasty. Not to mention, I’ll be unable to help, given my abilities...”

“I’ll be able to ensure nothing bad happens,” Rana replied. “But I do agree with Ryūta that this might be a bit too soon.”

“But the longer we leave it, the worse the problem will get!” Lukas stated vehemently.

Rana and I shared a glance. I knew where this was going...

“At the first sign of serious danger, we turn back.”

“And we’ll stick to ambush tactics, which will also benefit your abilities, Lukas.”

The blonde youth nodded eagerly.

Rana had taught him well in how to wield his shortsword and knife, but I knew there was a big difference between a sparring match and an actual fight to the death. I realised in that moment that I hadn’t taken a life in this world yet and wondered how it’d affect me when I did.

“Even a lowly creature such as a goblin is still a living thing. It is a burden to take a life, but you must learn to carry that burden to survive in this world.”

I grimaced at the prospect.

Will I ever end up killing something with my own hands? I wondered. Or will I rely on my familiars forever?

I couldn’t tell if it was a good or bad thing that I had no truly offensive abilities in my repertoire. I had considered getting a weapon, like a shortsword or dagger, but wondered if it would be a bad idea when I had no special proficiency ability for it, such as what I had for my Staff and Focus.

As though reading my thoughts, Rana said, “Ryūta, we should get you a sword. Just in case.”

“You think so? I was actually contemplating it.”

“Even if you do not possess an ability that benefits your weapon handling, it is not a bad idea to have a weapon to defend yourself with. Especially if you end up exhausted of your magical energy.”

I nodded. That was a fairly sound argument.

“Alright, I’ll rent one and then we can head out.”

In the end, I rented a twin-edged shortsword from the Ochre Guild’s For-Rent Armoury. The leather scabbard clapped against my left thigh with every step I took and it felt surprisingly heavy, even though the weapon itself weighed only about a kilogram, but I suppose that the weight was as much mental as it was physical.

I never in my life thought I’d have to carry a sword.

“**When in Rome, do as the Romans do,**” Armen commented. I was surprised by the phrase and wondered if it was simply the closest translation that my Omniglot ability knew or if Armen had in fact been from Earth.

Armen, what world did you come from before you ended up here?

“**Like your companion, I was born in Midrealm, though I was from the nation of Yal, where I briefly served in the capital of Modai as a King’s Man, before I was stolen away to this place.**”

Do you know the place that Rana is from, the Summer Isles?

“**I heard of the Isles, but I never travelled there.**”

“I think that’s one of the caves,” Rana suddenly said and I focused at the point in the distance she pointed at.

We had been walking along the pebble-strewn shoreline north of Ochre for about two hours. The cave she indicated was a small indent in the wall of the eight-metre-tall cliffside that bordered the shore. Debris from the cave’s excavation and chewed-clean bones from leftover meals were scattered about the entrance.

“There’s bound to be lookouts,” Rana commented.

“I’ll take a look,” I told them and called forth my Watcher familiar.

Sumi, lend me your vision.

As the Eye of the Observer gave its sight to my left eye, I mentally moved it ahead of where the three of us hugged the cliffside to stay unnoticed. I had to squint my right eye to avoid the terrible migraine of having double-vision, but I did feel like it wasn’t as bad as in the past.

Maybe this is the effect of levelling up my Summon ability?

The pebble shoreline raced past as I drove the Watcher towards the cave entrance. When it arrived right before it, I saw that a single goblin sat in the opening and gnawed on a bone the size of my forearm. With a loud *crack* that echoed back to where we stood, he broke the bone in half, before using his long tongue to suck out the marrow.

“There’s one in the opening,” I said to my companions.

“Check on the cliff above as well,” I heard Rana say.

I moved Sumi up above the cave entrance. The cliffside was striated with layers of earth, gravel, clay, and other similar deposits. I vaguely remembered some high school lessons about geology as I took in the many layers, but couldn’t recall enough to give me any particular insight. I was sure that someone well-versed in the subject might derive unique insight about the world from the many layers though, similar to how an Arborist might find meaning in the ring-pattern on a tree trunk.

At the top of the cliff were a few trees that looked close to tipping over the edge, their roots halfway exposed and the trunks leaning forty degrees or more towards the shore below. The ground was sparsely covered in grass and next to one of the leaning trees was a lanky goblin with a dirty-blue skin tone. He was fiddling with the mechanism of a battered arbalest that he’d no doubt stolen. The fact that the goblin understood how to work the winch mechanism, and seemed confident with handling the weapon, made me feel a mix of dread and apprehension.

These are no simple creatures. They have a human-like intellect!

I guessed that Rana and Lukas were already aware of this fact, but apparently it didn’t bother them. Back on Earth there was a huge ethics debate about of killing animals who showed even minor signs of intelligence, but in this world it was not something I’d heard any talk about. From the perspective of the goblins, humans might be the cruel ones, given how we mercilessly hunted and slaughtered them whenever they showed up near our settlements.

As I moved Sumi around to scout for more overlooks, I spotted a goblin hidden in a bush a bit further back from the lanky crossbow-wielding one. This hidden goblin was shorter and green, similar to the one I’d seen in the cave opening, as well as the first ones I’d encountered.

The goblin had a chipped and warped shortsword, as well as a conch horn that it would probably use to warn its fellows in the cave. It would have to be the first one we took care of or we’d end up swarmed.

I moved Sumi around some more, but didn’t spot any other goblins.

Move back to the cave entrance, I commanded it, then broke my connection to it. I blinked a few times to clear my head after my left eye returned to normal.

“There are two on the top of the cliff overlooking the cave entrance. A tall blue one with a crossbow near the edge and one with a shortsword hiding in a bush. The latter one has a horn.”

Rana nodded. “Blue goblins are faster and nimbler than the normal green ones, so I’ll deal with that one. Lukas, you’ll kill the one with the horn.”

The blonde youth nodded determined.

“It’s best that you go in first,” she told him, “But I’ll be right behind you should something go wrong. I recommend you aim for just below the jaw with your knife, jabbing it in sideways and pushing the blade out through its windpipe.”

The colour drained from my face at the graphic description of what was required of him.

I’m not the only one who has it rough with my Role, I realised.

To his credit, Lukas was very calm.

“How are you gonna get up there?” I asked, but no sooner had the words left my mouth than Rana knelt with her hands interlocked. Lukas put his boot on her hands and she immediately launched him high into the air.

The boy landed on the cliff above with a balanced posture, making it seem as though the two of them had practiced this throw a hundred times. I looked at the Rogue in awe, before seeing Rana kick off the ground and crawl up the cliffside using just her hands and feet.

The gulf between me and her, in terms of physical ability, had never been greater I felt.

As the two skulked along the cliff above, I tracked them with Sumi. Something I hadn’t picked up on earlier was that the vision granted by my Watcher was no longer the monotone grey-scale that it had been previously.

I can see colours vaguely now. I wonder what else I’ll be able to see when my Summon ranks up further. Or is this a result of my Pact of the Familiar levelling up?

Armen, do you feel any difference in strength?

“Since we escaped the Demon’s claws aboard the Galleon I have had better access to your spirit reservoir through our bond.”

Hm, maybe the changes vary based on the familiar type.

I was pulled from my reverie by the sight of Lukas sneaking up behind the goblin with the horn hiding in the bush. The way he moved with his knife held in front of himself reminded me of some of the scenes of shinobi that I’d seen in movies. I could already guess what sort of Advanced Roles he would have access to...

The blonde Rogue was able to get right up behind the goblin, whose focus was locked on the taller one with the arbalest that kept watch. In a single terrifyingly-easy motion, Lukas had jammed his knife into the side of the goblin’s neck, but he was unable to stop it from thrashing in pain and surprise. Though I couldn’t hear sounds through the bond with my Watcher, I was sure that the horn-wielder must’ve let out a yelp or something, because the taller dirty-blue goblin was immediately alert.

With a powerful push, Lukas sheared his blade through the neck, severing the creature’s carotid arteries and windpipe, making it quickly cease its thrashing. As the boy pulled away from his victim, it spasmed a few times before falling still. I wanted to scream at him to look up at the tall goblin, because it lifted its ranged weapon and sighted him, but, by the time Lukas broke free from his stare at the dead horn-wielder, it was too late.

I began frantically running down the shoreline towards the cave opening, while watching the scene unfold through my left eye.

The exact moment the arbalest let its bolt fly, Rana slammed into the blue goblin, sending the shot wildly off-target. Before it could put up any resistance, she had cleaved its head from its neck. Once she had made sure that the nest below had not been alerted, she stomped over to Lukas and punched him hard enough in the shoulder to knock him on the ground.

I could imagine the sort of scolding she was giving him for letting his guard down. It came from a good place, but it was hard for me not to want to console Lukas rather than lambasting him for freezing-up.

“You have been spotted.”

Shit!

I hadn’t noticed that I’d made myself completely visible to the cave opening. The goblin that’d been sitting in the entrance was yelling up a storm and clearly calling reinforcements from inside.

I have no choice! I need to summon Kabanenoki!

With the small knife that I carried strapped to my belt, I opened up the palm of my left hand and as my blood dripped freely to the ground, I invoked my Fighter familiar.

Come forth, Kabanenoki! Crush my foes with your mighty limbs!

From the blood emerged my towering Corpse Tree familiar upon its three legs. The very moment it had finished materialising, Kabanenoki began stomping towards the cave, from which emerged seven green goblins and one tall blue one. When they laid eyes on my familiar, half of them tried to run back into the cave, but a silhouette dropped from the cliff above to land atop one of them. As Rana pulled her sword from the goblin she had landed on, she turned the motion into a slash at another of the cretins, before immediately targeting the blue goblin.

The rest of the goblins bravely charged my familiar, which swung its distorted and twisted arm-like branches, crushing them to a pulp or flensing them apart with its claws. With each of the towering Corpse Tree’s strikes, I felt a portion of my energy drain away. A sense of numbness overcame me as I saw what my familiar made of the goblins, and when another dozen came from within the cave, Rana and Kabanenoki turned the slaughter into a massacre.

A moment later Lukas came to my side, staring wide-eyed and terrified at the scene by the cave opening. He was carrying the arbalest that the lookout had wielded and I saw that one of his belt-mounted bags was covered in blood, no doubt from where he’d stored the “trophies” from the slain goblins.

The sudden pang of exhaustion hit me and I turned to look at the unfolding massacre by the cave. A second after, my familiar vanished and I fell to my knees, utterly drained of energy. Even the ever-present Armen became barely visible to my eyes.

Lukas pulled out his sword and got in front of me.

“I’ll protect you!” he said courageously, while all I could do was look at Rana tearing through the goblins with seemingly no issue.

Around her lay two dozen decapitated and crushed bodies, and before her were the remaining two goblins, a blue one and a red one. Following the logic of colours, I assumed that a red goblin was strength-based, which seemed to be spot on, given its bulky frame.

“You need to help her,” I told Lukas, while I strained to get back on my feet. My head felt like it was floating and a pervasive nausea clogged my throat.

The youth looked at me seriously, but then nodded and sprinted off to aid our Vanguard, who seemed to be running low on energy.

The moment that Lukas entered the fray, the red goblin was distracted, allowing Rana to surge forward and slice through its neck. As the red leader fell headless to the ground, the tall blue one tried to make a break for it, but Lukas immediately flung his knife into its back, sending it tumbling to the ground, before Rana came over and stomped on its head with her metal boot, producing a loud *crunch* that reverberated along the stone coast.

She came over to me and asked, “Are you okay? You’re not hurt, right?”

“I’m okay. I just overextended myself a bit. Sorry for almost screwing things up.”

“Maybe we’re not cut out for quests like this,” she remarked.

“We just need more practice!” Lukas said optimistically.

“I’m really not meant to be using my familiars in a fight like this,” I replied. “It’s too easy for me to run out of energy.”

“You should try and train with your familiars more,” Rana advised.

“Would that help?”

“Spellhands and other magic-wielding Roles benefit from it.”

I nodded. “I’ll give it a try. We should gather our trophies for now and head back. It would be a bad idea to go for the next cave.”

“Shouldn’t we look inside this one at least?” Lukas asked.

“It’s a terrible idea to venture into a goblin nest unless you absolutely know what you’re doing,” Rana commented.

Lukas seemed disappointed by that. From the look of his aura, I got the sense that he wanted to prove himself.

“That was a nice throw, by the way.”

“His hand-eye coordination is quite excellent,” Rana said, sounding like a proud teacher.

The youth’s eyes lit up at the praise.

“Alright, let’s get these trophies and head back,” Rana decided.

When we walked into the Guild Hall sometime after dusk with bags full of severed goblin ears and the various trinkets they’d carried, as well as the arbalest Lukas had looted, a lot more people were seated in the tavern and going through the listed quests on the boards.

In the sea of auras I noticed a colour that I had not seen before: dark-red. Despite myself, I wished that Owl was still here to teach me all the things I didn’t yet know. I remembered the advice he’d given me though and took off my glasses for a moment, so that I saw the people without my Spirit Sight clouding my judgement.

There were three of them and each seemed to be strength-based, given their height of about two metres. They wore dark-brown storm-coats and had peaked hats with wide brims. Each seemed to be covered in jewellery and charms, but I couldn’t tell if it was a fashion choice or part of their tool-set.

“Rana, do you know what Role those guys are?”

She followed where I indicated and took a step back in surprise when she apparently recognised their attire.

“What is it?” I asked.

“They’re Witch Hunters, Ryūta.”

27 – Mercenary Work

I swallowed hard.

“Witch Hunters?” I asked in a low voice. “What are they doing here??”

Before Rana could reply, the clerk returned with the reward for the twenty-one goblin trophies we had delivered. A few of the bodies had been so thoroughly crushed by Kabanenoki that it was impossible to retrieve any meaningful trophies from them.

“Your total reward is eighteen silver crowns,” said the clerk. The Representative who had received the trophies and quest flier nodded in agreement.

“I thought it was only fifty copper crowns per kill,” I remarked.

“That is indeed the normal reward for green goblins, but blue goblins are worth two silvers and red ones are worth five.”

Rana looked at the pale dark-haired Representative with an intense stare, before raising her voice and saying, “I think it would be a good idea to raise the Quest Rank to Seeker. The presence of evolved goblins is usually a sign that there are also hobgoblins among them.”

The lady returned her intense stare, then sighed. “We were afraid of that. It seems the northern tribes have left Lacksmey to terrorise Arley, though for what reason no one knows...”

“There was just recently a Hobgoblin Lord near Lundia,” Rana replied.

“Indeed. Which is practically unheard of... these are truly troubling times we are heading into. In the past, it was only the south of Arley that was troubled by goblin tribes. Regardless, thank you for your honest assessment Ms. Thorn. I will raise your worries with our leadership and withdraw the Quest until a conclusion has been reached.”

Rana nodded curtly. “Thank you.”

After taking the eighteen silver coins and retrieving our Guild Cards, we made to leave the Guild Hall. I was glad to be getting out, since the presence of the Witch Hunters was deeply unnerving to me. Just in case, I invoked my Watcher.

Sumi, follow the Witch Hunters.

I felt a faint sap of my remaining embers of energy as the familiar silently obeyed, floating off through the wall of the Adventurers’ Guild building. I briefly shared its vision and saw that it was looking down at the three Witch Hunters from the first-floor balcony.

“We made a lot of money today!” Lukas said excitedly. I suppose that to him it *was* quite a lot of money, since I doubted he was paid much when he worked at the Margrave’s Castle.

“If you consider that it should be split three ways, then it is actually not that much,” Rana replied. “The risk-to-reward is greatly skewed. They basically incentivise us Adventurers to kill as many goblins as possible, and teach us that the more dangerous types, like the blue and red ones, are worth hunting. Trust me on this, that way leads only death.”

“I thought we did really well,” he replied, his excitement deflated.

“If not for me, you and Ryūta would have died,” she said matter-of-factly.

“That’s not—”

“She’s telling the truth,” I interrupted him before he could argue the point. “I overextended myself by using my familiar and you would have been injured or killed by a crossbow bolt if not for Rana.”

“I’ll do better next time!”

“That’s not the point,” Rana told him calmly. “We have to learn to balance the risk with the reward. Sometimes, as in the case of this goblin quest, we should have observed that they had evolved goblins among their ranks, returned to the Guild with the information, and then have waited for the quest to have a higher reward attached.”

“Wouldn’t that raise the potential for civilians to be injured or killed?” I interjected.

“Unfortunately, when it comes to something like this, we have to be cognisant of what we are capable of, and, if you think about it, had we managed to wipe out both nests, we would only have been paid ten silver crowns... Sometimes you have to focus on yourself. Playing hero will only lead to your own suffering.”

“That might be the bleakest thing I’ve heard you say yet,” I told her.

“It’s merely the truth.”

At times like these she could be very confident and argumentative, like back when I suggested that Lukas take the Role Assignment.

I let out a sigh. “Perhaps taking on Exorcisms is the best option. Never thought I’d actually say that out loud...”

“That’s only true if we stick with the Adventurers’ Guild,” she answered.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m saying that we should look at the Mercenary Guild and their contracts.”

“Wouldn’t I be useless for that,” I asked.

“Your familiar can protect other people, can’t it?”

I nodded.

“That means you effectively have an invisible bodyguard to use for any contracts where someone needs protection.”

“I guess that makes some sense. So, how do we go about joining the Mercenary Guild?”

Rana smiled, “I’ll show you.”

The Mercenary Guild of Ochre looked like a small fortress of stone. It even had a moat full of small fish and turtles surrounding it, with a single bridge connected to its entrance.

“Decades ago, this building was where the Lord of Ochre lived,” Rana explained without me needing to ask.

After crossing the bridge and walking through the four-metre-tall gate, we came into an interior space that looked pretty much identical to the Lundia version: a large central hall that was sparsely decorated; a wide counter where contracts were drawn out by one of the three Guild Clerks present; and a tavern-esque part that seemed present in all the Guilds, regardless of affiliation and purpose.

There was nobody within the Hall aside from the Clerks in their outfits of dark-blue shirts, black ties, and grey dress pants, all three of which seemed to be sleeping on their feet. Upon seeing us enter, the rightmost Clerk let out a surprised sound that awoke his fellows.

Rana led us to the wide counter, where she said, “These two would like to join the Mercenary Guild.”

“Of course! Do you already have soul-stone Cards from the Adventurers’ Guild or will you be requiring them to be made?”

“They both have Cards,” she answered.

“Why is there no one here?” I asked.

The leftmost Clerk, a tan woman with long blonde hair, sighed in frustration. “Everyone left a few weeks ago when all the trouble started in the Port District...”

I frowned, but then remembered what Rana had said earlier. They were just looking out for themselves and didn’t want to play heroes. Besides, I doubted there’d be many contracts available in a city besieged by a Demon and its wraith army, since the Mercenary Guild relied on people wanting to hire their members.

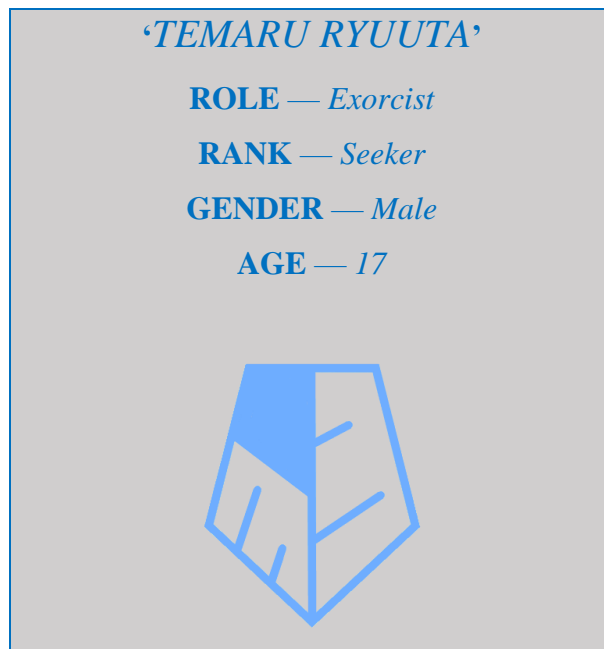
Rana began asking the first Clerk about what sort of contracts they had available, while Lukas and I dealt with the other two respectively.

The long-haired blonde woman looked at my Guild Card and then said, “Haven’t seen any Exorcist Mercenaries before.”

Although I was bluffing mostly, I replied, “I use my familiars as bodyguards.”

Her face paled slightly, but then she regained her composure and nodded curtly. I suppose the reaction was fair, given that ordinary people couldn’t see my familiars and their imaginations probably weren’t doing them any favours when they thought about invisible monsters at an Exorcist’s disposal...

Using a soul-stone tablet, the two Clerks seemed to copy the information on our Guild Cards, such that we were registered in their ‘system’ as well. Additionally, we were each given a playing-card-sized thin wafer of soul-stone that had our basic information and the Mercenary Guild’s insignia. I remembered seeing Rana show a similar thing when we had first signed the contract with her in Lundia, but hadn’t thought much of it since then.



“Does my Adventurers’ Guild Rank carry over?” I asked in surprise, when I saw the information.

“We do not question their Rank promotions, although Ranks have little bearing on the type of contracts you might accept from our Guild, unless you are dealing with unique clients and we deem you too inexperienced. If a client wishes to hire you, that is their prerogative and we do not generally impede this process. This means that your reputation matters more than your Rank, as well as your Role. We most often see clients hiring Paladins, Vanguard, and Rangers, as they are deemed the most reliable.”

“I’m guessing no one asks for Exorcists,” I replied.

“They do not,” she confirmed. “But, since your party includes a competent and reputable Vanguard, you ought to still find willing clients. Particularly in Ochre at the moment, as we are short-staffed on Mercenaries.”

“Did you find any worthwhile contracts?” I asked Rana as we were walking to the Church that lay in the Port District. I needed to buy Sinner’s Ash to refill my pouch, especially since I’d realised how useful it was in countering illusions. Given that neither Rana nor Lukas knew where to get specialised Exorcist tools from, I decided to go straight to the source, hence the Church we were heading for.

“There were a few contracts for ship captains that wanted guards to fight off potential pirate attacks, but I’ve tried such a contract in the past and it was miserable, plus they only pay about twenty silvers for a forty-day trip, granted lodging and food is included, but what they mean by ‘food’ is usually hardtack and watered-down ale.”

“Any other ones that we might actually want?”

“Aside from the ship guard ones, there were three escort contracts out of town. One was a merchant heading back to Lundia, another was similar but heading to Helmstatter, and the last was a woman heading to Helmstatter by herself.”

“Master Owl did say we ought to head for Helmstatter,” I mused.

“In that case, we should pick the contract with the lone woman,” Rana remarked. “The merchant one gives off bad vibes.”

“How so?” I asked as we walked under the archway into the Port District. As usual, Lukas was off in his own world, though still keeping pace with us.

“First off, it’s paying three gold crowns...”

I blinked in surprise. “That’s a lot.”

“Yeah.”

“And?”

“It would normally only be thirty-to-fifty silvers for such a trip, even if it was a small convoy. Whenever they offer up too much money as a reward, it usually means one of two things: you’re getting scammed or you’re being paid to keep a secret.”

“Why? What are they transporting? And why now?”

“It could be a lot of things: slaves, euphorics, illegal artefacts, forbidden texts, monsters, etc. As for ‘why now’, that probably just comes down to the fact that they haven’t been able to access their cargo from whichever ship brought it to Ochre, due to the cordon placed around the Port.”

I mulled it over in my head. I shouldn’t be surprised that such people existed in this world, given everything else I’d already seen, but it was yet another stark reminder that this world was not as forgiving as my own. Although, as I thought that, I realised that smuggling and human trafficking existed, even in Japan...

As I looked around the piers, seeing all the guards still stationed here, despite the cordon having been lifted, I couldn’t help but ask, “How are they getting whatever illegal cargo they have out of the city unnoticed?”

“If they’re the hush-money type, then they have enough coin to bribe their way out; otherwise they’ll usually cause a distraction or make a break for it, though that rarely ends well.”

“You seem to know a lot about this stuff,” I commented.

“As an Adventurer you learn how to handle monsters; as a Mercenary it’s not much different, although most of the monsters involved bear human faces...”

The Church of Ochre lay on the very fringe of the Port District, its belltower like a lighthouse for the ships travelling to the harbour. Unlike the rest of the city, it had been built from a pearlescent-white stone and had a front building shaped like a half-moon, behind which the belltower sprouted from. A wall of the same pearlescent stone surrounded its expansive graveyard that was full of rectangular three-metre-tall marble monoliths into the shelves of which were placed the urns of deceased, with small plaques stating their names, and dates of birth and death.

It was the first time I’d seen current or recent years written down, and it was surprising to see that it followed a similar pattern to the old traditionally Japanese way of naming years after the current Emperor.

“Who is Egil?” I asked after stopping by one of the pearl-white monoliths and reading the year, which stated ‘8th year of Egil’ as year of death, strangely, there was no specific date attached, though I noticed that with most of the graves, so it was perhaps intentional.

“Sir Egil Gyldenrose is the King of Lacksmey, and Arley, where his brother, Prince Torvalder, has been allowed to rule. The current era is named after the King.”

“What year are we in now?”

“12th year of Egil,” she answered.

“Why don’t they record the specific dates? I can’t believe I haven’t asked this until now, but, doesn’t this world have a calendar system??”

“They do track three seasons: Seed, Fall, and Harvest. However, each year the seasons seem to change in number of days. We’re currently on the fifty-seventh day of Harvest. Last year, Harvest was no longer than fifty-three days, but this year it’s sixty days. I have no idea why.”

“That’s very confusing...”

“As for the graves,” she started, then her eyes fell slightly, “it seems to be tradition, although when we buried Heshher, I made sure to mark the specific date of death, even though the Archpriest overseeing the funeral rites said it was bad luck.”

I frowned. I couldn’t understand why the people of this world would have such a superstition.

After wandering about for some minutes, we headed towards the main building, but were stopped by a groundskeeper, who kept the stone path through the graveyard clear of the pebbles that surrounded each of the monoliths.

“You can’t enter, there’s a sermon underway,” he told us.

“I just wanted to know if I can procure Sinner’s Ash from this church,” I replied.

“An Exorcist, are you?”

I nodded.

“You’ll wanna head for the crematorium *over there*,” he said and pointed towards a circular one-storey pearl-white building with a tall chimney from which bellowed a steady stream of smoke.

“Thank you,” I said.

The man grunted something, before returning to his task.

At the crematorium, a man in stainless white robes was overseeing four men who were loading bodies into large ovens on sliding trays, before pulling them back out and discarding the bones that were too big to crush into powder along with the desiccated remains. The fire that roared within the ovens seemed of an unnatural sort.

“What do you want?” asked the overseer in the white robes.

“I was told I could acquire Sinner’s Ash from here.”

He sneered slightly, then yelled to the workers, “Do we have any Sinner’s Ash on hand?”

“Four kilos, sir!” called one of the workers.

“I just need enough to fill a small pouch, no more than fifty grams I’m sure.”

The overseer nodded, then said, “That’ll be six gold then.”

“You can’t be serious!” Rana commented hotly.

The man turned to face her and said acidly, “Do you even understand how much effort goes into collecting this particular ash!?”

“You just said you had four kilos’ worth!”

“Rana, it’s okay—” I tried to interject to deescalate the situation.

“We only collect a few grams per cremation, so our stockpile is the result of thousands of cremations! It’s a valuable ingredient for Alchemists, Ritualists, and Exorcists, which is why it’s so expensive.”

I put a hand on Rana’s arm to stop her before she could argue back.

“We understand,” I told him. “I assume the cost is the same for Sacred Corpse Ash.”

“That’s even more expensive,” he told me, “But we have exhausted our supply, since someone came and bought it all to deal with the Demon Galleon, so I have nothing to sell you.”

“That’d be my Mentor,” I replied.

“You helped defeat the Demon?” he asked, genuinely surprised.

“That’s right!” Rana answered, before I could.

The overseer sighed, then nodded. “I see. In that case, I suppose we can refill your pouch as thanks.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Frode is a good friend of mine and our Church has lost many of its proud members to that infernal creature before you came here with your mentor.”

I bowed deeply as thanks after the man handed me my refilled pouch of Sinner’s Ash. We left the crematorium and walked back through the stone garden with the monoliths displaying urns, and a moment later the belltower began to ring, perhaps marking the end of the sermon or denoting some specific time of day, although it was past noon already.

With Lukas in front, we went through the gate that led outside of the white walls surrounding the graveyard and church, and then headed in the direction of the inn that Rana said the lady with the Mercenary Contract had noted as her temporary residence in Ochre.

While the blonde Rogue skipped down the street, I reconnected with my Watcher that I’d left to monitor the Witch Hunters. To my horror, I saw a perspective that was near identical to the street we were walking along, and, in the distance of my borrowed sight, I could see myself. I stopped in place and turned around, immediately locking eyes with two of the Witch Hunters who were standing only a few metres away.

“Let go of me!” I heard Lukas then yell. I spun around to see him in the grip of the third Witch Hunter.

A heavy hand settled on my shoulder, before a warm breath washed over my neck and ear. A stern voice said, “Temaru Ryūta, we have some questions we’d like you to answer truthfully.”

28 – Infamy

I tried to wrestle myself out of the vice-grip of the Witch Hunter, but to no avail. Rana had pulled her blade out of its sheath, wavering between aiming it at Lukas’ captor or mine.

Armen, do something!

“I cannot. I am unable to move.”

“Don’t try to call on your familiars for aid,” the guy holding me warned. “And tell your friend to put her sword away.”

I shared a brief and panicked glance with Rana, and she obliged, lowering her sword, though not returning it to its scabbard. The man holding the squirming Lukas came closer, as did the third who had been covering the scene with a crossbow.

With his hand firmly gripping my shoulder, my captor stared rifling through my bags until he found my Guild Card and Mercenary Card. He passed these to the crossbow-wielder for inspection.

“Hey! Don’t touch those!”

“Be quiet.”

Why can’t you move!?

“These men wield some strange magic that spellbinds me.”

I looked around, while my captor continued digging through my pouches and robe pockets, and spotted the crossbow-wielder having a smaller second aura glowing from his left gloved hand, though I could not tell what it meant, although the aura was pure-white and pulsing faintly.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I asked. “At least let my friends go!”

The man ignored me, until his friend handed the Cards back with the words: “He’s clean.” Then the vice-grip on my shoulder was released and I stumbled forward until Rana caught and steadied me.

“It seems that the accusation that you were in the possession of dangerous artefacts and forbidden familiars was a falsehood,” the man who’d searched me said out loud for all three of us to hear.

Behind me, Lukas was released as well and he quickly came up to my side, pulling out his sword.

“Who has accused me of such things!?” I shouted back. “I just helped this city get rid of a Demon, why would I be evil!?”

“We are aware of your accomplishments,” the leader replied steadily, while the crossbowman once again aimed his weapon at us. “We are likewise aware of your association with the Seditonist known by the name of ‘Owl’.”

“What do you mean?” I asked shakily. I wondered if they knew about his forbidden familiar or his disturbing religious belief in some reality-defying deity.

“Your teacher is responsible for raising some of the most heinous villains the continent of Hallem has ever seen. We are of the firm belief that the Demon brought to Ochre was caused by one of his former students. He is also infamous for having trained the ‘Puppet Master’ who made a hunting ground of Helmstatter, terrorising the city for nearly two years.”

“What does that have to do with me!?”

“Perhaps nothing,” the man said, stepping closer. “But placing a familiar to track us is certainly a move that someone suspicious would do, don’t you think?”

It terrified me that they knew that I’d made Sumi observe them, but if they could paralyse Armen, then it was surely no difficult manner for them to see my normally-invisible familiars.

Rana cast me a sceptical look and it made my chest tighten that she’d believe my intentions were evil.

“I’m new to this world,” I told him, “but I already know that you Witch Hunters are dangerous to people of my profession.”

“Tell us where your teacher is,” the man replied, ignoring my defence.

“I don’t know.”

The man watched me closely for a moment, then nodded to his friend with the crossbow, who lowered his weapon.

“We will be watching you closely,” he warned me, then he turned and went into an alleyway with his friends.

Sumi, you’re dismissed.

The inky Watcher that floated high above dissipated into the air.

A moment later, Armen said, “**My functions have been returned to me.**”

“What the hell was that!?” Rana asked, somehow blaming me for what had just happened.

“I don’t know,” I muttered weakly, my heart still beating a thousand times per minute.

“One of the Crusader’s friends must have sent them after Ryūta,” Lukas said.

We both turned to look at him. It had been maybe two weeks since I’d last seen Harleigh and the timing of events seemed to line up somewhat. Still, the revelation that Owl was the person who’d taught the Exorcist that’d torn Harleigh’s party into pieces, as well as the Demonologist that’d somehow sent a Demon to Ochre, did not sit well with me.

An event played through my head unbidden: Owl frantically trying to figure out if I’d summoned a forbidden familiar. With the knowledge of hindsight, I now wondered if he had been more concerned about me being captured and executed by the Witch Hunters because of it, rather than it being something antithetical to his teachings. He had told me that Harleigh was responsible for the death of his last apprentice, but was that because that apprentice had possessed a forbidden familiar? Given the way that Owl had talked about the ‘tasks’ he had to perform for the Observer, I now wondered if he had known that I’d come across these Witch Hunters and had thus ensured that I had no incriminating evidence on me. As though ensuring that I would go on to fulfil whatever strange purpose he had prepared me for.

It confused me why the Witch Hunter had not bothered to check my Encyclopaedia, but perhaps that was because they were unaware of the information within? Surely such a tome of esoteric and forbidden knowledge would’ve been incriminating enough by itself. It seemed unlikely that they’d know about familiars and how to counter them, but not know that Exorcists carried around such potent knowledge on their persons. Which made me wonder if it was in fact normal to have an Encyclopaedia like mine. It was hard to know what he had told me was real and what was fabrication. But then again, he had not told me to hide my Encyclopaedia from anyone, just my Guild Card.

The more I thought about it, Owl’s explanation that his Flayed Lord’s Curse caused people to betray him now just sounded like a suspicious cover-up to hide the real truth...

“Did you seriously tell your familiar to spy on them!?” Rana asked in outrage. “Why would you do something *like that!*?”

“I was worried, okay!?” I replied. “Owl told me that his previous apprentice was killed by Witch Hunters, so I tried to keep an eye on them just in case...”

“Which only made them more suspicious of you,” she scolded me.

“Yeah...”

“I think we should take the Mercenary Contract and get out of Ochre before they decide to pay us another visit,” she advised sternly, inviting no argument.

“You’re not mad at me?” I asked cautiously. Her aura was throbbing aggressively, so it was clear that she was.

“I’m fucking furious,” she growled. “How could you do something so reckless!?”

“Sorry.”

Rana sighed loudly, then said, “Let’s go find this woman. No matter what, we’re leaving Ochre tonight.”

I had no idea what the three of us must’ve looked like when we entered the fancy inn and Rana asked for the proprietor to fetch our soon-to-be client. No doubt we looked like a bunch of amateurs...

After waiting for ten minutes in the entrance of the inn, where the interior was decked out in expensive-looking lacquered ash-grey wood and snobbish Natives lounged in comfortable chairs with drinks in their hands, a woman came down the stairs. She wore a modest dress of a fabric that seemed somewhere between silk and wool, and which was a bit on the thick side for the Ochre warmth and sun. Her face was pale and had sharp high cheekbones, with sunken cheeks and dark rings around her otherwise charming amber eyes. The coal-black hair on her head was made into a thick braid that slouched over her shoulder, and a sliver of it was shock-white, twisting throughout the braid and making her otherwise mundane appearance quite unique.

When she was on the third-to-last step, her shoe slipped on the step and Rana quickly shot forward to catch her before she could fall on the floor. A few of the patrons that lounged nearby snickered mockingly.

I wonder if she’s feeble.

“**She is afflicted with something,**” Armen commented.

How can you tell? I asked him.

“**I have in the past treated patients with similar symptoms. The white streak in the hair is a commonality. I do not know the cause, sadly.**”

I chewed on my lower lip. *This might end up being more troublesome than expected...*

“Thank you,” the lady said to Rana, slightly embarrassed. “Are you the Mercenaries who have decide to take my contract?”

“That’s right,” she replied. “My name is Rana, and these two are Lukas and Ryūta.”

The lady, who might only have been thirty, though it was hard to tell, gave us each a scrutinising look. Then she said, “A Vanguard, a Rogue, and a... I’m sorry, but what are you?”

I met her eyes and said, “I’m an Exorcist.”

Behind me, one of the lounging Natives choked on his drink and I heard him sputtering and coughing as he attempted to clear his airway of errant droplets.

“I cannot say I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting one of your kind before,” she answered. Her aura was a vague dark-purple-red that was hazy and impossible to gauge much from, but it was clear that she was not lying at least...

I forced my true expression down and adopted an easy-going and confident smile.

Rana then said, “He is a capable wielder of his familiars and will be able to protect you in ways that my shield cannot.”

Lukas nodded in agreement and I could tell by the shape and pulse of his aura that he was upset on my behalf, which I thought was nice. I still struggled to fully understand what went on in his head, but it was good to know that his intentions were good.

At the statement, which was mostly false, the lady gave me another glance up-and-down, before nodding to herself.

“Very well, you three will do, I suppose. Let’s waste no time. I’ll go have my servant bring the carriage around.”

The carriage was of some pale black-veined wood given a lacquered shine and could comfortably seat six people within on its cushioned benches, while the driver at the front sat on a lifted bench and played the reins of the two black horses pulling it.

“You, Exorcist, will sit up in front with my servant. Lukas and Rana, you will join me within.”

Instead of contesting this, all three of us agreed to her terms. Rana had made it clear that while Adventurers’ Guild quests allowed for a lot of freedom in terms of how a quest was handled, Mercenary contracts relied on the client to set the terms, unless they were unintentionally putting themselves in harm’s way. As such, we simply nodded and did as she wished.

When I climbed up in front, I was glad that my robe-coat had several layers, since the nights could get a bit chilly and it was bound to get colder as we went further south, according to Lukas.

“I’m Temaru Ryūta,” I greeted the driver.

The man grimaced and then muttered, “I ain’t talking to an Exorcist.”

I couldn’t help but frown in response. I scooted as far to the edge of our small bench as I could, then hunkered down for what was sure to be an unpleasant ride.

The carriage shifted as the lady, Rana, and Lukas got in, then the servant whipped the reins and we started rolling along the bumpy stone streets of Ochre. It had been a short stay, but I had enjoyed my time here.

Given what Rana had told me of Helmstatter, and the fear I had that the servant and his mistress were representatives of their attitudes, it seemed like it might not end up a very fun visit.

While we rolled along the same road that’d brought us to Ochre, I practiced commanding and utilising Sumi to scout ahead, discovering that the Watcher familiar had abilities such as zoom vision and

tracking a moving target while it itself was moving. The latter proved useful for following the carriage’s journey and also repositioning to a new location further ahead. Given that the road between Lundia and Ochre was surrounded by forests pretty much the entire way, it was a bit hard to put my familiar to its best use and I wondered if it’d unlock the ability to see things in heat vision or infrared as I advanced my Pact of the Familiar and Summon abilities.

As well as practicing my manipulation of the familiar, I also tried to get used to having both eyes open while sharing my vision with Sumi, but it was not something I thought I could ever get fully used to, due to the massive migraine it caused. As such, I spent most of my time using Sumi with my right eye mostly closed.

I could hear Rana and Lukas talking with the lady inside the carriage most of the time, and the exclusion stung quite a bit, particularly because the driver fully ignored me as well. He was a dour sort with a big red nose and small eyes, as well as an unkempt beard that hardly gave off the air of ‘servant’, but perhaps the lady could do no better than such a servant?

Armen, as a Priest, were you able to diagnose people’s conditions? I asked, while looking through Sumi’s eye at the upcoming fork in the road that’d take us south to Helmstatter, rather than east to Lundia.

“Indeed.”

Do you still have that ability?

“Only when it pertains to you. My current situation prevents me from interfering with the world much, except for when it involves safeguarding you. However, I practiced as a Priest for many years and believe I retained my appraising eye for all manner of ailments, such that I can identify them at a glance.”

The Lady’s condition, what happened to those who shared it?

“Most perished within a few weeks. Their hearts simply gave out.”

I thought about it for a moment and considered the lady’s nature. *Is it possible that a curse could be responsible?*

“Yes. That would be my estimation.”

I frowned. We had truly found a troublesome client. We might as well have gone with the smugglers who were paying nearly five times what we’d be getting from guarding the lady.

How do you break a curse like that?

“I am untrained in such manners,” Armen replied. **“Cursebreaking is generally a trait of Summoners.”**

I noticed something by the fork up ahead through my borrowed vision and quickly gripped the driver by the arm, startling him awake. The horses had been going on autopilot while he dozed off.

“Stop the carriage,” I told him.

Given the tone of my voice, he did not argue and whipped the reins, uttering a word to the beasts.

As soon as we slowed, Rana flung open the door and leaned out to look at me.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“There’s an ambush up ahead,” I told her. My heart was pounding in my ears as adrenaline started flushing through my system.

“Goblins?”

“Not this time,” I said with gritted teeth. “They’re human.”

She hopped out the open door and, when the carriage slowed completely, Lukas followed behind her.

“Lukas, you stay with the carriage!” Rana told him.

“Ryūta, you guard the Lady with your familiars!”

You heard her, Armen.

“**I follow only the commands uttered by your voice,**” he replied loyally.

Make sure no harm comes to the Lady, the driver, the horses, nor Lukas, I instructed.

“**Very well.**”

I had been using Sumi sparingly, so I had a lot of energy left to use. In the worst-case scenario, I could bring out Kabanenoki, but I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

As Rana walked out ahead of the carriage, the lady got out as well, climbing up to sit next to me.

“It would be best if you waited inside,” I told her.

“Why? You will protect me, won’t you?” she replied, as though daring me to let her die just to prove a point.

“Of course.”

“Karl, go fetch the crossbow from the trunk,” she then said to the driver.

“Milady, please...” he pleaded.

“Don’t disappoint me now.”

He sighed, then climbed down from the front seat and went to get the weapon from the trunk at the rear of the carriage.

“These men are here for me,” the lady said. She seemed very sure of that.

“Why?”

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

“Because of my cousin, Torvalder Gyldenrose, the Prince of Arley.”

29 – The Cursed Princess I

When the shabby-looking servant-and-driver returned with an old relic of a crossbow, Rana had gotten a hundred metres ahead of the carriage where she was standing her ground, waiting for the hidden foes to materialise. She looked back at me, and I somehow could interpret her unspoken question.

“Do you think we can bargain with these people?” I asked the lady.

“No.”

I pulled my sword out and showed it to Rana. She understood the gesture and pulled her own sword from its scabbard, before yelling so loudly that the horses startled.

Pulled from their hiding by her seemingly-irresistible taunt, eight men emerged from the trees and bushes at the fork in the road a couple hundred metres from the carriage. They were all Natives by the looks of their weak auras, though their colours ranged from red to green in hues, indicating to me the types of strengths they had.

Most interestingly, Rana’s aura had become like a boiling sea of crimson tendrils. Her aura was naturally spiky, but this was on a whole other level.

Is this the effect of her War God ability? I wondered.

“**There is another three hiding in the trees nearby and coming closer,**” Armen warned.

How can you tell?

“**When they lay their eyes upon you with ill intentions, I can sense it. I do not understand it well, but it is a useful power I seem to have gained when becoming a Protector.**”

I wonder if it is the same sort of power that allowed the Witch Hunters to know that I was spying on them?

I sent Sumi high into the air above the carriage and then used its vision to scan the nearby trees, spotting some slight movement in the brush and canopies, when the three figures came closer.

After breaking off my bond with Sumi, I looked to where I’d spotted them, but wouldn’t have seen them hiding there if not for the faint wisps of their aura that was visible to my Spirit Glasses. All three auras greenish, with one very prominent and strong.

“Lukas!” I yelled down to my companion. “They have a Ranger with them! I need you to take him down.” I pointed off into the trees, showing where he was.

With a nod, the Rogue ducked down and quickly leapt from the gravel road and into the forest that surrounded it, disappearing like a camouflaged woodland creature. Even though I knew the path he was taking, I could not spot him without my Spirit Glasses that highlighted his light-green aura.

I watched the forest for signs of the Ranger and his two friends emerging or attempting to line up a shot at us, but nothing seemed to happen. Part of me suddenly felt a potent dread at having potentially sent Lukas off to get killed, but I pushed those concerns aside, since I had no other choice but to believe in him. I had seen him take down a goblin with such ease that it was hard to believe he was only thirteen, but he had also frozen-up afterwards...

Sumi, follow after Lukas.

I looked back to where Rana was fighting off the main force of the ambushers. Already four of them lay dead, one was grievously wounded, and the last three were fighting her all at once, though clearly losing. If the attributes were our potential as humans in this world, then it meant that with her S-tier in Strength and Vitality she had superhuman power and endurance. To a Native of this world, fighting Rana must've been like fighting an unstoppable monster in the guise of a human.

Her aura of tendrils seemed to be lashing out and hitting her opponents', making them quake and tremble. This impact of her aura against theirs seemed to make them flinch as though struck, allowing her the opportunity to slip past their defences and deal a killing blow.

Truly like a War God... I wonder how terrifying she must appear to their eyes.

A *woosh* came from the forest nearby and was quickly followed by a *crunch* as Armen intercepted an arrow mid-flight. I hadn't even registered the sound fast enough to realise it had been aiming right for us.

“We are under attack by an archer,” he informed me deadpan.

“Karl, give me that damned weapon!” the lady insisted, pulling the crossbow from the servant's hands and aiming it into the trees where the arrow had come from. If she had seen Armen intercepting it, she made no show of acknowledging it. She lifted the crossbow to her shoulder and sighted down the weapon, but before she could release the trigger, another two arrows came from the trees, one flying in a high arc and the other spinning as it aimed straight for the lady's head.

Armen stopped the first projectile only a handspan from the lady, by slapping it with his gauntleted palm, before catching the second with his left hand easily.

The lady blinked uncomprehendingly for a moment, then asked, “What just happened?”

“I just saved your life, three times. Please put the crossbow down and return to the safety of the carriage.”

She nodded lamely, then did as I asked, perhaps shocked out of her naturally-haughty obstinacy. As soon as she crawled down from the front seat of the carriage, someone broke from the treeline thirty metres away, discarding a broken bow to pull a slender single-edged sword, while Lukas chased behind him, blood glinting on the edge of his tightly-gripped sword.

I hopped down from the seat and got between the charging Ranger and the carriage door, hoping Armen would shield me. In my right hand I held my sword, which felt like it weighed a thousand kilos.

If he goes for the attack, disarm and incapacitate him.

“As you wish.”

The Ranger had a wild look in his eyes and lifted his sword as he came close. Lukas was still fifteen metres away and I realised that I was in his line-of-sight, preventing him from utilising his throwing knife to take the Ranger down.

As he swung his weapon down at my neck, Armen caught him by the wrist and twisted his whole body around, sending him crashing to the ground and tossing the sword aside.

I stood over the Ranger, my sword gripped fiercely, though feeling too heavy for me to use.

“Don’t move!” I yelled at him.

“Myrabelle must die!” he shouted as he got back to his feet, pulling a dagger from some unseen sheath.

When he came at me again, I instinctively lifted the weapon in my hand up to protect myself, and in the same moment Armen prevented the Ranger from striking me. A shuddering impact reverberated up through the handle of the blade and into my hands, making them tingle painfully.

I looked at the man in front of me, at his surprised green eyes, at his tussled and clumped brown hair, at his pale blood-spattered skin. He gasped and stepped back, taking the sword with him and pulling it out of my hands.

“I’m sorry,” I said on impulse. Then the Ranger collapsed to his knees, before falling onto his back.

A moment later Lukas was by my side.

“I killed the other two,” he told me. He seemed excited and a bit manic. Almost as though relishing in his ‘accomplishments’.

I felt numb. My hands had begun to shake and I couldn’t stop look at the Ranger on the ground before me, as he spasmed and bled out.

Rana came to our side then as well, looking between us and the dead Ranger.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

Lukas nodded but I didn’t respond.

“I killed him,” I then said.

Rana put a hand on my back. “You did it to protect someone else.”

“We need to bury them,” I insisted.

Lukas and Rana looked at me with concern.

“I’m fine!” I argued. “I meant that we have to bury them or they might turn into apparitions.”

“Oh…” Rana muttered. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

Already now, I could see how their auras, especially that of the Ranger, was changing shape and hue, as though boiling and transforming into something new. Given the wild look the Ranger had in his eyes, even after death, it was clear that he had been motivated by a strong desire to kill the lady, this so-called Myrabelle. It was possible that someone had brainwashed him, I thought, or maybe he was a fanatic. It was also likely that he was an Adventurer who had been strongarmed into taking on this assassination to save his party. Either way, it seemed that there were strong underlying emotions at play, and *that* was a fecund seedbed for a Haunter to grow from.

I hadn’t seen what became of the souls of the robbers in Lundia, since they had stolen my Goggles back then, but I had a suspicion that Master Owl’s horrifying Spawn of Nwetrou probably ate the souls of those it killed.

We gathered the ambusher in a pile, then used deadwood and branches to cover them, before starting a pyre. Rana was surprisingly adept at getting a good fire going, and Lukas eagerly kept fetching more wood to fuel it, as it devoured the eleven dead men.

The lady and her servant watched in mild confusion, while I stood with my wooden staff in front of the fire, repeating the verses of the Ritual of Obsequy until my voice was hoarse. I had no idea if I was doing the right thing or not, but this was the best I could come up with. Part of me feared that I might be creating worse apparitions, like the Condemned Ifrit born from a wrongly-executed Exorcism of certain Shade entities.

“**This is very close to how I would conduct a burial rite,**” Armen suddenly chimed in. It hadn’t occurred to me to ask him for advice until just then.

Do you think this is good enough?

“**I have found that, when it comes to a proper burial, the intentions are more important than the method.**”

I hope my intentions are good enough then.

“Few people would bury their attackers,” he remarked.

I didn't want them to die. They didn't have to...

“They chose their fate. You acted as a guardian in this instance, so your conscience is clear.”

It doesn't feel that way to me, I replied internally, while outwardly repeating another verse as the flames roared on voraciously.

After leaving behind smouldering embers and bone-filled ashes, our carriage was once again underway. We went left at the fork in the road and this time I was allowed to sit inside the carriage with the lady, Rana, and Lukas.

“I must say that I am quite impressed with your skills. I was of the impression that Exorcists were bad luck to associate with and that your vile magics corrupts all you touch.”

That's quite an image... no wonder people distrust Exorcists if that line of thinking is the norm amongst the Natives of this world.

“As I understand it,” I started, my voice rough and raw, “It seems that bad luck follows Exorcists, rather than us causing bad luck to others.”

“That explains why you met me,” she replied seriously.

I didn't know how to answer that, so I changed the subject slightly.

“You're aware that someone has put a curse on you, right?”

The lady nodded. “A Priest that I know came to that conclusion when he could not cure me, but I'm surprised you could tell. I suppose that those who dabble in curses recognise them easily.”

“Exorcists don't deal with curses,” Rana defended me. “You're thinking of Summoners.”

“I was of the impression they are the same.”

“We're not,” I lied, having no knowledge of what a Summoner was truly like. I hadn't met any so far and also had no idea what their aura might look like. Although if the colour-association had an underlying logic to it, a Summoner's aura would probably be a sort of blue or purple, similar to Spellhand and Exorcist.

As I understood it: Strength was Red; Dexterity was Green; Intelligence was Blue; and Soul was Purple. I had no idea how the other attributes might line up, colour-wise, but hoped to reach a point where I could easily decode someone's aura and tell how their strengths and weaknesses lay. It was possible that my hypothesis was a bit wrong though, since Paladins had Yellow auras and Priests had Beige ones, despite seeming to have a high Soul attribute as well.

“Is it true that your cousin is the Prince of Arley?” Rana asked.

“That’s right. My name is Myrabelle Gyldenrose.”

I frowned. Of course we’d somehow gotten involved with Royalty... I was sure Master Owl had known this would happen and it seemed certain that today’s attack had just been a taste of what was to come. The warning he’d given me that Exorcists were magnets for disaster and misfortune had never rung truer.

“I thought Prince Torvalder and King Egil didn’t have any relatives that could contest their reign.”

Rana and I both looked at Lukas. His awareness of the political landscape came as a surprise, but I suppose that as a servant he had picked up a lot of gossip about the rich and influential people of the world.

“Their father was known for being a philanderer and he sired many bastards. However, he truly loved my mother and I was awarded a sizeable inheritance when he passed away. Of course, with the inheritance it became impossible for me to hide my identity from my half-brothers. Egil for his part didn’t seem bothered by my existence, but Torvalder has been trying to kill me for a long time.”

“So, he’s responsible for the curse?”

“That would be my guess.”

“Then why try to kill you with assassins?”

Myrabelle did a dismissive wave, like a one-handed shrug. “Maybe he thinks the curse failed or maybe he’s impatient.”

“And you haven’t done anything to evoke his ire, have you?”

“I’m just trying to live in peace.”

“Why are you returning to Helmstatter then?” Rana asked astutely.

Her story doesn’t make sense, I thought.

“I wish to return for my mother’s funeral and I’ll be damned if I’ll let some power-mad tyrant stop me.”

“We will have to renegotiate the contract once we arrive in Helmstatter,” Rana replied. “This is far from what was asked in your request.”

“I’ll pay you each two gold if you keep me safe until the funeral is over.”

Lukas and I looked to Rana for guidance.

“Absolutely not,” she said vehemently. “We do this through the Guild or not at all.”

I nodded. That seemed the best way to go about things.

“You Outsiders sure love your little Guilds,” Myrabelle commented scathingly. Then she knocked on the wall of the carriage and the driver slowed it to a stop.

“I’d like you two to go sit outside with the driver,” she told Rana and I.

I grimaced, but Rana acquiesced. I cast Lukas a glance, as if to say, “Let me know if you need help.” The boy grinned in response. Somehow, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

It’s as if he doesn’t feel the weight of the two people he killed earlier...

Rana and I got onto the front bench with the driver, who grumbled something and scooted over. There wasn’t a lot of room, and we were almost sitting atop one another. Rana put an arm around me to stop me from falling off, and I leaned into her embrace.

“Sorry for getting you into this mess,” she whispered into my ear. Her voice made the hairs stand up on my neck.

“Pretty sure it’s my fault,” I replied.

And here I was, thinking that maybe I wasn’t so unlucky after all...

“**Few are those who survive the ire of Royalty,**” Armen commented out of nowhere.

I sighed. *Thanks for that uplifting comment...*

30 – The Cursed Princess II

My hands were drenched in blood and it dripped in viscous globules from between my fingers like crimson honey. I lifted my hands up while watching the fat droplets fall steadily. When I moved them away, I saw a blood-soaked man staring right at me, coming closer-and-closer, while his jaw kept opening and splitting his body in half—

I spasmed awake in Rana’s loose embrace, feeling a sudden sense of vertigo that was quickly replaced by rapid heart palpitations and a knot of anxiety in my chest.

“Bad dream?” she asked me. Next to her, the servant Karl was snoring loudly.

The world around us was dark and the two lanterns next to our front seat cast the nearby trees in an ominous glow, making the shadows of their branches twist and curl like reaching tendrils. The sight reminded me of Rana’s aura when she’d fought the ambushers earlier.

“How are you okay after killing that many people?” I asked.

The look on her face made me think that she interpreted my words as though I’d called her a monster. Truthfully, a part of me did feel that way. Someone that could kill other humans with such ease and feel nothing afterwards was obviously not right. The sight of her fighting the goblins had not stirred the same emotions in me, surprisingly.

“Of course I’m not peachy,” she replied. “No matter how many times you kill someone, it never gets easier. The first few years I didn’t have a single night where I didn’t have nightmares of the people and monsters I’d fought and killed.”

Her answer helped me feel a bit at ease. She was human after all.

“What is your War God ability?”

Her aura wavered slightly. It seemed a touchy subject.

“After my party disbanded, I ended up getting involved in the Arena. It started out as repaying a favour for someone, but before I knew it I was headlining fights and getting into life-or-death battles every week.”

“So, you were a gladiator?”

“I guess so. After some months, the War God ability appeared. I haven’t heard of anyone else with the ability and when I ask the Guild Geniuses about it, they never know anything. It seemed to be awarded to me for overcoming countless fights against many other Otherworlders who were equal to me in strength and skill, as well as some that I honestly should’ve lost to.”

“Are all abilities not part of your Role awarded in the same way?” I asked. It was something I’d been wondering about a bit.

“I don’t think so. The two I have were gained by overcoming something traumatic and life-threatening, but some people have abilities that they were born with and others attain them from training.”

I showed her my Guild Card and said, “My familiars appear on here like abilities.”

“Odd.”

“I saw Owl’s Guild Card,” I then revealed.

“Really? What was it like?” she asked, seeming very interested.

“Disturbing. He has some cultish-seeming Role called Adherent, as well as some curses and something called Observer’s Chosen. He also had a lot of familiars, one of which is forbidden.”

“How can you tell if it’s forbidden?”

“See how mine say ‘Watcher’, ‘Protector’, and ‘Fighter’? If it’s forbidden it shows up as four question-marks.”

Rana frowned. Perhaps my revelation about Owl had confirmed some of her suspicions. “I’ve never heard of the Adherent Role, but the Observer is one of the Old Gods that the people of this world pray to. It is similar in function to one that was worshipped in Midrealm, called ‘Zhmera.’”

“The Observer is the one that I summoned my Watcher from,” I told her. “Also, besides the Adherent Role, he had two more, the Exorcist one that I have, and an advanced kind called Spirit Caller.”

“I’ve heard of Spirit Caller,” she replied. “Spellhands have access to that one as well. But I didn’t know that you could have more than two Roles.”

“I don’t think you normally can...”

“I’m glad we’re no longer with your mentor,” Rana admitted. “I never felt comfortable around him. And if he’s part of some cult, then we definitely don’t want anything to do with him.”

I have a bad feeling that Master Owl isn’t completely out of the picture yet, I thought but didn’t say. There was no reason to scare her, plus, if I told her about everything Owl had said, she might begin suspecting me too and that was the last thing I wanted. It was a selfish impulse, but right now she was the only thing in this world that I truly cared about and I’d do anything to not lose her.

“You made a lot of crowns from the Arena, right?” I asked, changing the subject. “I noticed that you have a lot of disposable money, despite only being Seeker Rank.” After all, she’d easily bet one gold on the gamble of Lukas’ ability to be Role-assigned.

“I guess there’s no point hiding it, but yes, I don’t really have to take on quests or contracts. I could comfortably retire if I wanted.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“There are downsides to attributes that few people acknowledge,” she replied. “When you have a high tier of an attribute, especially an S-tier, it makes you feel restless if you don’t utilise it. For something like Strength it manifests as a strong desire to fight.”

“What about Vitality?” I wondered.

Rana blushed slightly and avoided my gaze.

“What?”

“Vitality manifests as a desire to... you know...”

“Oh.”

“Yep.”

“Is that why you invited me to your apartment that first time?”

“Yeah... but you were so frustratingly-passive that I had to take the lead!”

“Sorry. I guess it’s because my Vitality is F-tier.”

“Didn’t seem like an F-tier Vitality to me,” she teased with a lascivious grin.

Now it was my turn to be embarrassed.

“I wonder what side-effect my S-tier in Soul will have?” I then said to break the awkward silence.

Rana shrugged.

“I often found that it made me inclined to pray,” Armen remarked.

“Armen says it made him want to pray,” I told Rana. Part of me felt scared of uttering his name out loud, but it was also comforting to say it outside my mind. Somehow it made him more real. He had also not complained about it, so I figured it was okay.

“That’s kind of lame,” she joked.

“I haven’t really experienced *that*,” I commented. “Do you know about the other attributes?”

She thought about it for a moment, then said, “High Dexterity usually causes someone to be very active. Like running around or climbing stuff.”

I immediately thought of Lukas.

“High Intelligence tends to make you more prone to introspection and problem-solving, although some, like the Geniuses, seem to manifest the uncontrollable desire to obtain knowledge. Almost like a sickness.”

“I’m suddenly not so upset about my poor attributes,” I remarked.

“It just goes to show that even a gift like superhuman strength comes with downsides. Besides, attributes are not fixed powers, they’re more like potentials. I think the ‘side-effects’ are just our bodies naturally guiding us towards the best way to fulfil our potential.”

“That sounds like a pretty solid theory,” I replied. “Are you sure your Intelligence is only D-tier?”

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“Is there a way to increase attributes?”

“Only temporary ones, as far as I know,” she replied, “like potions and such.”

“Wait, so I could get a potion to increase my Vitality?” I asked.

Rana snorted a laugh in surprise, then grinned at me and said, “Why, do you have something you want to try?”

“I was thinking for long hikes or outrunning monsters, so I don’t get so tired...”

“Oh...” she replied, sounding disappointed.

Sometime in the middle of the second day, as I was scouting the road and forest with my Watcher, I noticed that the landscape was changing in the horizon, transitioning from the flatlands that seemed iconic of Lundia’s environs and into hills with actual mountains visible in the far distance when I utilised Sumi’s zoom vision. What’s more, a town was nestled into a pass that it seemed we had no choice but to pass through.

“We’ll come up on a town within the next day of travel,” I remarked to Rana.

She nodded. “It’s one of the Gate Towns to southern Arley. We should be passing through one called Brig. There are similar towns on the border between Arley and Lacksmey.”

“What are they for?”

“Collecting tolls, mostly,” Karl commented gruffly. He seemed pretty jaded about it.

“Really?”

“Yarp. Ten silvers for every cart and carriage that passes through.”

“The Gate Towns have other purposes,” Rana added.

“Pray tell,” the servant replied sceptically.

“They’re important checkpoints to ensure there aren’t major disruptions to trade routes, and they provide a useful place for the smaller farmsteads and villages to post Quests and Contracts for the Guilds.”

Karl scoffed. “They’re glorified tax collectors that bleed travellers and merchants of their hard-earned coin.”

I detected no hint of deception in his vague nearly-colourless aura, but as far as I could tell, a person’s aura only showed signs of lying when they knew they were intentionally misrepresenting the truth. If someone truly believed a falsehood, I wouldn’t be able to tell.

“Don’t listen to him,” Rana said. “Without the Gate Towns, whole swathes of the countryside would be overrun with monsters.”

“We should make a stop there,” I said.

“Milady won’t be pleased.”

“Tell her that since she lied to us about the specifics of the contract, we expect some leeway,” Rana told him.

Karl grimaced, but didn’t argue the point.

I was glad Rana was here. Without her, I was sure that I’d have let myself be pushed around by Lady Myrabelle.

We arrived to Brig on the eve of the third day. The Gate Town lay in the centre of a pass that was so narrow at points that only two carriages could travel side-by-side through it. Fortunately, the traffic was pretty subdued, though I had no doubts that things would pick up when it became widely-known that Ochre was once again safe. A testament to the potential back-and-forth of carts was visible from the many stables that sat at the foot of the flat hill that Brig itself lay atop of. Although, when we arrived and left our carriage, we were but one of four that were being serviced there. It seemed that Brig might be able to house a hundred carriages or carts in its stables, before running out of space.

While Karl and Lady Myrabelle set out to find an eatery, Rana, Lukas, and I sought out the local branch of the Adventurers’ Guild.

We ended up in a small repurposed inn, which had only a small bar for Adventurers to sit along, as well as a small desk for accepting and turning-in quests, and just one quest board in the back. Surprisingly, there were two other parties within: one with two Vanguards, a Ranger, and a Spellhand; and the other with a Paladin, a Priest, and someone with a Purple aura.

As I looked at him intently, Rana whispered, “That’s a Summoner. Surprising company he has. They all look like Initiate Ranks, going by their equipment and age.”

I nodded as I absorbed the information. If a Summoner was a familiar- and curse-focused Role, then it could benefit a Paladin and Priest quite well I thought, although I suppose that such a party composition was rarely considered due to Summoners’ bad reputation.

While we walked across the room to the quest board, the two parties observed us coolly while muttering amongst themselves. Rana got the most attention, perhaps due to her dark platemail and crimson hair. Lukas also attracted a lot of stares, probably due to his youthful face, while the people seemed to actively avoid making eye-contact with me.

“There are more quests here than I’d expected,” Rana commented as we looked at the board. “Normally you can only expect a few, but perhaps the trouble in Ochre sent people fleeing for the hills.”

As I studied the over-a-dozen quest fliers, I remarked, “This seems a good place to go for Initiates and Seekers.”

“It is. My Party used to get a lot of quests through the Gate Towns,” she answered. “The pay is often better than the big cities like Lundia and Ochre, although the people here are more wary of Otherworlders.”

I blinked in surprise when I laid my eyes on the bottom-most flier. It was for an Exorcism Quest:

<i>‘Endless Winter in Hearthshire’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Complex</i>	RANK: <i>Seeker</i>
<i>The village of Hearthshire to the southeast of Brig is known for being one of the best producers of many of the vegetables that are sold in Lundia and Ochre, such as cabbage, carrots, spinach, broccoli, and so forth. However, their crops have in recent times been affected by an unnatural winter that is localised to the village and as a result they are unable to harvest the food that thousands depend upon.</i>		
<i>Two villagers have been reported missing since around the same time that the winter began to envelop Hearthshire, but it is unknown if it is related to this suspected Haunting or not.</i>		
<i>You are to ascertain what Haunter is responsible for causing this unnatural weather phenomenon and then Exorcise the entity, such that Hearthshire may resume its normal function as an integral part of northern Arley’s food supply.</i>		
REWARD: <i>1 Gold Crown for the correct identification of the Haunter</i>		
REWARD: <i>5 Gold Crowns for the complete Exorcism of the Haunter</i>		

“We need to take this,” I told Rana.

She read through it, then nodded. “I’ll go find the Lady and tell her.”

31 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire I

To say that Lady Myrabelle was not happy with the sudden layover in Brig, while I handled the Exorcism Quest, well... that'd be an understatement. However, she acquiesced when Rana said she'd stay by her side in Brig to make sure no harm came to her. I wasn't super happy about going to Hearthshire with just Lukas, but I really wanted to take on the Exorcism, especially when it sounded like low risk and high reward. Of course, in the back of my mind was Rana's comment about misleading quest information, which repeated over-and-over as Lukas and I traversed the hills from the Gate Town to the village.

The wind was a soft breeze that came like waves on the shore, lapping over us and cooling down my sweat-covered face. Lukas, unsurprisingly, looked spry and unencumbered by the repeated climbing of the round hills, and with his semi-long blonde hair waving behind him in rhythm with the wild grass and flowers, I got the premonition that he'd end up looking quite similar to Harleigh. Of course, I had no idea how much his attributes would determine his appearance, but if his early-puberty boyish charm was any indication, then it seemed a sure thing.

And he's a Rogue too... he won't ever be in need of a Party...

“Are you envious of your companion?” Armen asked.

Maybe. I don't know.

“Envy is a sinful emotion,” he preached.

Spare me, please.

“I say it only for your own sake. I once let myself be ruled by it, and look at me now, a soul bound to an Exorcist.”

I was taken off-guard by his comment. *Do you despise me, Armen?*

“There are worse masters than you.”

That doesn't sound like a no.

“In time I may learn to enjoy myself, but it is painful to be reminded of my past mortality whilst in your company. To love. To embrace another. To have agency. To sleep... these are all things I can no longer do.”

I stopped at the crest of a hill while Lukas skidded down the slope and began making his way up the next.

“If it is in my powers, I will try to grant you a physical body,” I said out loud. With Lukas far enough away, I didn't think it necessary to contain my replies within my mind.

“Truly? You would do such a thing for me?”

“Why not? You have saved my life so many times already.”

“The people of this world, as well as your fellows, would consider such a thing heretical no doubt.”

“I don’t know if it would be considered forbidden or not, but it was an idea that struck me when Rana talked about the Puppet Master. It seems there is a way to bind a familiar to a vessel.”

I figured it was worth a try, at least for a familiar like Armen who was only focused on defence. I wanted to keep him around, since it sounded rare to have someone like him, considering Owl’s interest in him. It also could not be understated how powerful his healing ability was, let alone how potent it might become as I got stronger with my Familiar Pact and Summon abilities. I did feel bad for having a conscious entity serve me, so if he could experience a small degree of freedom from being given a physical body, then I wanted to grant him one.

“Are you planning on giving me a human corpse puppet?”

I grimaced at the thought. “Not quite, but maybe it’s possible to stuff you into a suit of armour. Like a robot.”

“I do not know what a robot is, but that sounds far better than my current state.”

Lukas was waving at me impatiently from the next hill and I started making my way down the slope towards him.

“I’ll try and research it. The Encyclopaedia does mention some apparitions that are permanently bound to physical objects as a result of a specific type of summoning ritual, but it might also be possible by using the ‘Contain Spirit’ ability that Master Owl never bothered to teach me, but which he said was used on the Demon Statue in the Galleon.”

When I climbed up the hill and came next to Lukas, I saw what it was he had spotted. In the distance, where the hills evened out and buildings were just poking above the nearby landscape, a darkness clung to the land and the grass was covered in a layer of frost and snow. In the sky above, all was as normal, that is to say: a cloudless azure expanse.

I sighed when I realised that it was still a few kilometres of hiking to get there.

At this rate, my F-tier Vitality seems a bigger threat than my Luck...

“I believe it would be in your best interest to procure a personal mount.”

I can’t imagine that’d be a cheap thing to get, besides, I have no idea how to ride a horse.

“You are still young. The things you do not know, you can yet learn.”

You sound like one of my old teachers...

My robe-coat was positively soaked-through with my sweat by the time we made it to the outskirts of the snow-covered Hearthshire. Lukas was giving me a worrying look, and he was of course no worse for wear, barely a speck of perspiration on his skin.

“Are you okay, Ryūta?”

“I just need to catch my breath,” I replied.

“Maybe you need to go on walks more often,” he commented.

“Easy to say when your physical Attributes are way higher than mine.”

“Rana says Attributes are wasted if you don’t train them.”

“I know,” I replied grumpily.

I noticed the change in the rhythm of his aura when he noticed my tone. “What should we do first?” he asked, wisely changing the subject.

I took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled, while beads of sweat trickled down my forehead and neck uncomfortably. Then I knelt before the threshold into Hearthshire. Impossibly, the green grass underfoot gave way to a blanket of snow and frost-stiff earth. There was no gradient or transition, just a straight cut where suddenly the grass was covered in a thick fluffy layer of snow.

At first I couldn’t tell if it was an illusion or not, so I took a pinch of the Sinner’s Ash that I’d had refilled in Ochre, before tossing it onto the snow. When nothing happened, I had two thoughts: one, that the Ash might be counterfeit; and two, that the snow was real. The latter seemed the most obvious answer, but I figured it was foolish to dismiss the former, after all, I didn’t have much of a way to tell if the Sinner’s Ash was actually as advertised or just a convincing replication.

“**It is not counterfeit,**” Armen enlightened me.

How can you tell?

“**I can sense the malevolency within the Ash itself. In the same way I can sense the purity of the Sacred Ash that you carry.**”

That’s useful to know, I replied gratefully.

“We’re not dealing with an illusion,” I told Lukas, who was busy rolling a snowball with his bare hands.

“It’s really cold,” he replied, confused, but also visibly excited by the dense ball he had formed.

“Well, yeah, it’s snow after all. Have you never seen snow before?”

“No.”

“Oh...”

I cleared my throat awkwardly.

“Well, don’t get too carried away, this is potentially a dangerous quest. Remember that.”

Lukas looked at the snowball in his hand and then let it plop to the ground where it broke apart. I felt a bit bad for not indulging him, but, at the same time, if an apparition was behind this, I figured it was paramount to stay alert.

“What do we do now?”

“I think we start off by going into the village to look for clues. Right now I have no idea what sort of Haunter we might be dealing with.”

Lukas was the first to cross the invisible barrier between the grass and snow, and when his boots touched down on the crunchy ground, his face lit up with excitement.

I sighed, then said, “You can play around a little bit, but stay near me and keep your eyes open for trouble.”

“Okay!” he said and immediately ran off, jumping around and kicking the snow enthusiastically.

I summoned Sumi and told it: *Go to the centre of the village.*

As the inky Watcher floated off ahead of us, I watched Lukas frolic excitedly. Armen hovered up next to me and I said, “I feel shameful for being envious of him. He’s never seen snow before and I doubt he’s had much time to play around as a child.”

“It is natural to desire the things we do not possess,” Armen weighed in. **“The children of Mondus do not all receive a happy childhood. It was the same in my world. I do not have fond memories of being a child on the streets of Modai.”**

“My childhood was happy and carefree,” I told him. “Probably better than what most kids experience, I imagine. At least compared to this world.”

“What would it take to give all children a happy upbringing?” he wondered out loud.

“You’re asking the wrong person for answers, but I’d imagine that the whole class system of this world, as well as the constant threat of monsters and ghosts, probably aren’t helping the issue much.”

“There were no social castes in your world?”

“Not in the same way as here, with Lords and Ladies, although I suppose our societies were hierarchical in the sense that rich people had more freedom of choice and societal mobility.”

“It must be human nature to create distinctions between peoples and giving some more power than others,” Armen philosophised.

I just shrugged in response, while continuing to trudge through the crunchy snow, one arduous and tired step at a time. It was almost half-a-metre deep in place and the ground below was uneven

and treacherous, making me stumble more than once as I worked my way to the centre where Sumi hovered dutifully.

I reached out through the bond with my Watcher familiar and narrowed my right eye as the vision of my left one was granted its Sight. From its high vantage point above the two-storey buildings of the village, I saw that not many of the inhabitants were outside, with those few present mostly working on moving snow away from their doors and roofs, using brooms and improvised shovels. Some people seemed to be in the middle of a heated debate over something, and a few others were just staring despondently at the blankets of snow that covered everything. From how they were acting, I got the sense that this problem had lasted more than a week, but probably less than a month.

I broke off the connection to Sumi as Lukas and I neared the first of the houses, then I pushed my Spirit Glasses high up on my nose and pulled out my Energy Stone. I saw no visible signs of a Haunting, such as the handprints of the Remorseful Betrayer or the footprints of the Skinstealer, but the Stone in my hand was pulsing weakly, indicating that there was *something* around, but it was yet too faint a response to infer any direction of the source.

When Lukas came up to me and was about to ask what we should do next, I pre-empted him by pushing the Energy Stone into his hands.

“You remember how this tool works, right?” I asked him.

He nodded eagerly.

“I need you to go around the village and keep a track of any place where you get a stronger reaction than what it’s currently doing.”

“Okay!” he said, and then he was off.

“A smart way to utilise your enthusiastic companion and his strengths.”

“He has energy to spare, while I’m already drained, so it was a no-brainer,” I remarked.

As the boy ran around with the pulsing Stone in his hand, he drew some curious gazes from the few people who dared stay outside. It hadn’t hit me until now, but the air was many degrees colder here than it should’ve been; cold enough for my breath to turn to mist as it left my lips.

I suppose that makes sense, given the snow and frost, I thought to myself. I quickly paged through the Encyclopaedia after stopping to lean against the wall of a house where the windows were all shuttered. I vaguely recalled a few entries that mentioned weather- and temperature-manipulation entities, particularly one which shared an uncanny resemblance to the Japanese folklore creature, the Yuki Onna. However, when I found the entry of the ‘Winter Witch’, as it was called, I knew I could

already exclude it, since it was described as an entity that viciously turned people into frozen statues in revenge for disturbing its habitat.

From the quest info, I got the sense that this was a problem that had occurred spontaneously, no doubt as a result of foul play, given that two people were missing. Right now, the thing I lacked most was information though, since the flier had been woefully sparse, so I pushed off the wall I was leant against, then sought out the two people I’d seen arguing through Sumi’s eye.

The two, a man and a woman, were still going at it, with their debate seeming to be over firewood to heat their homes, with the man accusing the woman of having taken too much from the communal pile, leaving him with less.

“Excuse me,” I said, interrupting the two.

Both turned on me with such swiftness that I couldn’t help but take a step back.

“What do you want?” asked the man angrily. Then he took in my appearance and his expression softened slightly.

I pulled the quest flier out of my belt pouch and held it in front of them.

“Would you mind telling me a bit about how everything suddenly got covered in snow?”

32 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire II

“Are you an Exorcist?” asked the woman.

I nodded, to which they both shared an uneasy glance, their mutual hostilities seeming to fade away somewhat.

“And that kid running around, he yours?”

“That’s my companion. He’s a Rogue.”

“Tell him we’ll know if he steals anything,” the man quickly interjected.

I frowned, but then just nodded, figuring it wasn’t worth arguing about.

“The Chief will be your best source of information,” the woman continued.

“Can you take me to him?” I asked.

The two shared a glance again, then the woman sighed and said, “Follow me.”

The woman took me to a house that stood pretty much at the centre of Hearthshire. The village was built on a slight hill, meaning that the two-storey house peeked a bit higher than the nearby houses and from its doorway you could clearly see the gentle slope that led down to the furthest house half a kilometre away. If not for the blanket of snow, the fields surrounding the village would no doubt have been thriving with crops, as well as the many small gardens and planters that lay between the houses. It seemed to me that the entire spirit of the village was its farming culture, so it was impacted heavily by the snow, whereas a city like Lundia probably wouldn’t have been impaired much, aside from maybe having slippery roads.

My temporary guide left me to return to the man she’d been arguing with, while I knocked on the door to the Chief’s house. After about two minutes, someone came to the door. It was a young girl, who looked up at me in terror, before yelling, “Dad!”

An older man with a spotty dark-grey beard and wearing rough-spun clothes came to the door moments later, giving me an appraising look. Before he could ask, I held out the quest flier.

“You’re very young,” he remarked sceptically.

I didn’t want to mention that I’d only been an Exorcist for about a month, so instead I just said, “I was hoping to get some more information about the quest.”

The Chief frowned, but then asked, “What do you wish to know?”

At no point did he move from the door nor invite me inside. I wondered if this is how all Adventurers were treated here or if it was specifically because I was an Exorcist.

“Can you tell me when the snow appeared?”

“It was five weeks ago.”

“Was there any event or accident or perhaps a death that preceded it?”

“No,” he answered quickly, but I could tell by the wavering edge of his vaguely-red aura that he was lying.

“The quest mentioned that two people went missing from the village,” I pressed.

He grimaced, but then admitted, “My daughter, Helen, and a minstrel who was staying here. They disappeared a few nights before the snow first appeared.”

I nodded.

I wonder why he didn't just say that right away?

“Do you have any idea where they could've gone?”

“No.”

Something else that'd been bothering me about the quest description then came to my mind.

“What made you believe that this is a Haunting?”

I'd read enough about some of the monsters that appeared in Arley to know that there were a couple that could perhaps also have been responsible for the elemental shift in the weather, such as the invasive ‘Frost Wyrn’ that normally dwelled in the far north, but were known to seek out warmer climates when its natural habitat became inhospitable. Granted, those tended to favour caves and mountains for their nests.

The Chief's eyes shifted and by the way his aura began fluttering, I wondered if he was embarrassed, but then he said, “Some of the villagers saw *things* at night after the snow started appearing, and they've heard a crying voice around midnight. My wife was the one who filed the request for the Adventurers' Guild, but, if you ask me, people are just scared and blaming it on ghosts.”

He sounded like he didn't believe in the supernatural, which I thought was odd for a world that had monsters in it, but maybe they were far enough removed from all that, making it easy to write it off as tall tales of fantasy.

“Where is your wife now?”

“She is staying in Brig for a few more days.”

Crap...

“I see,” I replied.

“Is there anything else? I'd like to go back inside before my fingers freeze off.”

“I may have more questions later,” I said.

He frowned, but then said, “I’ll be here.” After that he shut the door.

Well, that probably couldn’t have gone worse.

“I remember similar warm receptions back in my adventuring days,” Armen remarked.

Really? Even as a Priest?

“To many villagers outside the big cities, outsiders are potential threats and people like us are incarnations of their very worst fears. To them, it is unnatural that we possess the powers that we do, even though they often rely on those very powers.”

Part of me already knew this, but it was uncomfortable to hear that the same illogical treatment of Adventurers had existed back when Armen was alive.

I wonder why only us Otherworlders possess the powers that we do?

“There have always been parallels in Mondus, but our powers are stronger. The theory that I heard the most was that our abilities were a gift to make us fit into this world. It seems to have backfired.”

So, we’re given powers as a compensation for being stolen away to this world... that seems pretty thoughtless to me.

“It is but one of the many theories I know.”

And what do you believe?

“I believe that it does not matter. What use is there in knowing why we were put in this place?”

Wouldn’t it give you peace of mind to know?

“Ryūta, I have become a wraith. Peace of mind means little to me.”

Sorry... Still, I’d personally like to know.

“And what would you do with the answer?”

I’d curse whatever Deity or Entity responsible to hell and back.

I reunited with Lukas a few houses over from the Chief’s place. His face was glowing red from exhaustion and he looked like a happy golden retriever that’d been allowed to run wild for hours.

“He does indeed have very a dog-like quality,” Armen commented, agreeing with my thoughts. I wondered why he was so talkative today, but I was glad for the company at least.

“What have you found?” I asked.

From the peaks and valleys of his light-green aura, which bounced up-and-down, I could tell he was very excited to report his findings.

“There were four places that the Stone started glowing a lot! And one of the women said that she’d heard loud wailing on the wind when the moon was highest in the night sky. Oh, and an old man yelled at me when I was on his roof, but then he told me that he’d seen a woman dressed in a see-through veil and white dress floating around at night, looking for something.”

An actual description! I thought, excitedly. Although, when I ran through my memory of the entries in the Encyclopaedia, there were easily a dozen that could be described by such terms, but I wondered how many of them could also affect the weather and create snow.

“Good work,” I told him. “Take me to these four places, I’d like to see them.”

“Okay!”

The first place Lukas took me was a solitary tree that was hidden away by three houses that formed a horseshoe-shape to hide a garden. Next to the tree was a simple wooden bench with rusted screws. The branches of the tree were stripped of leaves, the cold having triggered its natural response to shed them, despite the fact that we were in the Seed season and Fall was a while away.

When Lukas returned the Energy Stone to me, I saw that it was pulsing steadily when held above the bench.

“Interesting,” I said, a theory already forming in my mind.

Sumi, come to me.

The inky eye appeared in front of me and I sent my essence into it to use its Sight, while manoeuvring it around the area, trying to spot anything that mortal eyes could not see. However, even to the Watcher’s special gaze, it was simply a bench next to a tree.

I pushed my Spirit Glasses further up the ridge of my nose as I looked around, but there were no footprints or other sorts of signs for me to observe.

“Take me to the next place.”

The next spot was a small inn, which was currently crowded with thirty-plus people huddled around a central fireplace that was dancing with flames. I realised something when I saw them all in their shivering states: they were affected by the cold far more than Lukas and I.

“I think maybe the Haunter has the ability to make people feel colder than they are,” I said to Lukas, “or maybe it is an effect that is slow to build.”

“Like a curse?” he asked.

I shrugged, but couldn’t help but feel like *that* was pretty spot-on.

With the Stone in my hand, I moved around the interior, eliciting several suspicious glances from the crowd, though no one stood up to challenge me. It was glowing and pulsing as I moved around, and seemed the brightest in the middle of the few tables and chairs.

As I pocketed the tool, I moved over to the proprietor of the inn, who was nursing a mug of mulled wine and looking bored.

“You recently had a minstrel visiting Hearthshire, didn’t you?”

He looked me up-and-down, glanced to Lukas, then returned to me, and asked, “You here to fix the weather?”

I nodded.

“Then why you wanna know about a minstrel?”

“It might be related.”

“How?” His meaty jowl sloshed around as he spoke and it was like his skin was struggling to hang-on to his body.

“Please just answer the question,” I said.

He frowned at my tone, but I didn’t have time to explain to him my theory, besides, I wanted to see the last two places Lukas had found before dusk settled. “There was a minstrel who arrived here six or seven weeks back. He stayed in my inn and played here every night on his lute. He was pretty popular. Seemed a nice sort.”

“Did you ever see him with the Chief’s daughter, Helen?”

His eyes narrowed to slits, then he said, “Get out.”

I was about to ask what he was keeping from me, but then Lukas put a hand on my back and whispers, “Let’s just go.”

As I followed him out, I realised that everyone in the inn had been glaring daggers at me.

“They’re hiding something,” I said to Lukas as we were walking to the next place. The snow was as crunchy as ever, and parts of the melted ice had seeped into my boots and were soaking through my only pair of socks.

“They don’t like outsiders,” he replied.

“It’s more than just *that*.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Something happened between this minstrel and the Chief’s daughter, Helen, and I think it’s an important piece in solving this case, but some reason they don’t want to talk about it.”

Lukas looked at me with stars in his eyes. “I wish I could think the way you do!”

I suppose he hasn't benefitted from watching crime shows on TV, I thought to myself. Granted, I hadn't been an aficionado myself, but it was impossible not to pick up some stuff from it, although most of it didn't help me much here. The main benefit was probably the ability to think outside the box and questioning inconsistencies and shifty witnesses. When I had been in middle school, I'd also read a bit of the ‘Meitantei Konan’ manga, but, again, much of it was useless to me here.

The hairs stood up on the back of my neck when I saw the third place and as I pulled out the Energy Stone it started pulsing like crazy, only intensifying as I got closer-and-closer. Gooseflesh rippled across my skin as I climbed up the lip and looked over the edge and down into the darkness.

As I held my Energy Stone over the darkness, its rapidly-pulsing light lit up the stone walls of the well that surged down into the ground. The bottom was so far below that even my bright tool could not illuminate it.

I swallowed hard.

Of course it's a well...

I was pretty sure I'd seen this horror movie before...

33 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire III

I was uncomfortably aware that darkness was steadily creeping across the land as I leant over the edge of the well, trying to see what lay far below. A rank smell assailed my nostrils as air wafted up from below, but it was impossible to see the bottom.

Sumi, I need your eye.

The Watcher appeared before me and I immediately tapped into our bond to gain its vision, while moving it down into the darkness below. Despite its sight recasting the world in greyscale, the shadows below were too dense for it to penetrate, but I moved it further-and-further regardless, while cold sweat ran down my brow and back.

“What’s down there?” I heard Lukas ask curiously. He seemed to have no foreboding sense of what we’d find, but part of me already knew.

I didn’t answer him as I drove Sumi to the very bottom, but it was so dark that I could not tell what was supposed to be down there.

“Do you have a torch on you?” I asked Lukas.

“I don’t have anything to light it with,” he answered.

I bit my lip as I thought about what to do. Then made a quick decision: “Return to the inn and use their fireplace to light your torch, then come back here. Whatever you do, don’t let them stop you.”

Unlike Lundia and Ochre, Hearthshire had no street lanterns nor Lamplighters, and I didn’t carry a firestarter like Rana, so it seemed our only option, except for maybe knocking on the doors of the nearby houses and hoping to borrow a light from them. Somehow that seemed a worse option than the inn.

While my companion ran off, I tried to manoeuvre Sumi around in such a way that the dimming sunlight that touched the top of the well could backlight whatever was below, but it produced no tangible results, though I saw a few *things* poking out here-and-there, but without a proper light it was impossible to discern their nature.

To spare my energy reserves, I momentarily broke off contact with the familiar, letting it remain in the deep well until Lukas brought the torch.

As mentioned, Hearthshire stood on something of a hill, which allowed me a vantage point from the well and through the gaps between the buildings, wherefrom I could see how the darkness was creeping across the distant hills, coming closer-and-closer. I wanted to pull out my Encyclopaedia

and leaf through the options, but part of me was too terrified to look away from the well, as though knowing the very moment I turned my back on it, the monster below would spring out and attack me.

“I will do everything in my power to protect you,” Armen reassured me.

Thank you, Armen.

“It may not relate to the Haunter, but did you notice the nature of the affliction the villagers suffered from?”

Affliction? I asked, surprised. I’d already forgotten Armen had a good eye for these things. *Aside from being untrustworthy and mean, I didn’t notice anything.*

“They seemed to be freezing in a way which the present weather does not truly account for.”

I considered his words and realised he was right. While the snow itself was cold and the trees and plants were dead or dormant, the air was its usual tempered state that reminded me of early fall in Kyoto.

You think the cold they’re experiencing is unnatural?

“Indeed.”

Crunchy footsteps came from around the corner of a nearby house, and then Lukas appeared, running full tilt with the torch in his hand. As he came up to me he looked around in paranoia, then concluded, “They must’ve stopped following me.”

“What happened?”

“When I lit the torch in the inn, all the people there became really angry, saying I was stealing their warmth. Some of them started chasing after me to get the torch back.”

I frowned. It was bad enough that we were dealing with an unknown lady in white who caused winter to spontaneously manifest, but if the villagers were going to obstruct our work as well, then the quest would become significantly more dangerous.

“From now on, we stay together,” I told him. “It’s possible that the Haunter is making the people here act irrationally.”

“Okay.”

I took the torch from his hand and then walked up the lip of the well again, while reconnecting with my Watcher that awaited below. With my right eye narrowed to a slit, I let the torch drop from my hand and down the well, then moved Sumi around so I could watch it fall.

The torchlight fluttered as it fell, its golden-orange light like a comet piercing the darkness of the tunnel into the earth, while illuminating the stones of the well until it passed the section where they transitioned completely to just dug-out earth. As it came nearer my familiar’s vantage point, I realised

that it had been far from the bottom, as the well itself was somehow even deeper than I’d expected initially, going almost fifty metres down. The things that I’d seen turned out to be roots that broke through the soft earth and brickwork. The last twenty metres of the well opened up into a small cave-like pocket, with a pool of water a few metres deep and which seemed to bubble up ever-so-slowly from the aquifer layer that fed it.

I only had a few seconds to see the bottom of the well lit up by the torch, before it hit the water and its flame died out. In those few moments, I saw the cave in full, and it seemed an isolated pocket of hollowed-out earth with no other entry but the well tunnel. In the pond directly below the tunnel floated a few pieces of debris, some persistent snow, and a bloated corpse of a woman, which the elements and time had not been kind to.

In shock of what I saw, I instinctively broke off contact with my Watcher and almost fell off the lip of the well, though Lukas steadied me with a hand.

“What did you find?”

I swallowed, suddenly feeling as though my mouth had been robbed of moisture, then I said, “She’s down there, Lukas. The missing girl, it has to be her.”

He asked the first thing that I’d been wondering too: “How do we get to her?”

Lukas was leading me to the final place he had found with the Energy Stone. As we walked there, darkness finally set on Hearthshire and the few villagers who had been outside all retreated indoors, casting us wary glares, but otherwise not acknowledging us, despite the fact that we were here to help them. It felt as though I possessed secret knowledge, now that I knew where the Chief’s daughter had gone, but I had no idea what to do with the information. I doubted he would be happy to know that she lay at the bottom of their well nor that she was undoubtedly the cause of the Haunting.

We left behind the village as we came to a hill with a large tree on it. Despite the snow that covered it, a few birds watched us approach from its thick branches. A sense of wrongness seemed to emanate from it.

Do you feel that? I asked Armen.

“**Yes. This is a hanging tree.**”

I grimaced at the thought. Trees such as these were responsible for my Fighter familiar’s existence. It was not a practice of punishment I thought was very just. I could understand why the Stone had reacted to the tree, because, when I looked up at one of the things that hang from its branches, it was the corpse of a man, though most of his flesh had been picked clean by scavengers, with only errant

bits of tendons and sinew and muscle keeping his head, torso, and arms connected, although his right hand was missing, along with his legs.

“You should’ve taken me here first,” I told Lukas.

“Sorry.”

“I’m not upset,” I told him, “But when we are looking for clues of an Exorcism, this is the most obvious kind.”

He nodded, as though taking a mental note for the future. I could sort of guess that he had shown me the things in the order that was most convenient, since the hanging tree lay on the very edge of the snow-covered landscape.

“It seems he was killed by the villagers,” I remarked, looking at the corpse.

“Villages like this are allowed to deal with criminals how they see fit,” Lukas explained.

“That’s barbaric.”

“**They must have thought he killed the girl in the well,**” Armen remarked, reading my thoughts exactly.

I bit my lower lip in consternation and was just about to pull out my Encyclopaedia to find whichever entity matched this case the most, but then a loud piercing wail rent the air.

A shard of ice lodged itself painfully in my lungs and I gasped for air. Next to me, Lukas exhibited the same reaction.

I turned around, heaving for air, and saw the village in the distance.

“The Haunter! It’s active!”

Since I’d left Sumi at the bottom of the well, I invoked our bond and borrowed its vision with my left eye while lifting it out of the dark well and into the village.

I’d only moved it around for a minute or two, when I spotted a figure drifting through the streets of Hearthshire. It was exactly like the description had said: a woman clad in white who wore a veil that hid her face, though her brown hair flowed down the front of her dress. It was hard not to notice the similarities of the White Lady and the bloated corpse at the bottom of the well.

Although sound did not travel through my bond with the Watcher, I could hear the loud wailing of the apparition even from the hanging tree that stood over half a kilometre away from the well that she circled around. It was as though she was tethered to it, her corpse below not allowing her to travel far. Given her appearance and manifestation, which, based on the witness testimony, was visible to human eyes, it seemed a sure thing that we were dealing with a sort of Wraith, as they were often described as visible to normal sight, while most shades were invisible to the naked eye.

“You have been afflicted, like the villagers,” Armen remarked.

I broke off from Sumi and regarded him, where he floated in the steadily-darkening night air in front of me.

What do you mean?

“It is as though the voice of this apparition has cursed you.”

I blinked uncomprehendingly, then pulled out my Guild Card, since I remembered seeing Owl’s curse on his:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Watcher)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Fighter)’</i> <i>‘Curse of the Frigid Soul’</i>			

“Lukas, show me your Guild Card!”

The boy looked confused, but pulled it out and showed it to me without asking why:

<i>‘LUKAS’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Rogue</i>		RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>13</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>A</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>D</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>E</i>	SOUL: <i>D</i>	STRENGTH: <i>C</i>	VITALITY: <i>B</i>

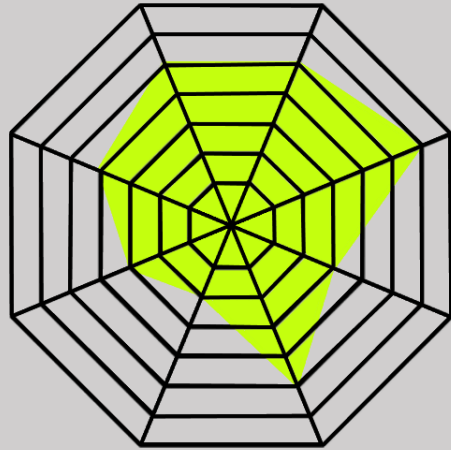
ABILITIES

‘Rogue I’

‘Fleetfooted’

‘Guardian Angel’

‘Curse of the Frigid Soul’



“We’ve been cursed...”

34 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire IV

My pulse was pounding so hard that it was filling up my ears with its drumming rhythm.

“**Calm down,**” Armen advised. “**If this is the same curse as what afflicts the villagers, then we know it does not kill you immediately. There is no need to panic just yet.**”

I tried to push back the knot of anxiety that had formed in the pit of my stomach, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the shard of ice in my lungs seemed to only hurt more, while in the distance *that* wailing voice rang out.

“At least I have a good idea what sort of entity we’re dealing with,” I said, trying to sound confident, although I knew how screwed we were.

Since it was dark and I’d thrown Lukas’ only torch into the well, I pulled out the Energy Stone which was already lighting up the belt pouch it was in. While holding the glowing tool in my right hand, I opened the Encyclopaedia with my left and leafed through the pages, trying to find something I vaguely remembered reading.

Lukas was looking over my shoulder when I came to the page I was searching for.

“Is that the one?” he asked.

I nodded.

It was an elemental subtype of a Night Wraith, an entity that only appeared at night, which was called ‘The Weeping Widow’. The depiction was pretty much identical to other Night Wraiths and their subtypes, and seemed to be a strange sort of commonality when dealing with a female wraith.

“How do we deal with it?” he asked.

I’d forgotten that Lukas couldn’t read the text in the Encyclopaedia, since it was written in the Chthonic language, which I only understood because of the Omniglot ability that all Otherworlders were given. Given that one of his parents must’ve been a Native of this world, it seemed that he had not inherited this ability. But perhaps that was a good thing, I considered, when I read through the options we had for exorcising the Weeping Widow.

Given that the Weeping Widow was a vengeful spirit created from a man or woman who committed suicide after witnessing the murder of their lover, its potential exorcisms were pretty complex and involved somehow satiating the wronged spirit. One thing that was bizarre though, was that they came in many different elemental types, with the curse they inflicted somehow matching that type. The entry said to be wary of the types that possessed the wind element, but made no explanation as to why.

I grimaced, then said, “It won’t be easy.”

There were four potential ways of going about dealing with a Weeping Widow that the entry stated:

#1 – Wait for everyone cursed by the Weeping Widow to die, at which point the Haunter disappears.

#2 – Bring the blood of the one(s) who wronged the Weeping Widow to its grave and then perform a Ritual of Obsequy utilising the blood.

#3 – Kill the one(s) who wronged the Weeping Widow and offer their corpse(s) to its grave.

#4 – Reunite the Weeping Widow with the corpse of its slain lover and perform a Ritual of Union to lay both of their spirits to rest.

This first option was obviously no good, since Lukas and I were both cursed, not to mention that I found it a very callous way of dealing with a Haunting, since I considered my job as an Exorcist to be saving the people affected by an apparition.

The second was probably unlikely to happen, since it meant that we needed to confront the ones who had killed the minstrel and hung his body from the hanging tree, then somehow get them to hand over their blood...

The third was obviously just plain immoral.

Which left the fourth and final option, which had its own set of problems associated with it.

Something suddenly clicked in my head as I read through the description and exorcism guide: Helen had been alive when the minstrel had been killed, and she had seen his murder and hanging, which had made her leap into the deep well to take her life, while no doubt cursing the villagers.

A ball of disgust formed in the back of my mouth.

The villagers are responsible for this!

“It seems a commonality for many hauntings,” Armen remarked.

I have half a mind to let this curse take the lot of them before I exorcise the Widow!

“Adventurers’ lot is often to clean up the mess left behind by the inhabitants of this world, but you must remember that not everybody is dismissive of the work we do.”

There was probably some wisdom in his words, but right now I was too incensed to consider that side of things. Nonetheless, I gritted my teeth as I prepared for what we had to do.

“We have to reunite the corpse of the minstrel with the body of Helen,” I told Lukas. “Then I must perform an elaborate ritual on their bodies.”

“How are we going to get the body from the well?”

“I have no idea.”

“Should I cut down the minstrel?” he asked, looking prepared to climb the hanging tree to reach the branch eight metres above, from which the noose had been tied.

“No, we don’t touch the body until the sun has risen. If the Weeping Widow sees the body of its lover, it will become enraged and the curse will intensify. Whatever that means.”

“Okay...”

Lukas sat down in the snow next to the large ominous tree.

“Ryūta?”

“Yes?”

“I’m starting to get really cold.”

“I know. Me too.”

I sat down next to him, holding the glowing Energy Stone in-between my hands, while looking at the village in the near distance, from which the pleading mournful cries came every few minutes.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered into the cold wind, “I will let you and your beloved find the peaceful rest you deserve.”

I awoke next to Lukas, shivering and teeth rattling, despite the sun that ought to be warming my skin. With a gentle nudge I woke him.

“The sun is up,” I told him. My entire body was sore from the cold that flowed from within me. I now understood why the villagers had mostly remained indoors, because just the slightest breeze felt like the inside of an industrial meat freezer.

If this was how it felt after less than a day of dealing with the curse, then I wondered why the villagers hadn’t already died from hypothermia. I wondered if the curse only affected my mind and not my physical temperature, since that might explain it.

“**Your core temperature has gone down,**” Armen commented, shattering my fledgeling hope.

So there’s a real threat of this thing killing me?

“**Yes.**”

I slowly rose from where we’d huddled next to the tree.

“We need to get the minstrel’s body into the well before the sun sets,” I told Lukas.

He was slow to rise, but then he began doing some stretches to bring back warmth into his limbs, before he cautiously pulled himself up onto the trunk of the hanging tree, before climbing the tall limb to the branch that held up the corpse.

“Watch out,” he warned. Then, with a simple slice of his blade he released the noose and the body fell into the ankle-deep snow next to me with a *thump*, the right arm popping off on impact as the last vestiges of its muscles and tendons snapped.

I looked down at the pitiful remains of the minstrel, a man whose name I’d never learnt.

A moment later Lukas dropped down beside me, already seeming to have regained the heat in his body, which made me wonder if Vitality played a role in resisting such curses. Soul was supposed to guard me against the effects of magic, but perhaps I hadn’t trained the attribute enough to benefit from *that*? Meanwhile, Lukas had probably always been active and energetic, so he was no doubt already at his peak potential for most of his physical attributes.

“**You ought to meditate more,**” Armen advised.

I’ll try...

I made the decision that I would be the one to climb down the well to perform the ritual, since, logistically, that seemed the best option. To compensate for me taking on that job, Lukas was therefore the one who carried the minstrel’s ruined corpse to the well. The smell of the body was repulsive and filled my nostrils with its acrid and sickly-sweet stench, but the Rogue did not complain once.

I need to get a familiar that can do this sort of dirty work, I mused.

“**Don’t look at me.**”

If I find a way give you a corporeal body, then it is the least you could do, I joked.

Given that Armen was basically a floating featureless man inside a suit of armour, it was hard to interpret his expressions and reactions, but, by the way I notice him shift at my words, I could tell he was not amused.

“**Summoners commonly employ imps for menial tasks,**” he suggested to me. I knew he was just trying to wriggle out of the responsibility himself, in the event that I managed to give him a real body.

I recalled the Greedling that Master Owl had used to carry the Demon Statue and made a mental note to research it more. Perhaps once I got to Helmstatter I’d try to find a Summoner to help guide

me in my next familiar acquisition and hopefully teach me some of the things Owl had deliberately avoided. I also really wanted to find out more about Ward Crafting and the Contain Spirit ability.

As we came into the village, Lukas half-carrying-half-dragging the ruined body of the minstrel with the severed noose still attached and trailing behind us, the few villagers who’d ventured outdoors regarded us with unmasked fear and anger. One of them let out a scream and fled into her house, and another man called us monsters, before heading for the inn, perhaps to get people to stop us.

“We need to hurry,” I told Lukas, and, to his credit, he put on a burst of speed that left me staggering to keep up with him, despite the heavy burden in his arms.

When I did catch up to him, the well was in sight ahead of us.

“Sorry for making you do this.”

“It’s okay, Ryūta.”

We stopped by the lip of the well and he settled the minstrel’s body next to it in the snow.

“What now?” he asked.

I looked at the top of the well, where a threadbare rope was attached to a simple iron lever for winching up a small bucket or whatever else it was attached to.

“I unfortunately think I’ll have to use *that* rope to descend.”

“Should we throw the body down there first?”

“Let’s lower it down,” I said, despite knowing we probably didn’t have the time, if the villagers were on their way over in an angry mob. “I don’t want it to break more than it already has,” I argued.

He nodded and together we pulled up the shallow bucket that was fastened to the winch, then carefully placed the minstrel’s corpse into it, along with the arm that had fallen off, and two finger bones I’d found buried in the snow beneath where he’d hung.

I watched the brittle rope as Lukas steadily spun the lever to lower the corpse down and was glad to see that it could carry at least sixty percent of a male body, accounting for the missing bits of bone and meat and skin...

With a single tug on the rope, the body flipped out of the bucket and into the water, at least that’s what I assumed happened, since I couldn’t see anything, but did hear a loud *splash*.

As Lukas winched the bucket back up again, I heard feet stomping up behind us and turned to see nine men staring at us. Each of them looked to be in a lot of pain and their teeth were audibly chattering, but they nonetheless looked ready for a fight.

“We don’t have time for this!” I yelled at them. “I’m here to exorcise the ghost that is haunting your village! I am trying to save you from the curse that’s literally freezing you to death!”

They shared glances between them, but from the way their auras moved, it was clear that reason didn't hold much sway over them, so I pulled out my Focus and aimed it at them, letting a small amount of energy build in my body before expelling it out with a single word: “Repel.”

As the energy left my hand and became a tiny vortex of wind, it flew through the air and disturbed the top layer of snow on the ground when it passed over, before hitting the frontmost person and slamming him two metres back and into a wall.

Oh shit, that was too strong!

The villagers looked at their friend and then at me. The apprehension I had sensed in their auras was utterly gone, replaced by blind hate. In some circumstances, hatred could overpower fear. This was one of such instances.

Armen, protect me, but don't hurt them too badly.

“Of course.”

“Lukas, we're just going to show them that it is foolish to fight us, but don't be too heavy-handed. They are clearly not in their right minds.”

The Rogue nodded and stayed by my side as I moved forward, while the eight villagers charged at us weakly. Each and every one that tried to strike me was caught by Armen's hands and flipped upside-down or faceplanted into the snow with just enough force to hurt, but hopefully not enough to injure. Lukas was less delicate, as he dislocated a man's arm and kneed another in the groin, but this was no time to be sensible.

When all nine men were on the ground, groaning in various states of pain, we quickly returned to the well. With a left hand on the well's edge, my feet in the shallow bucket, and my right arm coiled around the rope, I gave Lukas a nod to begin lowering me.

Sumi, I want you to remain above the well.

The Watcher appeared by my side and floated up into the air.

Armen, stay with Lukas and protect the well.

“Understood.”

Then the rope and bucket shuttered as Lukas began lowering me down. It suddenly struck me just how little I wanted to be doing this, but it was too late to turn back now. As much as the villagers didn't deserve my mercy, I knew they would die if I didn't deal with the Weeping Widow before long. I'd gotten Lukas into this mess as well, so the guilt and responsibility was driving me as well. Still, as my hand ran along the bricks of the well, while I slowly fell deeper into the tunnel of darkness, I couldn't avoid feeling a knot of anxiety form in my chest.

35 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire V

The iron winch above creaked ominously every time Lukas spun it to lower the bucket carrying my weight and I could hear how the individual threads of the rope were straining to hold my weight.

To distract myself from the reality of what I was committing myself to, I connected to Sumi to watch the world above me. As soon as its vision flowed into my left eye, I saw Lukas directly from above, as well as the nine villagers, a few of which had started getting up and were trying to rouse their fellows. It seemed that the curse affected not only their bodies’ temperature, but also their constitutions, because I noticed that each of them had signs of malnourishment and starvation, even though it seemed they had plenty of food despite their dead crops.

While he steadily operated the winch, I saw Lukas keeping an eye on the nearby men. It would be bad news for me if he let go of the lever though, since I’d go plummeting down into the bottom of the well, where the water wasn’t deep enough to prevent serious injury.

I was brought back to the reality of the dark well, when my hand that trailed the brick wall felt the transition from stone to earth. From watching the torch fall down the well the day before, I knew that the transition roughly marked the halfway-point.

Then suddenly the rope snapped under my feet and the bucket fell away, leaving me hanging from my right arm that was wrapped around the rope. I let out a yell of surprise and immediately Lukas stopped winching. A moment later there came a *splash* from below.

“Are you okay!?” he called from above.

I put my left hand on the rope and my feet against the earthen tunnel wall, then yelled back, “The bucket snapped off, but I’m still hanging on to the rope!”

“Should I pull you up!?”

“No, keep going! I’m not far from the bottom now!”

In truth, I was still only slightly further than halfway and I couldn’t see anything except the brickwork of the tunnel above me and the rope I was clinging to for dear life.

As the winching continued, I let the friction of my boots against the earth wall control the descent and take some of the weight off the rope. I doubted that it would hold me for the return trip up.

“You have to find another rope for when I go back up!” I shouted.

“Okay!” he responded.

A beat of nothing as the sound of the winch continued, then he asked, “Are you going to be okay!?”

“I’ll be fine!” I lied.

Then a sound from just above my hands made me look up, before I heard the fraying rope snap and felt the bottom drop out of my stomach.

I came to, gasping for air, while sitting at the bottom of the shallow reservoir that I’d landed in, my head just barely poking above the water and saving me from drowning.

“Ryūta!?” Lukas yelled down from above, the distance and the earth of the tunnel muffling and distorting his voice.

I tried to yell back but my throat was hoarse.

The impact with the water must’ve knocked me out. It feels like a sledgehammer hit me in the chest.

“Your body is fine, aside from some bruising,” remarked Armen, sounding as though he was right next to me, despite still being above where Lukas protected the well. **“You were only unconscious for a few seconds due to the air being knocked out of your lungs.”**

Although I couldn’t see anything in the darkness, bizarre geometric shapes and little worms of light were swimming around in my vision; a side-effect of losing consciousness I guessed.

I groaned as I stood up and put my hand on the nearby cave wall to steady myself, since my legs felt rather shaky and I didn’t want to go facepalming into the water again. When my senses slowly returned to me, as though I’d been rebooted and they were just now switching ‘on’, I noticed the pervasive scent of death around me. I wondered how much of the putrid corpse water I must’ve swallowed and felt my guts curdle at the thought.

Fumbling with my bags in the dark, I managed to produce the Energy Stone which was glowing with so rapid a pulse that it was functionally a lamp. Its pale light lit up my surroundings and cast shadows on the curving walls of the cave I found myself in.

A tiny yelp escaped my lips as I saw just how close the floating corpse of Helen was. Her bloated and decaying body lay facedown and shifted ever-so-slightly in the water. A bit further away from where I’d landed lay the remains of the minstrel, his body sitting firmly at the bottom of the water. Surprisingly, the water itself was fairly clear, but drinking it was no doubt still a bad idea.

“Ryūta, can you hear me!?”

I cleared my throat and managed to yell back, “I’m okay!” As my voice left my lips, it felt like razorblades dragged along my vocal cords and it triggered a coughing fit.

“More of the villagers have arrived. They are not happy about the man you killed.”

Killed??

I immediately connected with Sumi who was still floating above the well and through its eye saw that the man who I’d used my Repel on was being carried away, while the people around him looked both mad and mournful.

Shit.

I doubted self-defence would be considered valid and my pulse started picking up speed as I imagined the enraged villagers dragging me off to the hanging tree and stringing me up to one of its branches, just like they had done with the minstrel.

Confounding matters, the group of villagers had grown to number more than twenty, and though I was sure Armen could protect Lukas for a moment, I doubted it would take long before the active defence exhausted my energy reserves.

Swallowing my mounting dread, I cleared my throat again and then yelled up the well, “Lukas! Run back to Brig and find Rana! Tell her about the situation and have her bring a rope here to get me out!”

I saw the indecision on his face as he heard my order, his head turning from the crowd and to the well, then back to the crowd again.

“Are you going to be okay down there!?”

“I’ll try and exorcise the apparition! Hopefully that’ll calm down the villagers!”

“Okay! I’ll hurry back!”

Part of me wanted to yell at him to not leave me alone, but with how things were looking, he’d have to fight his way through the crowd just to protect the well, which would obviously put him in serious danger. I once again had to remind myself that he was just a boy in his early teens. While someone like Rana possessed superhuman strength and endurance, Lukas had yet to mature completely and reach the full potential of his attributes.

A fist of anxiety gripped my heart as I watched Lukas run from the well through Sumi’s eye, while giving the angry villagers a wide berth.

I took a deep breath, before breaking the connection to my Watcher and returning my focus to the only thing I could deal with in my current situation: the exorcism of the Weeping Widow.

“Should I remain up here to protect the well?”

Do you think they would tear it down to get to me?

“They look very weak from the curse, so I am doubtful.”

Remain there and just let me know what they do.

“As you wish.”

I took in a deep breath, then immediately regretted it as the putrid smell of death flooded my nostrils. There was a small ‘shore’ next to the pool of water, which was waist-high at my end and about three-metres deep at the far end where bubbles emerged from the ground, steadily replenishing the reservoir.

Since it was the thing I wanted to do the least, I started off with hurriedly dragging Helen’s body to the shore, after having to swim a bit to catch it. Although I immediately washed my hands in the water, it felt as though a sheen of her putrefaction was forever stuck to the skin of my hands and my gorge was rising, a taste of acrid bile on the back of my tongue.

As I swam to where the minstrel’s body had sunken to the bottom, I noticed something that reflected the light of my Energy Stone and which floated at the top of the pool, thanks to its buoyant lenses. When I picked them up, I realised it was my Spirit Glasses.

They must’ve fallen off when I fell down here...

Maybe Master Owl was right about the goggles...

I put the glasses back on and immediately noticed a strange phenomenon: the body of the minstrel was connected to the body of Helen with a faintly-red band of light. I had not noticed this reaction before, so it seemed to only be active when the two lovers’ corpses were reunited.

After lifting the minstrel’s body from the bottom of the pool, where it was close to two-metres deep, I dragged it to the shore as well, placing it next to Helen’s bloated and disfigured body.

The moment I stepped out of the water, I realised just how heavy my robe-coat had become after soaking up the nasty water. While hurriedly taking it off, along with most of my other clothes, I checked my pouches and bags, fearing my exorcism tools had been ruined, but it seemed the two ash pouches were watertight, while the Black Candle was hydrophobic, and my incense sticks just needed a bit of drying to be useable again.

The Encyclopaedia had somehow survived intact as well, which honestly confused me, but I guessed that an object of such value had been crafted with longevity and weatherproofing in mind, though I couldn’t tell how, as it seemed its pages were just the same kind of vellum I’d seen elsewhere, yet somehow the ink and pencil markings stuck firm to it.

I breathed a sigh of relief, but then a chill wracked my body, cramping up my calf muscles painfully.

“Your core temperature has dropped significantly,” Armen remarked.

Can’t you heal me?

“It does not work against such ailments as what afflicts you.”

I should get this exorcism over with then...

I opened up the Encyclopaedia to the page with the Weeping Widow, then furrowed my brow when I found no text for the Ritual of Union, only a mention. I leafed through the pages of the first half, but while there were several references to Rituals, such as the one I was looking for, very few entries actually had the Rituals written down.

I’m such an idiot! Why didn’t I check this earlier!?

“Fret not. I am familiar with the ritual you seek.”

Really?

“It was commonly used during wedding ceremonies when I worked at a Church in the city of Altar.”

A wedding ceremony? Wait, am I marrying these two corpses together!?

“That does seem to be the case, yes.”

That’s absurd!

“I believe it makes some manner of sense. After all, the Widow was separated from her lover, causing her to manifest as an apparition. The Ritual of Union binds two souls together. I can see the logic behind using it to exorcise the Widow.”

I nodded. I suppose that did make some sense now that I thought about it. Plus, the entry stated that the Weeping Widow had to be sated, and while it would accept blood offerings, this seemed a more amiable and healthy solution.

“There is but one problem however,” Armen remarked, and I felt my hope falter at his words. **“The Ritual requires the given names of the betrothed, but we do not know the minstrel’s name...”**

36 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire VI

For the eighth time in the last five minutes I berated myself for my lack of forethought. It was lucky that Armen knew the Ritual of Union, but the fact that I had never learnt the name of the minstrel, as I’d assumed it was pointless to discover, was now proving the only thing keeping me from completing the exorcism. And, given that I was trapped in this well until Rana *hopefully* showed up to save me... well yeah, that was a sobering thought to say the least.

“You gain nothing from focusing on things you could’ve done better,” Armen advised.

He was floating above the pool of water in front of me, since the upset villagers had left the well and returned to the meagre warmth of their homes, after believing me dead and Lukas driven off. It was clear that the curse was affecting their mental states and reasoning, but at least it meant I was in no immediate danger, although the curse-induced hypothermia was my next immediate concern. My body had become significantly colder since my plunge into the water, and it seemed that the curse not only made me perceive everything as colder, but it also somehow inhibited my ability to warm up.

“I’m all ears if you have a suggestion,” I replied to him, annoyed.

“Do you not have a way to commune with the souls of the dead?” he asked.

“Is *that* something an Exorcist can do?” I wondered. If it was, it was certainly the first I’d heard of it, but, then again, there were countless things Owl had not bothered teaching me.

“The Ritual ability is stronger than most believe.”

“Like the Worship and Offering abilities?”

“In a way, yes.”

“But how am I meant to commune with the spirits of the dead?” I asked, but then immediately answered my own question, “Wait, would a Ouija Board work?”

“I do not know what that is.”

“I’ll show you,” I said and began using my index finger to ‘draw’ a Ouija Board in the soft earth of the cave’s floor.

When I was finished, Armen hovered over to look at it. **“I still do not comprehend its function. Is it an alphabet?”**

“It’s like a board where the soul of a dead one can apparently write out words one letter at a time... oh but wait, it’s missing something.”

I looked around to find something that could serve as the little planchette for the crude board I’d drawn and eventually found a piece of waterlogged driftwood the size of my hand, which I quickly carved into a little triangle using my sword, before poking a large hole in its centre.

I proudly displayed the piece of carved wood to Armen, but he still seemed confused, so I brought it over to my drawing of the Ouija Board and said, “The people who take part in the séance to commune with the dead using the Ouija Board all have to put their finger on this piece of wood. Then a question is asked of the spirit and it’s supposed to move the wood such that the hole in the centre lands on a letter or number or the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ markers.”

“That seems a fascinating way of pretending to speak with the dead,” he remarked scathingly.

I frowned. “It was the only way I could think of!”

“Perhaps a test is in order, though I remain sceptical.”

“Fine.”

Because it seemed important for most other rituals, I brought out the Black Tallow Candle and placed it behind my ‘board’ on the damp earthen cave floor.

I cleared my throat, then said, “Helen, if you are here, give me a sign.”

Expectantly, I stared down at the planchette that my finger was loosely touching the bottom of, but though it was quivering slightly, it wasn’t responding to my words.

“Your shaking hands are moving the wood,” Armen commented. He seemed to find it amusing to make fun of my improvised Ouija Board...

“I’m slowly freezing to death,” I reminded him.

“What do you do if she is unable to read your letters and understand their meaning?”

“You can read them, right?”

“Yes, but I had the Omniglot ability while I was alive.”

“Didn’t you yourself say that it was the intentions that mattered most.”

A strange sound emanated from Armen. It took me a moment to realise he had chuckled.

“I suppose I am being overly harsh. My apologies. I merely find the prospect of you freezing to death in this well quite upsetting and thought this a silly attempt to remedy the situation.”

“You’re the one who suggested it,” I reminded him.

“I had higher hopes for your imagination.”

“Alright, I’m gonna try rephrasing my question, maybe it just didn’t work because it was too vague a request.”

“Did your book not say the Widow was only active at night?”

I sighed.

“I will stay my tongue.”

“Thank you.”

I cleared my throat, then asked the Ouija Board, “Helen, are you here?”

A cold wind brushed over my neck and ear, then the Black Candle lit a pale-blue flame and the planchette shot out of my index finger’s loose grip. The hole in the middle of the piece had landed on ‘yes’.

I swallowed hard, while a ball of fear and excitement was steadily growing in my chest. Nearby, Armen was still as the grave. Despite his antagonistic remarks about my impromptu board, I too had shared his pessimism about its odds of working.

This time, I didn’t place my finger on the wooden triangle, when I asked, “What is the name of the minstrel, your lover?”

The piece lifted off the corner of my drawing that said ‘yes’, where it hovered a few centimetres above the floor, then it shot to the first letter. Then the next, and so on.

‘S’.

‘E’.

‘R’.

‘A’.

‘N’.

‘O’.

‘F’.

‘O’.

‘C’.

‘H’.

‘R’.

‘E’.

I swallowed again, before asking, “The minstrel’s name was ‘*Seran of Ochre*’?”

The planchette flew to the ‘yes’, before something like a giant invisible claw raked across the floor of the cave, extinguishing the Black Candle, tearing my drawing to pieces, and making me stumble backwards in surprise. I slipped and landed on my ass in the water, soaking through my almost-dry pants.

“I don’t think that’s a good sign,” I said.

Then a scream rent the air, so loud that I felt blood trickle down my right cheek from where my eardrum popped painfully. While the scream went on-and-on, it took a decidedly inhuman distortion to it and became less of a scream and more of a terrible cacophony of agony that made the ground above me shake violently. The bits of snow that floated atop the pool nearby suddenly began forming a layer of ice and within seconds the entire reservoir was frozen solid.

As frost spread up the walls at the far end of the cave, I quickly reconnect with Sumi and peered down into the well from where it floated above, just managing to catch the moment the frost escaped out the stonework and spread in a ring from it and across the village. I flew up higher to get a better perspective, and saw one of the villagers who had left their house to investigate the sound just as they were caught by the spreading frost. The wave hit her leg and immediately crawled up her body and turned her into a solid statue, which tipped face-first into the ground, arms and legs locked in mid-step. Two more villagers were frozen solid in the same way, but I had no way of knowing how the sudden frost spread to the interior of the houses from where Sumi floated, so I moved it down towards the inn, where I knew many would be gathered.

As my Watcher familiar moved through the roof of the inn and down to the ground floor, I beheld the congregated villagers huddled around the fireplace. But, they were also frozen solid, having become statues as well. The surprise made me lose the bond with my Watcher and returned me to the cave the bottom of the well.

I looked uncomprehendingly at the frozen pool and the trail of frost that had moved up the far wall. I couldn't explain why, but I had somehow been spared, despite the curse on my body.

“I do not understand what happened,” Armen admitted.

“I think I might have enraged the Widow, and in return she turned everything to solid ice.”

“It does not bode well for those frozen solid, even if you should manage to reverse the effect.”

“Why not?” I asked, horrified at the certainty in his voice. Had I just killed everyone in the village!?

“Like water expands when frozen, so does blood. When blood is frozen it is unable to deliver air to the brain. A brain starved of air for only just a few moments will be irreparably harmed. One starved of air for more than that will never recover. In short. Those frozen solid are dead.”

I swallowed hard, but then gritted my teeth. “I'll perform the Ritual of Union as fast as I can! Maybe I can still save them!”

“I admire your tenacity, but it is wasted.”

“Just tell me what words to say for the Ritual!” I had stood up, and though my whole body was quivering from the cold I was feeling and which was emanating from the pool and the world above now, I pulled out my bamboo-like Staff tipped with a glassy stone and pointed my free hand, palm-first, at the two corpses that were still connected by a flimsy red thread of ethereal energy.

“Very well. Repeat after me...”

I listened to his words and repeated them out loud.

“Before me stand the betrothed,”

“Helen of Hearthshire,”

“And,”

“Seran of Ochre,”

“These two hearts will become as one,”

“Their two minds will meld into a united whole,”

“Their two souls will twist into a single strand,”

“Let these two be conjoined in a single embrace and connect their souls with a single thread,”

“Merciful Timeless Dragon, whose coiled figure surrounds us all,”

“Make of these separate hearts a single whole,”

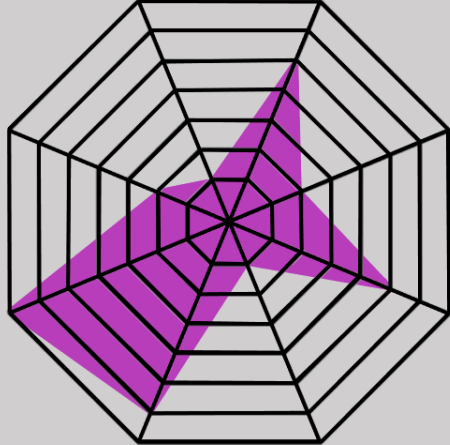
“And even in death be they twinned of heart eternally!”

A bizarre translucent-pale energy began radiating from the tip of my staff and, as it pulsed outward, it seemed to make the weak reddish link between the corpses of Helen and Seran grow stronger and more visible, as though my Ritual was strengthening it.

Then it was like a crack of thunder and a pulse shot out from the pool of water, immediately breaking apart and evaporating the solid ice. As the pulse rolled along the same path as the flash-freeze before it, it thawed the ice that ran up the cave wall and out of the well above, and when I connected to Sumi to watch its progress, I saw that the fallen villagers who had been frozen solid now slumped unconscious on freshly-thawed dirt and grass. The layer of snow that had blanketed the entirety of Hearthshire was gone as though it had never been there, though puddles of meltwater remained behind, but to any onlooker it might as well have been the aftermath of a nasty downpour.

“I think I did it,” I mumbled uncomprehendingly. Things had gone from looking impossibly-dire to suddenly-hopeful.

There was just one last thing to check. I pulled out my Guild Card and stared at it:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Watcher)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Fighter)’</i>			

“**It seems your Ouija Board worked,**” Armen then said.

“Pretty sure that only made things worse.”

“**It allowed you to learn the name of the minstrel and complete the ritual.**”

“Who knows if I was fast enough though? I can’t exactly climb out of here to find out if the villagers are unscathed.”

“**Many will have died,**” he concluded. “**They were weak to begin with and such a sudden freezing of their internal organs and blood must surely have finished what the curse started.**”

“I hope you’re wrong.”

37 – Leopold

Warmth spread through my body as Armen’s healing spell repaired my torn eardrums, as well as a few scratches and bruised I’d sustained when I fell into the well.

“Thanks.”

“**What are you doing?**” he asked.

“I’m looking through the options for my next familiar,” I told him. “I’m thinking a Tracker would be useful. It would not only open up Tracking Quests for me at the Guild, but it also seems useful for locating apparitions.”

Armen hovered over to look at the entry I was reading.

“**Is that a slug?**”

“It’s something called a Euthiaphim. Apparently it uses psychometry to see the past to find tracks. Sounds pretty bizarre, but the comments on here seem to encourage it for a new Exorcist, as a starting Tracker.”

About a third of the entries had notes from past owners of the Encyclopaedia and I’d already made some additions of my own to the few apparitions I’d encountered. I’d taken the time while waiting to write a warning on the Weeping Widow about not trying to communicate with it, as it might enrage it.

Armen began reading a warning at the bottom: “**Do not ingest any of the slime it secretes from its body. It can produce a powerful sedative slime, a strong hallucinogenic slime that makes you think you’re floating through the air, and a type of mind-bending euphoric slime that I lack the words to describe.**”

I laughed. “Sounds like he sampled every type.”

I was slowly beginning to recognise some of the handwriting and art-styles, though I had no names to attribute them to, other than the few that were clearly done by Owl, who had a terrible eye for art and whose handwriting made even the worst doctor’s crow-marks seem legible by comparison.

The drawing of the Euthiaphim was neatly shaded but looked quite alien compared to anything else I’d seen, but then, I also could not imagine what a four-metre long ‘tall-as-a-horse’ sentient psychic slug would look like.

“**It seems a bad idea to summon this one.**”

“The other options I was looking at sound like they’re tough to handle, and the one that Master Owl used has some very strange summoning requirements, like ‘a dying man’s breath’ and ‘a desire strangled by necessity’, which I don’t have a clue about how to decipher.”

“There are ecclesiastical rituals with similarly-vague and indecipherable requirements. They are known as ‘Esoteric Tolls’.”

“Well, call them what you will, I don’t get them either way.”

It was just another reason to try and find a Summoner to learn from. Hopefully I could learn how to interpret vague summoning tolls, as well as gain a further insight into familiars. Granted, that was *if* I could find such a person and *if* they were willing to teach me... Somehow it seemed too much wishful thinking that such a person might exist.

I closed the tome and put it into its belt pouch, then leaned back against the wall of the cave with a sigh. Though my clothes were still soaked through and my robe-coat lay nearby to dry, I quickly found sleep overtake me.

I awoke to the sound of something splashing into the pool nearby, like chunks of stone breaking off from the well above. The light from the Energy Stone had dimmed significantly in the time since I’d dozed off, and I figured that it wouldn’t be long before the residual energy from the Haunter was completely gone and the Stone’s pulse slowed and its light faded entirely.

“Something is coming,” Armen warned.

“It might be Rana!” I said excitedly and got up, pulling the still-sopping-wet robe-coat from the ground and putting it on, feeling its uncomfortable weight and the clammy fabric drape over me. But it didn’t matter, because I was finally getting out of this hellhole.

Sumi, show me what’s above the well.

Nothing happened.

Sumi, lend me your vision.

Still nothing.

“I can’t connect to my Watcher,” I said to Armen, confused.

Then something heavy splashed into the pool with a loud *crash* and a wave of droplets scattered all around.

I looked up towards the tunnel above, just as a sickly-pale blue glow flowed down. It took me a moment to understand what I was looking at, as the light came closer-and-closer, but then I saw the

tip of three incredibly long spindly legs emerge from the narrow opening, and the nature of the *thing* became clear to me.

I let out a cry of fear as it unfurled itself from the narrow tunnel and stuck impossibly to the ceiling above, its pale-blue-glowing body faintly illuminating the ceiling. I picked up my Energy Stone, as though its light could guard me, then pulled out my Focus and aimed it at the creature.

“Repel!” I yelled, but fear was overpowering me to the point that I could not concentrate on the image of the spell and thus nothing happened.

An echoing chitter came from the enormous spider as it sat on the ceiling of the cave, the pool below reflecting its hideous and disturbing figure. Then the bulbous abdomen behind its thorax moved up to the ceiling, anchoring a bit of frost-blue web, before it began crawling along the curving cave wall towards me.

“Whatever you do, don’t let it get to me!”

“Of course. Though we do not have anywhere to hide.”

“I don’t care, just protect me!”

“As you wish.”

The size of the spider really started sinking in when it was only a few metres away and I could see the minute details on its face: the clustered black eyes; the short arms next to its fangs; and the forearm-long hairs that covered every part of its body, quivering in some unseen wind.

Its beady eyes observed me as it closed in and I felt every muscle in my body tense up. But Armen had spoken the truth: there was nowhere to hide. I only had the little ‘shore’ to stand on, and I doubted the water would keep me safe, at least not for long.

In one sudden motion the enormous spider shot forth, only to be met by Armen’s impeccable defence, which repulsed it.

It moved its head slightly, as though appraising me, then it moved away a bit, and started rubbing two of its front legs’ claws against its spinneret at the end of its abdomen, wherefrom the frost-blue silk came. As it moved its legs back in front of its body, a line of silk connected the two claws.

“What’s it doing?”

“I’m sorry,” Armen started, as the spider came closer, **“but I do not think I can do anything about that silk. It seems to be of a sort of ethereal nature.”**

I didn’t get to ask what he meant, as the giant spider shot forth again, wrapping the line of silk around me so quickly that by the time I realised what was happening, I was suddenly upside-down. To his credit, Armen kept trying to push and slam the spider, but even though its body shuddered and

moved with every impact, the silk did not come loose from my body, and as it crawled back up the well, I had no more energy to fuel his defence.

“I have failed you. I’m sorry.”

I screamed and flailed as much as I could, but it did not matter, as I was dragged up through the tunnel, dangling below the enormous spider like a fly caught in a web.

By the time I was back outside, my throat was sore from all the pleading and yelling, and my eyes stung with the salty tears I’d cried in frustration and existential terror at the thought of being eaten alive by so abominable a monster.

“Shut up already,” a voice said.

The surprise caught me off-guard and I unintentionally obeyed the command.

“Finally.”

A sigh followed, then the spider spun me around so I dangled in the air in front of the man who had spoken. Below me, the well promised a swift fall to my death if the hideous monster let me go from the grasp of its claw and sticky ethereal web.

“Who are you?” I asked, my vocal cords so raw that it hurt to speak. Behind the man I noticed a body that’d been torn open, as though the spine had been pulled out and the insides had been feasted upon. I vaguely recognised the victim as the first person caught by the enraged Widow’s flash-freeze.

“I thought I told you to shut up.”

I didn’t reply, thinking it was probably a bad idea to anger a person who had a giant spider at their beck-and-call. I tried to discern his aura, but then realised my glasses had fallen off again.

Shit.

“It is the least of your worries at this moment,” Armen commented. **“But if it is of use to you, I believe this man is a Summoner.”**

Now I really wanted to see his aura.

It was then that I remembered that the Spirit Lenses did not enable my Spirit Vision, but rather, they made it easier to access the Ability. Owl had said it took a lot of concentration to use it without the lenses, but it was obviously still possible.

I imagined the drained reserves of my energy pooling in my chest, before moving through the channels in my body to reach my eyes. For a second, I saw a faint light around the man before me, but then it vanished and was replaced by a painful headache in my right temple.

It had given me enough time to see the colour of his aura though.

His aura had been a deep purple, like a darker version of my own aura.

The man before me had dark-grey hair, a thick neatly-trimmed beard with sharp crisp edges, as though just recently shaved, which framed his angular features into something akin to an arrowhead. His eyebrows were likewise trimmed to perfection and his irises were white, giving him a disturbing fiendish stare. He was slightly taller than me, but rail-thin, almost to an unhealthy skeletal degree, and he wore a simple black hooded robe, the skirt of which stopped just below his knees and with loose overlong sleeves.

Next to the man hunched an impish creature with a single bone-yellow horn growing from the left side of its scalp, and which had dark-blue bumpy skin and jet-black eyes, similar to the spinner whose frost-blue web held me dangling above the well.

“Take his stuff from him,” the man told the dark-blue imp and it leapt from the ground to clutch onto me.

I yelped in fear of its greedy fingers, as well as the thought of the silk-thread snapping and letting me fall. Ignorant to my whimpers, the imp crawled around on my body, while pulling stuff out of my packs and pouches, tossing them to its master. I couldn’t help but grimace as my Focus, Staff, and the Encyclopaedia were thrown to the man as well.

When it was done, the man said, “Check below, he might have dropped something.”

“What do you want from me!?” I asked in terror.

He looked at me with annoyance, then said, “Someone like you is a rare thing to find: an Exorcist who doesn’t immediately perish, but who is too foolish to adequately protect themselves.

“What I want from you is the most powerful ability known to an Otherworlder: the Contain Spirit ability, which allows for untold power if used correctly.”

When I gave him a look of surprise in return, he said, “Of course you have no clue about its true worth. Woe be to those the Owl gets its claws in, but decent pickings for a vulture like me who doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Shush. Your comprehension is not required, only your obedience. Now, just do as I say and I won’t have to kill your friends.”

I swallowed hard. But a righteous anger was filling me at the thought of him trying to hurt Rana and Lukas, so I asked, “Did you follow me here?”

“Follow you!?! Hah! Give me more credit than that. I laid this whole elaborate trap, just for you. I had to make sure you weren’t some useless Exorcist that survived by good fortune alone, although I must say that your ‘methods’ leave a lot to be desired.

“But! It *was* deeply amusing to see you kill more than half the village when you angered the spirit.”

Wait...

My mind was spinning with the implications of what he’d revealed.

“You’re the reason the Weeping Widow appeared!?”

He sighed. “Of course. Were you not listening?”

Leaning down, he picked up the Encyclopaedia, then lazily leafed through its pages.

“You have this thing right here. Surely you must’ve understood how easy conjuring a Haunting is... or well, probably you haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“How long have you been planning this? Since when did you start following me!?”

“Enough! I’m not interested in talking about this. But, if you must know, I discovered you in Ochre, when the Owl dragged you there to play pretend for the Guild. I was surprised you survived the encounter with the Galleon Demon, but mostly I was happy, because I knew you’d be perfect for my plan. It wouldn’t work with too cunning an Exorcist after all, though resilience is required for what I have in mind.”

None of this was making sense to me.

If he’s been following me since Ochre, then...

“Did you send the Witch Hunters after me?”

“What? No. That’s stupid. The old Owl did that, obviously. *Gah*, you really are dim-witted. He’s been playing you like a fiddle, that man. A veritable pied piper he is, and all the wet-behind-the-ears Exorcists follow the sound of his flute. Most of them die of course, but it’s all part of his great schemes.”

He shook his head. “But enough. I don’t want to talk anymore. So be quiet or I’ll feed your tongue to my *Prideling*.”

Just then, the imp crawled up out of the well. It had found my glasses, as well as the pouch of Sacred Corpse Ash, which had apparently fallen out when the spider had picked me up.

The man picked up the glasses, turned them in his hands, then nodded to himself and muttered something I didn’t hear, before putting them on.

Wearing my stolen glasses, he looked at me and said, “My name is Leopold. You belong to me now. Don’t forget it.”

38 – A Siren and its Song I

The air was punched out of my body as I landed on the ground next to the well, the sticky ethereal web releasing its hold on me. Rather than breaking apart, the silk simply vanished, as though a flame extinguished by a strong wind.

“Gather your tools. We’re leaving.”

I hurriedly took all my items that’d been looted by the ‘Prideling’ and placed them back into my belt pouches and bags. As I held the pouch with the expensive Sacred Corpse Ash, I dug out a small amount and spilled it on the ground. I knew it would not be moved by the wind and hoped it would be some manner of clue for Rana and Lukas to find. I just hoped they were safe and that the madman Leopold hadn’t already gotten to them. Despite his unhinged nature, he seemed very powerful.

After stuffing away my small blade and Focus, as well as hanging the Staff over the back of my soaked-through robe-coat, I got up and followed Leopold, who was watching me, while his enormous spider fidgeted restlessly and the impish Prideling made strange sounds, like a twisted monkey.

With a gesture from Leopold, the Prideling disappeared in a puff of aquamarine smoke.

“His imp just went invisible,” Armen told me, **“but it is still there. He wields several familiars that are not visible to your eyes. One of them is terrifying and it is watching me closely.”**

“What did you do to my Watcher?” I asked him, realising he must be the reason why I could no longer connect to it.

The question clearly annoyed him and he didn’t answer.

“I cannot tell if it is a Fighter, Protector, or Watcher, but the entity that is staring at me just leaned close and whispered something into his ear when you asked that.”

The thought that Leopold was being guided by some forbidden familiar made a pang of dread shoot through me.

Once I recover my energy, I’ll summon Kabanenoki and try to kill him. I can’t imagine he’ll leave me alive once I’ve performed the task he wants to use me for.

“What is it your want me to help you cast my Contain Spirit ability on?” I asked after we’d passed the inn, wherein many corpses of the villagers no doubt lay. Dead by my actions or by those of my depraved captor.

“I seek to capture a Siren and its Song.”

“Why?”

“You don’t need to know that. Now be quiet. I don’t like the sound of your voice.”

I frowned, but stayed my tongue.

After leaving the village and its thawed-out fields behind, Leopold clapped his hands twice and three Pridelings appeared out of thin air. It was hard to tell with my own familiars, but watching Leopold and how he handled his minions, I was starting to get the idea that familiars could exist in three stages: manifested but incorporeal, like what Armen existed as for most of the time; manifested and corporeal, like when Armen had to interact with the real world to protect me; and banished, which, depending on the way it was done, could be permanent or more as a way of dismissing a spirit to some separate dimension of existence, where it was not visible even to its summoner’s eyes.

I was unsure what the benefits was from keeping familiars manifested when they were not utilised, but perhaps it required less energy than to resummon them from their banished state, with the downside being that someone with a Watcher familiar, or other means of observing spirits, could see them.

“**You are mostly correct,**” Armen commented on my speculation, while I watched the three imps work in sync to carve some large glyph into the soft earth.

The fact that Leopold could control three separate familiars to work with such coordinated precision spoke volumes of his skill, as I had not even seen Owl capable of such a feat.

“**When I am dismissed, I still follow behind you, but you can neither see nor hear me. It is a lonely form of existence.**”

Does that mean Kabanenoki is in that state right now?

“**I would assume so, yes.**”

I chewed my upper lip, wondering how I could perform the partial summon required to manifest my Corpse Tree familiar in its incorporeal state.

What’s his familiars doing?

“**He seems to be using them to draw out a summoning glyph. He must be very powerful, at least if he is doing what I believe he is doing.**”

Before I could ask Armen what he was talking about, the imps finished their work and Leopold stepped up to the edge of the large six-metre-in-diameter glyph and held his right hand out, palm pointed at the large symbol, while a mace-like black sceptre was held loosely in his left hand, its tip adorned with large red crystal surrounded by dark metal flanges. As the Summoner’s power flowed

into the glyph, the crystal on his sceptre began to pulse with a warm glow, before the lines craved by the three imps took on the same glow.

Then something appeared in the centre of the large glyph, just suddenly there from one moment to the next.

I looked at the thing that had been summoned. It was a fancy carriage made of a matte black steel that looked too elaborate to have been forged in Arley, but rather seemed to belong in eighteenth-century London streets. A sickening ghostly-green light seemed to emanate from it, even without me using my Spirit Sight. I wondered if the carriage was somehow possessed.

Did he just summon a carriage??

“I believe it is unlocked at Rank IV of the Summoner Role. It is known as Object Transference. It is not that he summoned the item from some other realm, but rather that he retrieved it from a pocket dimension where it had been previously stored.”

You can do that!? Could he do that with a house as well??

“Technically, yes. But it is rather impractical, as I understand it.”

Will I get an ability like that? I could already imagine many scenarios where it could come in handy.

“No. It is a unique ability of the Summoner Role. It is possible that you might access an Advanced Role with the ability, but I do not personally know of any.”

As soon as Leopold had summoned the steel carriage, he dismissed his imps, who each vanished in a puff of smoke, then the enormous spider moved in front of it and attached its ethereal threads to where horses would normally have been hitched.

He turned to face me and then said, “Get in.”

I remembered an old statistic I’d seen on television just then: the moment a kidnapping victim goes into a vehicle, their survival rate plummets...

Only faint embers of my energy had returned to me, but I knew I had no other choice. In a swift motion, I pulled the blade that I’d hid in my long sleeve and ran it across the palm of my left hand.

Kabanenoki, come forth and crush my foes!

From the ground emerged the hideously-twisted Revenant tree and it quickly began lumbering towards Leopold who stood only a few metres away. The Ethereal Spinner hitched to the carriage released its binding silk and began moving towards my Fighter familiar with rapid skittering movements of its eight legs, but before the two familiars could clash, I heard Leopold yell something.

“Banish Corpse Tree!”

As suddenly as my monstrosity had emerged from the ground it also vanished back into it, and a feeling of utter despair overtook me. I pulled out my Guild Card, fearing what I’d find, just as the three Pridelings manifested around me, ready to tear me apart. While Armen swatted away the first two that leapt for me with an animalistic fury in their eyes, I stared at my Card and felt as though a claw had seized a hold of my heart.

My hard work and effort had been wiped away... *just like that...*

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i>			

Leopold had somehow broken my Pact with the Corpse Tree, and no doubt done the same with my Watcher before sending his spider to fetch me from the well. It was then that I remembered what Owl had told me about the names you gave a familiar:

“...other Exorcists, Summoners, Spirit Callers, etc., can Banish your familiars for good if they know their names or even turn them against you if they’re skilled enough. You don’t want that to happen, trust me.”

As the third imp leapt for me, I knew I was once again exhausted of my energy and it soared through Armen who stood before me, his protection no longer capable of manifesting itself, before landing on my face and bringing me to the ground. A moment later, the other two imps hopped onto my back and my legs, pinning me firmly in the soft dirt, their strength many times that of my own.

Leopold stalked over to me, while the giant spider followed close behind him.

“That was very foolish,” he told me in a mocking tone.

“How did you do that!?” I growled, struggling to move my head so I could glare up at him.

The three imps suddenly moved around and then began dragging me towards the carriage that the spider was returning to as well.

Leopold followed next to me as I was pulled along by the Pridelings.

“Few realise the power that Omniglot wields. Few realise that it allows for someone like you and I to banish everything with a certain name, so long as it is translated easily between languages. I knew you were foolish enough to not consider the importance of the names you gave your familiars, and thus it was easy for me to banish them.”

“**The powerful entity is whispering to him again,**” Armen warned. “**And she is looking at me.**”

“You were wise to name your Protector something other than a simple translation of its appearance or spirit-name in your mother-tongue, but I have heard its name nonetheless, which allows me to do this:”

Leopold pointed a finger at my Guardian Wraith, and I knew what he was about to say, so I screamed loudly in protest, only for one of the Prideling imps to wrap its disgusting hand around my mouth.

“Banish Armen!” he said.

39 – A Siren and its Song II

Leopold looked at his hand, confused, then at the floating wraith that he was somehow able to perceive despite him being incorporeal.

“Banish Armen!” he shouted again, and I instinctively flinched at the sound of his voice.

He grumbled, then made a gesture. One of the Pridelings that pinned me to the ground began rummaging through my bag until it found my Guild Card, which it brought to the Summoner.

With a single look at it, he tossed it to the ground before me and the two other imps eased off my back, allowing me to get to my knees. I quickly took my Guild Card and looked at it. It still said “*Pact (Greater Protector)*” on it.

For some reason, his banishment had not worked.

Why didn't it work? I asked Armen.

“Because Armen is not my true name.”

I didn't know whether to be happy that Armen was still here or upset that he had intentionally not revealed his true name to me.

Then a realisation hit me: He had not allowed me to name him, and since Armen was not his true name, it meant that he only served me because he wanted to. I had literally no control over him, which, with any other familiar, would no doubt be a death-sentence.

“I was worried your master or someone else would attempt to take control of me, so I misled you.”

But why me? Why did you even allow me to summon you? Why do you obey me if you don't have to!?

“Because I have seen your soul and deemed you worthy of following, and because there is something I want in return.”

You want me to do something for you?

“Yes, but now is not the time for that. I do not mind if I have to wait a decade for it to happen. My thoughts now are only on your survival such that the day may eventually come to pass.”

When that day comes, will you tell me your true name?

“Perhaps.”

“Maybe you’re not as foolish as I thought,” Leopold said dismissively. Then he pointed to the carriage. This time, the Pridelings had not been dismissed into their incorporeal state, but rather crowded around me, like prison guards. “Now, no more delays. Get in.”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t have a choice. In the back of my mind, *that statistic* about kidnapping victims played on repeat. The moment I got in, the odds of Rana ever finding me again were slim-to-none.

As I walked to the carriage, I put a hand in my bag and grabbed a pinch of the Sacred Ash. I intentionally slipped just before the carriage door, leaving a little bit of the ash on the ground. It was not enough to be immediately obvious, but still visible to anyone who knew what to look for. Although it was no doubt pointless, I planned to leave more of the ash along the route we took, if we made any stops on the way to our destination.

One of the imps crawled up onto the side of the carriage and opened the door, then the two behind me shoved me in. I landed on my knees on the wooden floor, then got up and sat down on the surprisingly-soft cushioned bench inside. The Pridelings entered after me, one sitting on my right and one on my left, the last one opposite me. Then Leopold entered and sat down on the bench opposite me as well, after closing the door.

A moment later, the carriage kicked into motion as the enormous frost-blue spider pulled it up-and-over a nearby hill. The speed was comparable to that of a car, but the carriage, which ought to have been jumping up-and-down, was unnervingly stable as we tore across the hilly landscape.

Some hours into our journey, I made the mistake of asking where we were going.

“Harrlev,” Leopold replied, annoyed.

“I don’t know where that is,” I replied.

“You don’t need to know. Now shut up.”

“It is the nation south of Arley. It is much smaller, but is well-known for its swamplands and meadows, as well as its capital that borders the coast. They are allied with Goldentide. In the past they were at war with Arley, but brokered a peace after losing substantial territory that now makes up Arley’s south.”

Isn’t that super far away?

“Yes. It is three times the distance from Ochre to Helmstatter.”

I frowned. I honestly wanted to cry. I was never going to see Rana again, and it was only a matter of time before this madman killed me.

I need to get away from this psycho before we get too far.

“Indeed. But I believe you must bide your time and wait for his guard to drop. You have some worth to him, but he might gravely injure you or put a curse on you to make you comply.”

A curse... I contemplated. I had entirely forgotten that Summoners possessed not only the power to break curses, but also to cast them. In many ways, they were an offensive and affliction-specialised variant of an Exorcist. I couldn't help but be a bit envious. Plus, someone like Leopold didn't have to deal with the veritable Sword of Damocles F-tier Luck that all Exorcists possessed.

It had been maybe eight hours by the time we finally made a stop. Due to the dark-tinted glass windows in the doors of the carriage, I had been unable to see the path we'd taken, but I was sure that we'd gone across the wilderness far away from civilisation, since the ride had never stopped being bumpy.

I wondered, as Leopold stepped out and the three Pridelings forced me to follow, what people who saw the spider-drawn carriage from afar might think. My assumption was that the creepy entity that Armen said spoke to the Summoner was somehow capable of warping the perception of reality, similar to the power that Owl seemingly possessed as an Adherent of the Observer. There was no way the Summoner was dumb enough not to have thought about how the Natives saw him, as his Role was as equally feared as mine.

The world outside the carriage was that of a dark forest, with a yellow moon the only light source, until one of the blue-skinned imps created and lit a fire. The trees were of a kind I had not seen in this world before, which were reminiscent to pines, but the needles were greyish-green with white edges and the air smelled strongly of their sap, as well as a heavy musty undertone of moss, which, given the fact that the understory was coated entirely in it, was little surprise. It was as though all the grass had been devoured by an invasion of moss, which carpeted everything from the ground below the trees, and clung to the first half-metre of the tree trunks, stones, boulders, and anything else it could reach.

While the Pridelings worked in unison to set up some sort of tent, Leopold waved his hands through the air in a complex series of motions, then with a finishing gesture summoned a massive six-legged eyeless hound with a long snout like that of an alligator. It did not have the webbed feet of an alligator nor the paws of a wolf, but rather something that looked like oversized ape hands covered in scales and tipped with opaque claws. Instead of fur, the creature had quills that moved steadily up-and-down in waves as the Summoner regarded it, then, with an unspoken command, he

sent the beast off into the darkness. The loud huffing and sniffing sounds it made, indicated to me that it was a Tracker, though not one that I remembered seeing in the Encyclopaedia.

“It is possible to enslave the monstrosities made by flesh-smiths,” Leopold remarked, as though trying to teach me something. “That hound is one of a kind, but other monstrosities bear reproductive capabilities and thus have become plentiful and easier to obtain.”

I nodded eagerly, mostly just because I thought that appealing to his vanity might serve me in lowering his guard. Besides, even if he was dangerous, it was possible I could glean some useful knowledge from him. Owl had been dangerous too, just in a more cunning way that was less obvious.

I’d read the entries in the Encyclopaedia about Monstrosities, such as the ‘Welin’ born of an unholy ritual involving human sacrifice; the ‘Minotaurus’ that seemed identical in both name and appearance to a legendary creature of Greek Myth; and one that was very ominously just referred to as ‘The Visitor’, but which was a catch-all name used to refer to many unique and terrifying creatures that formed as a byproduct of very powerful rituals, and which were described as a melted-together union of several humans possessed by some alien consciousness that might take on an endless variety of shapes.

As I understood it, the term Monstrosity, at least in the Encyclopaedia, referred to entities formed from the bodies of humans, often combined with some other species or distorted far beyond their original visage. The connotations of what that meant for his strange hedgehog alligator hound were quite grim.

Leopold pointed at the tent that his Pridelings had finished setting up. It looked a lot like the kind of cheap tent you could buy anywhere back on earth, though the fabric was some sort of linen coated with a hydrophobic coating on the outside to keep rain out.

“Go to sleep. I will wake you in four hours.”

I blinked, confused.

“What about you?” I asked. I had assumed he’d want me to sleep on the ground, while he slept in the tent.

“I do not sleep.”

Of all the things he had said so far, this unsettled me the most.

Since I didn’t want to be thrown in by his Prideling familiars, I went into the tent willingly, though I doubted I would be able to find even a minute of rest.

“You have not slept in a long time,” Armen remarked. **“Try to lay down. Fear not, I will stand guard as you sleep.”**

I laid down, slightly assured by his confidence, even though I knew that I was dead as soon as Leopold wanted me to be.

I suppose I’ll just close my eyes for a moment.

I shot upright as a hand touched my shoulder, but saw that it was Armen who had touched me. I couldn’t remember him doing that before: touching me that is. I hadn’t even thought it was possible, truth be told.

“I assumed you would prefer to be awoken by me instead of the Summoner,” he said.

A moment later, the tent-flap that served as its door was pulled aside and the ugly impish face of a Prideling stared at me, before making a weird twisted monkey screech that hurt my ears.

“I’m already awake!” I complained loudly, as my ears rang.

The Prideling waited in the opening of the tent until I got up and made to leave it. I was surprised that I’d been able to actually fall asleep, and despite only getting a few hours of rest, I felt a lot better than I had for a while, given that the sleep in the well and the carriage prior to that had all been quite terrible. The grim irony that I slept better while being held captive was not lost on me.

It was still dark as I left the tent, but in the distant sky I saw a faint light that was spreading slowly as dawn was unfurling itself across the land.

“It’s time I teach you how to use your ‘Contain Spirit’ ability,” Leopold said.

40 – A Siren and its Song III

“Hand me the tome you possess,” Leopold demanded. He was sitting on a boulder next to the fireplace. I was sitting on the moss opposite him.

I wanted to object, but I knew that he would take it from me if I didn’t comply.

After handing him the Encyclopaedia, he skimmed through its pages, humming some melody to himself and totally absorbed by its entries.

I sat and watched him go through it from front-to-back over the next few minutes, before he broke out of his spellbound reverie and handed it back to me.

“Where are the rest?” he then asked.

“The rest? What do you mean?”

“It is incomplete,” he replied. “This one contains only the common entities found in Arley and Lacksmey. And there are only six Demons within. Demons are plentiful and abundant. There should be more pages about them.”

“You mean to tell me that there are way more entities than what this book describes?”

“Of course, weren’t you listening!?”

“This was the only tome Master Owl gave me.”

Leopold sighed in exasperation. “Those who worship the Watcher are often jealous with the knowledge they possess. And the true reason he gave you this tome was because of the spell held within.”

“Spell?”

“It allows for someone with a Tracker to always find you. It was how I followed you.”

I blinked. This was a lot to take in. I knew I shouldn’t be surprised, but the more time I spent with Leopold, the more I was starting to believe that Master Owl’s kindness had been smoke-and-mirrors. It wasn’t so much that I trusted Leopold’s words, since he was clearly unhinged, but his explanations were like missing puzzle-pieces that slotted perfectly into the holes that I’d felt existed in the things Owl had told me.

“Do other Encyclopaedias work the same way?” I asked.

“Doubtful. My Nirvah says that this tome has had many owners. The Owl uses it for his schemes.”

“Nirvah?” I asked confused about who he meant.

Leopold waved a hand and something became corporeal behind him. At the sight I scrambled back several metres, terrified of what I saw.

One of its four hands rested on Leopolds left shoulder, while its other three, on their double-jointed arms, held gleaming obsidian masks with different faces on them. Its body was stretched and overlong, with something like ribs poking-and-stretching the off-white plastic skin of its narrow torso in a disturbing manner. A long thin neck supported an egg-shaped bulb of a head, upon which a single enormous vertical eye was planted in the centre. Its eye watched me intently, and its pupil-less iris was like a reflection of the cosmos, with stars and rainbow-coloured dust and blue dwarfs and red quasars. Below its narrow torso, from which sprouted its four arms, was a narrow point where a pelvis would’ve been on a normal human, and it simply floated above the ground in a manner that seemed to suggest that gravity held no sway over it. Simply put: it was disturbing and alien, and it made the ethereal-blue spider seem normal by comparison.

The three arms holding masks moved forward, and the thin lips on the first, which depicted a sleeping beauty with her eyes closed, began moving as it said, “*I am Nirvah. I see you.*”

The second mask was like an angry troll and its fanged maw opened to grunt, “I SEE YOUR POTENTIAL AND JUDGE YOUR WORTH.”

The third-and-last mask was a charming lupine male face locked in an alluring grin, which moved its lips subtly and told me, “*I keep the secrets of the cosmos and hide the truth.*”

I swallowed hard. It was a familiar which spoke. *That* could only mean one thing.

“You have a Demon as your familiar?”

“Nirvah is an Envoy of the Absolutes, not a Demon,” he replied. “And she is not my familiar, she is my other half. I gave her half my soul to form a pact with her.”

“Why would you do *something like that*?”

Leopold narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. “You do not seem like you would ever understand my reasons, so I will not waste my time explaining it. Now, it is time for you to learn how to utilise your most powerful ability.”

I still had more questions, but as the terrifying ‘Envoy’ became incorporeal again, I knew that the moment had passed. I wondered how much of Leopold’s unnerving behaviour and attitude could be attributed to his pact with this ‘Nirvah’.

Do you think I could banish Nirvah? Although maybe that is not her name.

“No. The sort of pact that he has formed with her means that she is intertwined with his soul. You would have to kill him, and even then, there is a chance she might possess his body, meaning you would have to kill it a second time. He is what in my time was referred to as an

‘Incarnate’. They can be killed by anyone, not just an Exorcist. Some of the most dangerous Quests the Adventurers’ Guild hands out pertains to such monsters.”

Isn’t Incarnate one of the Roles that Owl said I could specialise in?? He said you had to form a pact with a Demon to become one.

“I believe the Role shares the name, though perhaps it allows for more control over the sorts of Soul Pacts you form. Most Incarnates are humans who have been possessed by Demons but retain parts of their original selves.”

They sound very dangerous.

“They are.”

Leopold moved from the boulder he had been sitting on. He was staring at Armen, as though he could see him. It wasn’t until then that I wondered if his Nirvah could listen to what Armen told me. Somehow that didn’t seem likely, but I was perhaps better off assuming that my conversations with the Wraith were not secure.

A realisation hit me then. If Owl had put a spell on the Encyclopaedia that allowed him to track its location, then he might come to my rescue.

“Are you not worried about the spell on my book?” I asked Leopold as I got up from the mossy ground and followed him to the other side of the clearing, away from the tent, campfire, and carriage.

“Nirvah blocks such spells while you are in her presence.”

Master Owl had wanted me to go to Helmstatter for a reason. If he had indeed pruned and prepped me for his ‘schemes’ then he would be upset to know that I suddenly vanished without trace. Or would he? I hoped he would, even if I was beginning to understand more-and-more how much he had played me for a fool.

In truth, I only have myself to blame.

When we came to the line of trees at the far end of the clearing, Leopold summoned one of the Pridelings. Then he said, “Since your tome does not mention Pridelings and their powers, I will explain them to you briefly. To most effectively utilise ‘Contain Spirit’, you must understand the entity that you are using it on.

“A Prideling is a minor Devil, of the Imp category. Other kindred Imps include Slothlings, Greedlings, Gluttons, Flaykin, Wrathlings, and Succubi & Incubi. Like most Devils, both minor and greater, they follow the Mortal Sins.”

I blinked in surprise. “Like from the Christian bible?”

“Yes. Now shut up. No interruptions or I’ll cut your tongue out.”

He continued, “The Pridelings are pale imitations of true Pride Devils, but they possess the ability to cast Shocking Touch, which works like a stun-gun.”

As he once again compared things to references from earth, I realised that Leopold must be from there as well, and in a similar time period as me, given that he knew what a stun-gun was. The fact that the most psychotic person I’d met thus far was someone from the same world and era as me was a sobering fact. Frode, who had been a literal Viking as far as I could tell, had been far more polite and good-natured. The dichotomy was unsettling, to say the least.

To show off the ‘Shocking Touch’, Leopold formed an upturned fist and the Prideling swiped its hand through the air before me, while a white-hot crackle formed around its claws and a tremendous *SNAP!* followed, almost like an explosion. My body involuntarily jumped back a step, in surprise.

I was pretty sure it was less like a stun-gun and more like putting a fork in a power outlet, and whoever was unfortunate enough to be hit by it would probably die from cardiac arrest.

“A simpleton would utilise *this* ability of the Prideling and Contain its essence within a weapon, in order to imbue it with that same lightning power. However, the true worth of Contain Spirit is the ability to make tools. In the case of the Prideling, one could take their core trait, ‘Arrogance’, and use it to create an impenetrable suit of armour. But, if they knew as much about the Prideling as I do, they would take its spirit and bind it to a pair of glasses, allowing one to see a glimpse of the future.”

“Like foresight?”

“Yes.” He handed me the glasses and I took them gingerly. Then he pointed at the Prideling in front of him and said, “Your first use of the Contain Spirit ability will be simple. I have already prepared *this one* to be bonded with the glasses. You must simply perform the ability while intoning the Binding Litany.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“No more interruptions. I am about to tell you.” For emphasis, he performed a gesture and the Prideling held out its crackling claw towards me.

I took in a deep breath. Leopold had taught me the Binding Litany, how to alter it for a given purpose, how to imagine the Contain Spirit when I used it, and what to be careful of when I attempted it. Apparently, the ability left you vulnerable to possession if done incorrectly, and I did not want to have my soul devoured by a Prideling’s spirit, just because I screwed up the wording or timing.

He had told me that for binding an unnamed entity or one which name was unknown, a ritual glyph had to be drawn, since the Binding Litany required the name of the entity.

The name of the Prideling before me, which dutifully awaited its bonding with the Spirit Glasses in my left hand, was named ‘Wertlos’. My Omniglot ability did not translate it, which I thought was strange, since I was fairly sure it was a German word.

Additionally, once a binding was successful, the contained spirit would become obedient to whoever wielded it, so long as it did not have a strong personality or intellect. That meant that containing a Demon, or something like Armen or Nirvah, would still require a proper Pact to be formed, otherwise the tool or weapon produced from the binding would become hostile and attempt to hurt the wielder.

I was starting to understand why Owl had not wanted to teach me this ability, as it seemed to come with a whole host of problems. But he also seemed averse to the thought of using possessed weapons and objects, so maybe to him it was not just the risk involved, but something else as well.

I took in another deep breath, then exhaled out my nose.

With my palm pointed at Wertlos the Prideling, I imagined the light within my body, that Harleigh had taught me to sense, and I used my imagination to move it from my core and up through my right arm and out through the palm like a grasping tendril. I felt a quake flow through my body as my soul connected with the Prideling’s spirit, as well as something like lightning rolling across my scalp.

While imagining that the soul-tendril from my palm wrapped itself around the soul of Wertlos and moved it through my body and towards the Spirit Glasses that lay in my other palm, I intoned the Binding Litany within my mind:

*Wertlos, devil imp of proud and fiendish origin,
Obey mine desire and render thyself to mine design,
Hark mine words and kneel to mine command,
Lest thy soul be cleft in twain,*

The light within me and the Prideling’s soul that it carried with it was moving through my core at this point, before making its way up through my left arm and towards its palm.

*Wertlos, servant to mine will,
Offer me thy gift of foresight,
Become one in bond with the object that I wield,
And until thy task has ended,
Obey mine whims and wishes.*

A bluish light glowed from the corporeal form of the Prideling, before it vanished, only for its light to briefly glow from the Spirit Glasses in my left palm.

A few metres away, Leopold was staring intently at the spectacles, lust and greed obvious in his pale eyes.

I wondered what exactly the change in the glasses would be, so I put them on, immediately met with the bouncing-and-excited purple aura of Leopold and he stormed towards me. Only, he wasn't moving, but rather, a ghostly replica was. A second later, Leopold perfectly matched the movements of the ghostly outline that preceded him, and when I saw it lash out, I quickly backpedalled, only for the real Leopold to swing and miss.

“Give me those!” he screeched.

I looked around, seeing that all his other familiars were either too far away or unsummoned, so I made a snap decision and fled into the line of trees, running as far away from the madman as I could.

“Come back here!” I heard him yell from afar, his voice muffled by the trees.

A moment later, a snarl rent the air and I knew that he'd sent one of his beasts after me.

I just kept on running.

41 – Escape

As I ran through the dark forest, where the dawn’s new light could scarcely reach, the outlines of the pine trees’ branches lagged ahead of the trees’ actual movements and produced a disorienting and migraine-inducing hallucination before my eyes. More than a few times I misjudged the movements of the branches that shifted in the wind and caught a face-full of stinging grey-green pine needles.

I was about to take off the Spirit Glasses that contained the newly-imbued Foresight of the Prideling Wertlos, when Armen halted me:

“Keep them on. Get used to what you are seeing. Their gift is too useful to discard.”

Another branch slapped me in the mouth and I had to spit out a few needles.

I hope you’re right.

Then a howl sounded from close-by.

The sudden sound made my heart skip a beat and I paused for a split-second, just enough time to settle my foot awkwardly on the mossy ground. A moment later I collapsed under my own weight as my right foot skidded away, thanks to the morning dew making the moss slick beneath my boots.

I tumbled and rolled for a few metres, before scrambling to get back to my feet. Another howl sounded from even closer and a second later I saw the creature that’d made the sound, as it broke through the thicket of moss-covered shrubs and saplings.

The strange ghostly outline preceded its motions by a couple seconds, and time seemed to slow and it charged for me. Of all the familiars I’d seen in Leopold’s roster, this was most normal-looking of the bunch, as it wore the simple appearance of a large black fox with orange spots dotted all over its body. Its lupine features were nonetheless terrifying, especially as I saw its outline lunged for me.

With a frantic motion, I crawled out of its path, and no sooner had its true body caught up to my Foresight than it landed on my previous location and skidded briefly after taking a bite the air.

A snarl escaped its maw and I quickly yelled to Armen, “Kill it! Quick!”

He did not reply, but instead got in front of me. As I saw its outline crash against Armen’s wraith body, I understood what fate awaited the fox-like creature. A moment passed and it lunged for me, but was caught by his powerful armoured hands, which grasped its upper and lower jaws firmly, before wrenching them apart.

I cringed as a violent *crack* and *tear* sounded from the beast, as well as a pained whimper that died in its throat as its body turned incorporeal and vanished. I had no idea if a familiar could die in the traditional way, or if death was only temporary. Either way, I was not inclined to find out, so I

got back up to my feet and pushed myself onward, even though the air felt like fire in my lungs and sweat coated every centimetre of my skin, soaking into my robes.

At some point, maybe after an hour or maybe even two, I found a part of the forest where the understory dipped down an incline, which was dotted with burrow holes of animals, as well as craters formed by partly-uprooted trees. Under the extensive umbrella-like root-system of one such tree, I hid myself away, hoping desperately that Leopold would not be able to find me.

“He will find you. You must keep moving.”

“I can’t! I physically can’t! Damn this body and my useless physique.”

Armen was hovering in place. Unlike with everything else, the Foresight granted by my glasses did not seem to work on him, but, then, it also did not work on my own body either, which was probably a good thing, since it’d be too disorienting otherwise.

“He will kill you when he captures you again,” Armen said coldly.

“Don’t you think I know that!”

“I am merely telling you what is at stake.”

I brought out my Encyclopaedia and started rifling through its pages in the second half.

“What are you doing?”

I didn’t want to tell him, because it was no doubt a bad idea. No, it was *definitely* a bad idea. Of the worst most self-destructive come-back-to-bite-you-in-the-ass kind.

After skimming through the entries for about two minutes, I found what I was looking for: a Fighter familiar that did not require an extensive summoning ritual, aside from a hexagram, the Black Candle, and Sinner’s Ash. Unfortunately, the choice I had landed on was one I’d already read about before and personally considered idiotic to ever try to summon. But desperate times call for desperate measures, or so they always say.

Several warnings on the pages stated the folly in summoning this entity as a familiar, since it was uncontrollable. As in, and I quote, *literally uncontrollable*. One of the previous owners of the book had written, *“Because of strong personality, perhaps?”* I wasn’t sure what that meant.

Armen looked over my shoulder. **“Ryūta, what you are planning is a bad idea.”**

“Do you have any better suggestions!?”

He paused for a moment, then answered, **“No.”**

“Then I’m doing it.”

I crawled out of the root system and found a decently-flat spot for my ritual to take place. A moment later I heard loud sounds in the air that sounded very much like huffing and sniffing, along with some incredibly-deep growls that made my very body shake.

“It must be another Tracker,” Armen guessed.

I gritted my teeth, trying to push the thought of being jumped by another demonic hound from my mind, as I knelt to the ground and brushed a thick layer of dead pine needles aside to lay bare the earth beneath. Using my simple knife, I carved the hexagram into the ground, then I made a small mound of Sinner’s Ash in the middle, before placing the Black Tallow Candle behind it.

Another deep growl made the ground beneath my feet quake. Whatever was on my scent was close now.

I took a deep breath as I pulled the crystal-tipped bamboo staff from my back and held my right palm pointed at the hexagram. I spent a couple seconds concentrating on shutting off outside stimuli, since messing up the invocation or pact-forming would have dire consequences.

“Make sure I am not interrupted,” I told Armen.

“I cannot protect you from this thing you are summoning,” he warned me.

I ignored him and started intoning the ritual:

“O hateful and vindictive one!”

“Heed mine call!”

“O judged and punished one!”

“Observe mine plea!”

“O Condemned Ifrit!”

“Light these foes of mine aflame!”

The small hexagram I’d made burst into fire alongside the wick atop the Black Candle, however, the heat was apparently of such intensity that the entire Candle was reduced to a waxy puddle in seconds. At the same time, a figure emerged from the little heap of Sinner’s Ash, as though birthed from the remains of a dead criminal. As it grew in size and its details became clearer, I saw that it was the body of a woman that was forming. Her arms and legs were long and slender, and her figure was lithe and dangerous. From atop her bald head grew two horns. The most unsettling thing was that her entire body, horns included, was charred black and looked like brittle charcoal that might fall apart with the slightest breeze.

Then, like a tinder was sparked, fire exploded out from the figure, coating her body in something like a summer dress of flames, giving her a flowing mass of hair that floated impossible from her

head, and giving a facsimile of life to her charred body by turning her coal-black and rugged face into a beautiful smooth-skinned face adorned with two steel-hard and dangerous eyes.

A scream emerged from her that physically pushed me back half a metre in the earth and hurt my ears, though not as much as what I had experienced from the enraged Weeping Widow. Still, at this rate I would lose my hearing before I turned twenty.

I sent my essence out to touch hers and it felt like her heat and fire flowed back along my reaching soul tendril, as though it was a trail of flammable oil. While my core temperature steadily climbed and sweat-pearls formed on my skin, tickling my skin as they ran down, I began speaking the Pact of the Familiar through the tenuous bond I’d formed with her body.

Terrifying Ifrit, whose fire scalds my soul,

Give yourself to me and become my—

“No! I will not become your plaything!”

I hadn’t expected her to be able to interrupt the Pact, much less be able to speak.

Let us make a trade then!

“I have a vengeance I must exact! I will lend you my strength if you bring me those who wronged me!”

I swear that I will bring your desire to fruition.

She did not interrupt me this time, so I didn’t waste a moment.

Thy hounding flames will leave nothing but ashes!

Okuribi-Hime, this is henceforth thy name!

With the Pact finalised, it was as though Okuribi-Hime was released from the hexagram, and she immediately shot into the air like a rocket, but paused as she hovered near the tops of the pine trees, which were slowly smouldering by her very presence.

Unlike with Kabanenoki, I could feel how every second of her being corporeal was draining my energy. I had no idea how long I’d be able to manifest her for, but as I stared in awe at the simple destruction she was causing to her mere surroundings, I figured that she was less like a single-target Fighter, and more like a carpet-bombing of napalm.

The growl of the Tracker sounded again, and I looked to the top of the incline, where it stood and sniffed the air with its alligator snout and eyeless face. It was the quill-covered monstrosity that Leopold had showed me before.

I didn’t even need to command Hime what to do, because she immediately flew towards the disturbing hound with a gut-wrenching scream, as though she was in gruesome pain. I wondered

bleakly if her flames hurt her as much as they hurt her surroundings. Given that a Condemned Ifrit was born as a result of someone being burnt to death, either in a failed Exorcism or as punishment for a crime, perceived or real, I doubted the entity had a healthy relationship with fire.

With a target for her wrath, the ambient heat that made the pine trees and moss crisp and smoulder became like a laser-beam, although I couldn't really see the difference, except in how suddenly the alligator hound burst into fire and started literally melting, skin, meat, and fat drooping from its body, while it let out a pained growl.

Then Hime came within reach of the hound and landed on the mossy earth before at the top of the incline. With a simple grasp, she pulled the head off the hound, which immediately became ashes in her hands.

As the hound disappeared in a bonfire of melted fat, blackened bones, ashes, and indestructible quills, the Ifrit let out another shriek and shot off back the way I'd run from.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “I can't believe that actually worked.”

“**Do not skin the bear before it is caught,**” Armen said.

“What?” I asked, not sure why the Omniglot ability had translated his words into such a strange sentence.

“**Prudence is warranted. The Ifrit may turn its devastating fire on you if you cannot assuage its desire.**”

I frowned, then pulled out my Guild Card just to make sure that a Pact had actually been formed. Armen looked at the card over my shoulder and simply said, “**Fascinating.**”

I suppose I should not have been surprised to see such a thing, but I now had another worry added to my growing list.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
<i>ROLE: Exorcist</i>		<i>RANK: Seeker</i>	
<i>GENDER: Male</i>		<i>AGE: 17</i>	
<i>ACUMEN: B</i>	<i>DEXTERITY: E</i>	<i>INTELLIGENCE: B</i>	<i>LUCK: F</i>
<i>PACT: A</i>	<i>SOUL: S</i>	<i>STRENGTH: E</i>	<i>VITALITY: F</i>

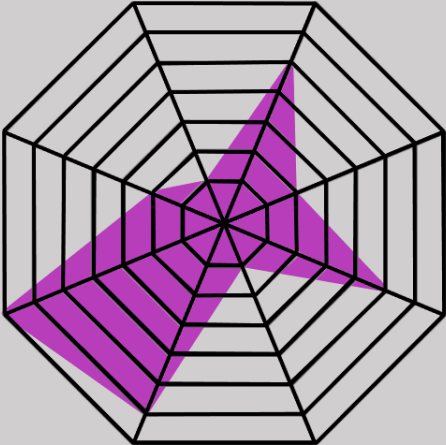
ABILITIES

‘Omniglot’

‘Exorcist I’

‘Pact (Greater Protector)’

‘Pact (????)’



42 – Consequences

Behind me, the dark forest was steadily burning and the black smoke darkened the sky above, making it seem as though night had fallen, despite it being close to noon. I silently cursed my Vitality as I heaved for air and my lungs felt like they might implode from the strain of maintaining a jog through the pine-needle-covered understory.

I had no idea where I was going, but I knew I just had to get away from Leopold. My soul energy was brought to a point where I expected to run out within the next minute, so while it physically hurt me all over, I just kept moving further and further away from the fire behind me, hoping that Okuribi-Hime would visit enough devastation on the Summoner that he’d lose my trail.

“You still carry the Encyclopaedia,” Armen warned. **“He will follow its trail.”**

I can’t just throw it away! I argued back internally, too worn-out to speak out loud.

“You would rather be caught again?”

If I get rid of that book, then I might as well give up trying to be an Exorcist!

“I thought you did not want to be an Exorcist,” Armen countered frustratingly.

What other role is there for me in this world!? It’s clear that my lot in life is to be an Exorcist, unless you know of some other way that I can use my powers! Even Mercenary work seems a folly for me to pursue alone! We only got the job to guard the Princess because of Rana, and now that we’ve been separated and I might never see her again, there are no one who will hire me! I’m a bad omen! Just look at this mess I’ve gotten involved in! Look at the mess I’ve dragged Rana and Lukas into!

I felt the last bit of energy get sucked out of me just then and the immediate exhaustion hit me so hard that my knees collapsed under me and I tumbled down a small hill, while the dead pine needles jabbed me in a thousand places and got stuck to my sweat-damp clothes.

With a groan, I pushed myself to my knees, brushing the needles out of my hair. The glasses had fallen off again and lay a metre away in the soft earth. I put them back on with an annoyed sigh. *Owl was right. Goggles are better...*

A scream emerged from the thin air in front of me as Hime emerged as a small flame that grew into her full body within seconds.

“Your soul is untrained and weak! I need more power to sustain me than what you provide!”

I wanted to yell back at her and tell her to screw off, but I didn’t, because I knew I had no defence.

“Why did you answer his beckoning call?” Armen asked the Ifrit, who was, like him, floating in the air in her incorporeal form, invisible to all eyes but mine and those of a Watcher.

With a frustrated snarl, she screamed her answer, “***I thought he could render my vengeance!***”

“**I too felt the same way,**” Armen replied. “**Have faith in Ryūta. He is still young, but you understand his potential. It is why you answered his call.**”

I didn’t entirely comprehend what Armen was saying, but I got the ominous sense that spirits with unfinished business and strong personalities might be eager to seek me out somehow. After all, Owl had said that entities with strong personalities that weren’t Demons were quite rare. Although, if the Ifrits of this world were like those from earth, Hime was technically a subtype of Demon.

With wobbling legs, I got to my feet and tried to slowly continue walking. To distract myself from the soreness in my body and the overwhelming exhaustion, I asked my two familiars: *Have you been summoned before?*

“**Yes,**” answered Armen.

“**No!**” The Ifrit’s body exploded with fire as though to emphasise her answer. I suppose it made sense that she had never been summoned before, given that only someone and desperate and foolish as me would summon an uncontrollable entity like her.

How long is it since you died, Hime?

“***In life, I was known as Seramosa! The title you have given me pains my ears, do not utter it again!***”

My apologies, Seramosa.

“***I do not know how much time has passed since I was burnt at the stake, but I spent a long time in the in-between, floating through the colourless veil with other souls like mine, as well as some that I hope never to see again.***”

“In-between?” I asked out loud, my voice was raspy from the exhaustion. I was also parched and wondered if I might pass out from dehydration.

“**I recall a place like it as well,**” Armen said, “**though my memories become hazier with every moment I spend in the real world.**”

“***It was like the purgatory that the Church always warns of!***”

“**Indeed. It is said that the souls of those who are not buried with proper rites end up in this in-between space, belonging neither to reality nor the afterlife.**”

“***The afterlife is nonsense the Church invented!***”

“**I hope it exists,**” Armen replied.

The Ifrit gave him something like an appraising look, while I had to take a breather next to a tree. The roar of Seramosa’s fire was audible even from here, and the sky was covered in soot. I hoped she had managed to kill the Summoner, but knew the madman was probably more durable than that.

“You bear their stench! You were a Priest, weren’t you!”

“Like Ryūta, I was an Otherworlder. But yes, I had the Role of Priest.”

“Your Church caused more harm than good! Many like me were burnt to death for simply doing what you Priests could not!”

“In my time, the Church did not burn people at the stake,” he replied evenly.

“Liar!” she screamed and the tree I was leant against suddenly charred black under my touch, as though her rageful flame could burn through me.

Seramosa, calm yourself. You and Armen are no doubt from very different time periods. As far as I know, there are no stake burnings in this world either. The Church seems a force for good here.

The Ifrit floated up close to me, her beautiful-but-terrifying face radiating heat that made my skin flush red. ***“What land are we in, Exorcist?”***

We’re in the Principality of Arley.

“I do not know this place. My home was near the capital of Mourn. The Church and their Witch Hunters were infamous for their callousness and uncompromising ruthlessly! I was sentenced and punished merely for aiding those who sought out my aid as a Cursebreaker! The Church and its Priests did not have the talent I had, so they viewed me as heretical! I will visit untold devastation upon them!”

I have never heard of a place called Mourn, I replied. But I will find it, so your desire may be fulfilled.

“I have heard it mentioned once. It lies in the Heartland of Asra, the eastern continent.”

I need to see a world map, because I have no reference to understand how far that would be.

“A map, of the entire world? I have never seen such a thing. I do not imagine it would exist.”

Why not? In my world they had maps of every continent for hundreds of years before my time, back when only ships could traverse the vast oceans, before flight and satellite technology.

Seramosa looked at Armen, who, despite his blurry features, also looked lost.

Nevermind, it would be too complicated to explain.

“Your world sounds strange,” the Ifrit commented with no trace of irony.

A little bit of my energy had recouped after I’d continued slowly walking through the forest for another hour. No matter how far I went, however, the sky was still blackened by smoke above and the roar of fire sounded near enough that it might only be far enough away to be obscured by the dense trees.

I knew I would need more than just a few embers of energy if I wanted to make proper use of Armen and Seramosa, when Leopold eventually caught up to me, so, despite the paranoia and anxiety that never left me, I sat down on the ground and began to meditate. It took me some minutes to really find the rhythm, since my heart was still pounding and the adrenaline still coursed through me.

To ground myself, I forced my mind to focus on the immediate sensations I felt, such as Seramosa’s heat that radiated through me, the way that the pine-needles dug into the skin of my legs, and how it felt to exhale every breath.

The roar of fire was still there, but there were also sounds of the wind playing through the pine trees and shifting the dead needles around with a faint rustle. The sounds of birdsong were gone however, and so were the chirps of insects and small critters. I felt bad that I was responsible for setting the forest ablaze, but I’d had my reasons.

Then another sound filled my ears. Something like the flap of a bird’s wings, although from its volume, it had to belong to an enormous animal.

My eyes shot open, just in time to see something like an enormous shadowy harpy eagle descend down through the trees, its beak and eyes like the glowing white lights on a truck. I could not see its future actions with my Foresight glasses, which immediately filled me with dread.

With a scream, Seramosa shot up towards the enormous shadow bird, but it transfixed her with its eyes and froze her in place. It moved its head and shifted its left eye to stare at Armen who was hovering in front of me loyally, freezing him still as well. I was immediately reminded of when the Witch Hunters had done something similar.

“**Run!**” Armen yelled, and I didn’t waste a second.

As I tore up the ground with every panicked step, I heard a sound that sparked some familiarity, something like the slobbering huff of many nostrils working in symphony, and a second later I saw an outline of something reptilian leap from a tree towards me with its claws out. I threw myself forward, and an instant later, the creature performed the action of its preceding outline, barely missing me with its hooked claws.

With not a second to waste, I got back to my feet and kept running. The thing shuffled after me while a big tongue continuously coated its eyeless face with drool. I remembered it as the same creature Owl had used as a Tracker: a Scenting Tongue.

I saw more movement ahead with the glasses, but knew I could not react fast enough to avoid it, and a moment later I was hit by a spectral blue-glowing web and pulled from my feet and into the air, where I dangled below the front-most spiked legs of the enormous spider Leopold had used to catch me with the first time around.

I yelled and thrashed, but to no avail.

I was held above the ground of the forest for about half an hour, while the creepy shadowy harpy eagle stared at me with its huge glowing eyes. Armen and Seramosa were gone, but I didn't know if that was because they were still frozen in place or because the monster's gaze made it impossible for them to manifest.

The moment Leopold arrived, he parked himself next to the enormous bird. I wondered if it was his soul-pacted Nirvah wearing a different guise. After all, she gave off the impression she could change shape, given how she had those three obsidian masks.

With a wordless command, the silk that held me lowered me to the ground, then Leopold waved his hand and his two Pridelings appeared from next to him, before running over and seizing me in their powerful grasps that belied their diminutive child-like bodies.

Only when I was pinned to the ground by the two imps, did the silk slacken its hold on me and Leopold walked closer. I got the sense that he was terrified of how I might be able to hurt him, which I felt was warranted, since, without whatever magic was blocking my summoning, I could've turned him to ash with Seramosa fire.

“Nirvah says I should kill you,” Leopold said after stopping a few metres from where I was pinned to the ground. “But I am tired of looking for Exorcists to serve my desire. You will have to do, but I will make sure you are obedient henceforth.”

Only then did I notice what he was holding in his right hand. It was a large cleaver.

When one of the Pridelings forced my right arm out in front of me, I knew what he was planning and I started screaming at him to stop. Pleading with him to be lenient.

“Don't worry,” he said, as he lifted the cleaver into the air. “You don't need your hands to perform the Contain Spirit ability.”

Then he swung the cleaver down.

43 – A Siren and its Song IV

Armen was working his healing magic to mend my stump, and had promised that he could regrow my lost hand, but said that it would take time. For some reason, the parts he regrew looked like charcoal, somehow similar to Seramosa’s Ifrit horns. He said not to worry.

The pain from the moment had been so overwhelming that I’d passed out immediately, which I was glad for, since I’d woken up to Armen’s voice, while his magic was closing the wound. I’d lost blood, but not as much as I should have, and whatever magic Armen used, it pushed the pain away.

In the end, Leopold had cut off just my right hand, leaving me with my left as a ‘mercy’. The shadowy eagle had disappeared, but I knew it would pop out if I tried anything, and the enormous frost-blue spider still clung to the trees directly above me, waiting to strike, while the two Pridelings were guarding me. The three familiars all had visible burn scars, no doubt thanks to Seramosa, with the spider having nearly half of its body blackened and melted like wax.

For some reason, Seramosa had not reappeared like Armen, once the eagle vanished, but while I wanted to tempt fate and tried to command her to set the Summoner ablaze, she refused to show up. It made me realise that I truly had no control over her.

“She is terrified of that Watcher,” Armen said, as though able to read her feelings.

Why?

“Fire cannot harm it, and they are some of the entities that make their hunting grounds within the in-between. If Seramosa has existed there for as long as I assume, then she has learnt to avoid them.”

But she charged right at it, I argued back.

“Perhaps she hoped she could slay it before it could attack. But do not worry about that now. Focus on the present.”

I looked over to Leopold and saw that he was working a sewing needle through my severed hand, while muttering something that sounded like a spell. He had said that he would make sure I would be obedient and I did not like what my mind was imagining.

Seramosa, please! Appear and burn this madman to ashes!

The Ifrit once again refused to obey.

“Give her time. Once the Summoner is properly distracted, perhaps she will be inclined to do as you ask.”

I learnt what Leopold had meant by ‘obedience’ when he finished his arcane work on the hand he had cut from me. My stump was already halfway to resembling a palm, though the joint was stiff and immovable for now.

“You are familiar with Voodoo Dolls,” he said, not waiting for me to answer. “This piece I took from you is now linked to your body through the Curse of the Excruciating Bond.”

I shuddered.

“I suppose a demonstration is in order, such that you understand your place *properly*.”

“No, that’s okay,” I started, not wanting to be shown what I knew he wanted to show.

He completely ignored my words and lifted the hand-doll into the air. Several stitches had been made in the skin and it was of an unhealthy brownish colour, like leather, and utterly unrecognisable as my former hand. He took a little pine needle from the ground and shoved it into the middle finger, the needle easily penetrating the leathery skin.

A jab of excruciating pain shot through my left thigh, as though a spear had gone straight through it, and I fell to the ground with a scream, despite knowing the pain was entirely in my mind as there was no hole in my thigh, nor even blood. Armen grunted in pain as well, somehow feeling the same agony that I was experiencing.

Then suddenly it was gone, and I heaved and groaned as I struggled to get back to my feet. I looked up and saw that Leopold had pulled the pine needle out again.

“You understand now the power I hold over you,” he said, his tone calm, which only made it more ominous. “There will be no more delays, or I will put you in a world of pain until your mind breaks and there is nothing but a husk left behind.”

I nodded eagerly, not wanting him to make good on that threat.

“I won’t try to escape, I promise.”

The dark carriage headed south through the rough terrain and forests, dragged by the massive spider, while I sat inside on the opposite side of Leopold. On his shoulder sat a smaller version of the shadowy harpy eagle, but its eyes were closed, and in his right hand was the voodoo doll he’d made.

He seemed to allow Armen to continue healing me, which I thought was odd, and my charcoal-black new hand now had a thumb and part of an index finger.

“Your Protector is a former Adventurer, is it not? A Priest, by the looks of it.”

There was no point in denying it, so I nodded.

“Fascinating. I have not heard of such a thing before. I am glad I let you live. Despite your difficulties with obedience, you are an enigma I’d like to solve.”

I couldn’t tell where this was leading, but my imagination was screaming, “*He want’s to experiment on you!*”

“Your choice to summon an Ifrit while on the run was peculiar as well. It is said they are uncontrollable, and yet, here you are, still living. Even with my Nirvah to herd unruly familiars, I would not attempt to subjugate such a Demon.”

“It sounds as if he would lose control of his familiars if his Soul-Pacted Envoy was to disappear.”

You yourself said that it would not be possible to banish it, since it is bound to him.

“Indeed, but it may be possible to disrupt their bond somehow.”

Leopold looked at the hand that was slowly growing back into something resembling the one he’d cut off, you know, apart from its disturbing texture and colour. “It seems that the nature of your Ifrit is affecting the healing touch of your Protector,” he mused. “I will be interested to see what traits it has once finished.”

Is that true? Is Seramosa affecting the healing process? Is that why my hand looks like charcoal!?

“I am afraid so. I did not know how to tell you.”

I frowned.

“If not for my Protector, I would’ve bled to death.”

“I was prepared to cauterise the wound,” Leopold replied nonchalantly. “Show me your Guild Card. I wish to see this new Pact you have formed.”

I gritted my teeth, but obliged, awkwardly using my left hand to pull it from my belt pouch on my right hip.

The Summoner nodded to himself. “It is as I thought.”

“It’s a forbidden pact,” I agreed.

“Is that what the Owl taught you *this* means?”

I blinked, confused.

Leopold sighed. “The question marks imply that the Pact was not formed with a specific task for the familiar.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your Protector is only listed as a Protector because that is the task you gave it when you formed the bond. You did not give the Ifrit a task when you formed your bond, thus there is no task listed on your Guild Card.”

“Wait, do you mean that I could give any familiar any task I want?”

“Within reason, yes. Pacts formed with a specific bond are easier to control, but limit the familiar’s power. For example, the task of Protector means a familiar can only act to guard you, or, in the rare cases where they possess magic, utilise their magic on you, such as with your Protector’s healing touch.”

“That means that all the types of familiars listed in the Encyclopaedia are wrong!”

“They are not wrong, you just misunderstood them,” Leopold replied. “They are meant to be viewed as recommendations for how to use a familiar. After all, were you to task a Guardian Wraith with being a Tracker, you would see poor results.”

“So my Pact with the Ifrit is not a forbidden one?”

“The Ifrit is a Demon sub-type, so no, it is very forbidden.”

I frowned. Although felt that I had learnt something very important at least.

The next two days we did not leave the carriage, while it moved south nonstop. Unlike with a horse-drawn carriage, there was no need to worry about the mount dragging the vehicle to become fatigue, and thus we covered a vast distance in a fraction of the time it would have taken.

At one point, during the second day, Armen remarked that we’d passed Helmstatter. The revelation made my chest hurt, but I knew I had to bide my time. In hindsight, my previous escape attempt had been foolish, since I didn’t have a proper plan in place for how to get away from the Summoner. I knew that if I wanted to truly escape him, then I need to kill him.

On the third day, we stopped in a village and I was forced to watch as Leopold unleashed his Pridelings, the giant Ethereal Spinner, and his Scenting Tongue on its inhabitants, brutally slaughtering them and leaving their remains for his familiars to gorge themselves on. Nirvah in her harpy eagle form never left his shoulder though.

After the village was emptied of life, Leopold picked the largest house and told me to enter with him. I had to keep myself from pulling out my small blade and lashing out at him, as I stepped over the bodies of the villagers, whose faces were frozen in abject horror.

Leopold pulled out a chair and sat down next to a simple round table that wobbled slightly, pouring himself a mugful of ale from a bottle he’d found.

“You will perform another Contain Spirit for me. But first, eat and drink, replenish your energy.”

I swallowed as I looked at the food that was brought in by the Pridelings, looted from storehouses and other homes. While we’d travelled by the carriage, the food had just been waterskins full of bitter wine and some strangely-sweet flaky biscuits. I’d developed a new fear: what would happen if I got a cavity? Armen had assured me he could heal my teeth as well, which had assuaged me slightly.

Even though I was reluctant, I sat down opposite Leopold, trying not to look at the shadowy bird on his shoulder, while grabbing a bit of everything to eat. There were fruits like pears and apples, as well as root vegetables like carrots and radishes. There was a bit of smoked ham and pork belly as well, which I got the feeling had been stored and kept for an important celebration, like those I’d heard happened around the end of Harvest season.

I washed it all down with some watered-down ale, which, while not exactly to my taste, was a preferable to me over the wine that Leopold fancied. Still, I would’ve given a gold coin just then for a nice hot cup of black tea with lemon.

After finishing the best, most indulgent, meal I’d had in what felt like weeks, Leopold pulled out a whistle that had been carved from a bone and scooted it across the table to me. Then, with an unspoken command, he called the Scenting Tongue into the room. It came crawling through the doorway and up on the ceiling of the wooden house we were in, its eyeless face moving around while its enormous tongue continually covered the nostril-holes that dotted its head with a fresh coat of slobber.

“Are you familiar with the Scenting Tongue?”

I nodded. “Master Owl had a similar Tracker.”

Leopold seemed surprised by this, but then composed himself and said, “Unlike the Prideling imp, it is not from a realm of incorporeal energy, nor is it the soul of something bygone, nor the product of fleshcraft or monstrosity rituals.”

“It is from the world of Merriddia,” I answered, remembering what Owl had told me.

Leopold narrowed his eyes and felt a pressure building on my body, squeezing the air from my lungs, as the hand-doll he held was squeezed in his grasp slightly. I took the hint and shut up. A moment later, he eased his grip and I sucked in a mouthful of air in relief.

“Its main trait is its ability to following scent trails in the air, which is what you will Contain within *this* bone whistle.”

I didn't see how a whistle would be able to be imbued with a scenting ability, but didn't want to argue the logic, as I, first off, had no clue how magic worked in this world, and, secondly, valued my life more than a pointless debate.

“Aside from its powerful tracking ability, the Scenting Tongue also has great tolerance towards extreme temperatures, and can store nutrients from the food it eats and slowly distribute it throughout its body, meaning it only requires feeding once every few weeks.”

Leopold cleared his throat and paused his rambling. He seemed prone to be carried off on tangents, which, if not for his depraved nature or total disregard for human life, might have been endearing, instead it just came off as the mutterings of an insane person. Like a serial killer talking about his favourite doll collection. There was no way it didn't come off creepy and weird. Although saying that, whenever he spoke about something in-depth, it made him slightly more tolerable, so I actually appreciated his ramblings.

“No more time wasted. Contain it within the whistle, then we leave for Harrlev.”

With another unspoken command, the Scenting Tongue released its grip on the ceiling and fell to the floor, spinning to land on its feet.

I got out of the chair and walked closer to the otherworldly creature. Closer than I really wanted to be. In my left hand I held the bone whistle, while I pointed my charcoal black-right hand at the Scenting Tongue. The hand was still immovable, like a fixed prosthetic, and Armen hadn't finished forming the pinkie yet, so it only had four fingers. Still, having something close to a real hand was a comfort. I couldn't stand staring at the stump my arm had become, but now it didn't feel as upsetting.

“What is its name?”

“Widerwärtig,” Leopold answered.

Once again, the Omniglot ability did not translate it. I suppose it made sense that names were not translated, since otherwise I would be introducing myself as ‘Fat Willow’ instead of ‘Ryūta’.

I looked at the Scenting Tongue and reached out with my soul, while intoning the Binding Litany:

*Widerwärtig, Scenting Tongue of Merriddia,
Obey mine desire and render thyself to mine design,
Hark mine words and kneel to mine command,
Lest thy soul be cleft in twain,*

My grasping soul pulled the creature's soul through me, while I went on to the second half.

*Widerwärtig, servant to mine will,
Offer me thy gift of smell,*

*Become one in bond with the object that I wield,
And until thy task has ended,
Obey mine whims and wishes.*

Light in a brownish-reddish hue glowed from the Scenting Tongue and the whistle in my hand, and then the Komodo-Dragon-looking creature vanished and the light from the whistle intensified, before dying down a moment later, when the magic subsided.

I couldn't help myself, and put the whistle to my lips, despite Leopold's angry glare that cleared stated that he wanted it, just like the glasses he had stolen from me.

As I blew the whistle, a bassy-deep sound reverberated, and it was like a thousand strands of floating light became visible to my eyes, each connecting to an object in the room or something that had been in the room but no wasn't. Each strand had a unique colour, though for some the variance was so slight that it was hard to distinguish them from others. The sheer magnitude of information gave me an immediate headache, and a moment later, pressure squeezed the air from my lungs and forced me to the ground with a gasp.

Leopold thunder over and picked up the bone whistle that I'd dropped, squeezing the voodoo doll an extra time just to remind me of my place.

“We leave,” he then said and released his squeezing grip on the doll.

I scrambled after him.

44 – A Siren and its Song V

My body was sore from Leopold’s abuse of the voodoo doll every time I made a slight error or spoke when he did not want me to speak.

Armen had finished healing my hand, but was still working on the internal parts, regenerating the muscles and joints between bones, so right now it was a hand with its fingers splayed like some creepy mannequin for a glove store. It had not changed from its charcoal-black hue and it was rough and dotted, as though some kind of porous stone. Most unsettlingly, it seemed to occasionally let off a tremendous amount of heat, which was beyond my control.

I’ll have to get a special glove or gauntlet to mitigate its burning touch...

“It may prove a boon if you can learn to master the power it absorbed from Seramosa.”

That was a thought I hadn’t considered. Seeing as the hand was a mix of the Ifrit’s powers and Armen’s, it was quite possible that it could unleash some of her devastating fire. But it was currently a temperamental and uncontrollable thing, just like the Ifrit who was responsible for its appearance. If I did manage to get it under control, my new hand might prove to be a welcome addition to my sorely-lacking offensive arsenal.

While we travelled to Harrlev, I spent most of the time meditating, which Armen had advised me to, since it promoted his healing abilities and accelerated the recovery of my hand, while also expanding my available energy reserves. It seemed to work like a muscle, where, the more you put strain on it, the stronger it became, but excess periods of no training would revert it to a weaker state. I had to remind myself that my S-tier Soul Attribute was only worth something if I actually pushed the limits of its potential.

According to Armen, my Pact Attribute was the only one that I consistently was training, even though it was through no intentional effort on my part, as my bond with him was the catalyst for its growth.

I was broken from my meditative state when the carriage came to a sudden halt and Leopold said, “We have arrived.”

Suddenly, my mind was brought back to what he wanted from me, as well as the very real threat of being disposed of as soon as my job was complete.

I followed him out of the carriage. The two Pridelings manifested and immediately moved to flank me, making any attempt at escape impossible. The shadowy harpy eagle remained on Leopold’s

shoulder with its eyes closed. In his right hand was the voodoo doll he had made from my hand. It was clear that he was not taking any chances.

Armen released a sigh of relief, then informed me, **“I have completed the healing at last.”**

Good timing, I commended him.

I looked down at my charcoal hand and ever-so-cautiously curled the fingers into my palm, forming a fist. My eyes became misty, as the anxiety of permanently losing my hand was eased.

Thank you Armen. Thank you so much.

“Of course. Your focus now should be to learn to wield the power that lies within your Ifrit Claw.”

Ifrit Claw? Is that what my hand has become?

“Given that it bears the same nature as Seramosa, it seems quite likely that it can take on a different shape once fire inhabits it.”

I blinked in surprise. In my mind’s eye I was picturing my right hand turning into a massive flaming claw that could tear through anything. However, I still had no idea how to go about taming the power that now resided within my ‘Ifrit Claw’. While Armen had been working on healing its internal structure, I had accidentally brushed it against my right thigh and burnt a hole through my pants, as well as giving myself a third-degree burn that the Wraith was fortunately quick to heal.

Until I reached a point where I could control its power, I had to be very conscious of how I moved the hand around and what I touched with it. Unfortunately, this meant that it was currently useless for holding anything, and I was relegated to using my left hand, which, despite the many days of relying on it exclusively, was still proving awkward.

“You need to make counter-charm Wards before we approach the Siren’s territory,” Leopold told me.

“I don’t know how to make Wards,” I replied.

He grumbled. “Your teacher was useless!”

“Sorry.”

“I will have to teach you then.”

I looked at him surprised. “You know how to make Wards?”

“They are not difficult to craft, but only an Exorcist and some Advanced Roles have the ability to make them work.”

With a gesture, one of the Pridelings left my side and went to the back of the carriage, where it retrieved a stack of high-grade paper, as well as an inkstone and brushes. The brushes were of varying sizes and levels of craftsmanship, but some reminded me of the calligraphy pens I’d used in the past.

The other Prideling left my side as well, though to compensate for my loosened guard, the enormous spider released itself from the carriage and moved closer to me.

Seramosa, are you there? I need your strength!

“**Bide your time a while longer,**” Armen advised.

I bit my lip, but followed his advice. Regardless, attempting to flee was meaningless if the Ifrit did not wish to manifest to my beckoning call.

The second Prideling brought something like a low table from the back of the carriage, which it placed before Leopold, before returning to my side. The first Prideling placed the papers, inkstone, and brushes on the table, then came to stand next to me as well.

“Come closer,” Leopold told me. “I will only show you once.”

I stepped up next to the low table and knelt down next to him. He brought out a waterskin, this one containing actual water and not the bitter wine he fancied, and dripped a bit of the liquid onto the inkstone, before using one of the brushes to reactivate the ink and coat the fine hairs at its end.

One of the Pridelings walked over and took a sheet of paper, which it sliced into three long strips with deft swipes of its rending claws. It was easy to forget that the imps were dangerous despite their diminutive frames, so it was a sobering reminder.

Leopold took one of the strips, placed it in front of him, holding the top with his left hand, while adopting a proper calligraphy posture. Then he started dragging the brush along the paper-strip, making a complex series of continuous movements. As I watched him, I was brought back to a memory of middle-school, when I’d observed my Calligraphy teacher and marvelled at the ease with which he worked a brush.

As he finished and lifted the brush away, the strip was covered in what looked like a complex sigil. The design made no sense to me, just like the scribbles I’d seen on Owl’s Wards. Nevertheless, I had somehow memorised every movement he’d made, which surprised me.

“**Memorisation is a side-effect of high Intelligence,**” Armen told me. “**Those with an S-tier have perfect recall and are unable to forget anything.**”

That sounds horrible, I thought. Although I would have loved such a skill for exams. But a B-tier Intelligence isn’t that high, is it?

“B-tier is considered near the peak of human capabilities, with A being the peak, and S being superhuman. In many worlds, a B-tier intellect would make you a genius.”

I hadn't realised it was *that* high. When I thought back to my life on earth, I had always been quite good at memorisation, but never to this extent. Although my few friends had said it was like a superpower, the fact that I could remember anyone's name, even after hearing it just once. That being said, I had never been a genius, not even close. If someone like Einstein had his Intelligence measured, I wondered what tier it would've been.

“Your turn,” Leopold told me, breaking me from my train of thought.

“Should I just copy you?”

He gave me a look like I was an idiot. “No. As you work the pen, you feed the paper and the ink with your energy.”

“Is that it?”

“It is harder than it sounds,” he replied. “I will be surprised if you master it in your first attempt.”

He handed me the brush and I took it with my right hand. Instantly the pen burst into flames and fell apart in two pieces, scattering hot ash all over my legs. I quickly wiped it off with my left hand.

“Your new hand is troublesome,” Leopold remarked. I noticed that he had shifted and moved away, such that I could not easily reach for him, and I felt a faint pressure as his grip was back on the hand doll and preparing to squeeze it firmly if I tried anything.

The large shadowy bird on his shoulder turned towards me and opened its eyes, which shone like bright headlights and stung my eyes with their glare. Armen vanished as its gaze fell on me, but I could also tell that the heat in my hand dissipated.

“Nirvah has blocked the Ifrit's powers that occupy your hand. Now, proceed with the Ward.”

I frowned, but took a new brush with my right hand, this time not causing a sudden combustion. I hated to be separated from Armen, but I would follow his advice and bide my time.

After dipping the brush on the inkstone, I perfectly mirrored Leopold's movements, while imagining that the light in my body was steadily flowing along my hand and down the pen and into the ink.

When I finished copying the drawing, I could sense a faint power emanating from the paper-strip.

Leopold nodded.

“Now make another one,” he said and took the strip. Although he hadn't said anything, I could tell I had made it correctly. He was not one for praise, but he would complain every time I made a

mistake, so the omission spoke volumes. I was proud to have pulled it off, despite still not comprehending what exactly the sigil meant.

After I repeated the motions on the second paper-strip, I felt very exhausted. It had taken a lot more energy than expected to make the wards.

“Attach that to your clothes or put it in a pocket,” Leopold told me. “We are now prepared to track down the Siren.”

45 – Sirensong

We left the carriage behind and walked for about an hour, reaching an area that Armen informed me was known as ‘Silvermarsh’. During the entire trip, Leopold was using the Bone Whistle to follow the scent-trails on the air, thanks to the Scenting Tongue’s ability contained within.

The landscape here was relatively flat and I saw the outline of a sizeable town to the southwest. Nearby were the remnants of a small village that’d been partially swallowed by a large swamp. Trees, boulders, and the various houses were all dragged down into the soft earth and boggy waters that covered a large swathe of the area. I wondered how a Siren had ended up here, but then another concern suddenly reared its head.

I did not have a Watcher familiar nor my Spirit Glasses, both thanks to Leopold, so how would I be able to see the Siren?

I voiced this concern to the Summoner and he glared at me with an annoyed look in his eyes.

“A Siren is not an apparition,” he said. “You do not require a Watcher to observe it.”

The answer surprised me. “If it’s not an apparition, how can I contain its spirit?”

Leopold narrowed his eyes and gave me his ‘Are you stupid?’ look, which I was quite used to by now. “You can contain the spirit of anything with a soul...”

“Even a human??”

“Yes. Although it would be meaningless to do so, and anything with a strong personality complicates the process and makes it more dangerous, unless you can convince them they have no choice but to submit themselves to your will.”

The implications were grim, but I couldn’t help but think that he was wrong. After all, if I could selectively pick which trait or ability that I wanted to contain within an object, then it seemed possible that I could select an Otherworlder’s unique Role abilities or perhaps even their Attributes.

“I do not think that is a path you wish to travel down,” Armen warned.

You’re right. I’m worried Leopold’s disregard for human lives might have started rubbing off on me... but still, the possibilities seem quite grand.

I followed behind Leopold, with the Pridelings and the Ethereal Spinner close behind me like an escort, and we went through the sunken village as we made our way to where the largest of the many swamp lakes lay.

The houses were all long-abandoned and I wondered if the Siren was responsible for the swamp’s formation or if it was unrelated.

Without knowing it, Leopold began answering my speculations, as he said, “Some years ago, a heavy storm flooded the marshlands here and temporarily connected its lakes and ponds to a large river to the east. Sirens are normally ocean-dwelling creatures, but they are also curious by nature and seek humans when they can, as they feed upon them. One Siren followed the river to this marshland, but stayed for too long and when the water receded it became stuck here. It is slowly starving to death, as the people in this area quickly learnt to steer clear of its territory. It occasionally feeds on Adventurers and Mercenaries hired to deal with it, as they always underestimate its charming song.”

The fact that such a disruptive creature had stayed alive for several years spoke volumes of its power, I thought. Although it was possible that Harrlev just had access to far less Otherworlders than Arley, and, given their past history, they were probably reluctant to ask their erstwhile enemy for aid. It was also likely that, since the area wasn’t of huge strategic importance and lay near the border, it the Siren was allowed to stay, as it potentially could thwart invaders from Arley.

No sooner had we passed the last house and neared the waters than a song started flowing across the marsh. Faint rings flowed across the stagnant water, carried far by the reverberations of the singing voice. It was clearly a female voice and its melody was mournful and melancholic, but the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard.

The two Pridelings gripped me by my wrists and pulled me forward, while the large spider leapt up into a tall tree that slumped down into the water at a thirty-degree angle a few metres away from us. I saw as Leopold pulled out the voodoo doll from a pouch on his belt, before the shadowy Nirvah in her harpy eagle form took off from his shoulder and opened her eyes, staring off towards the source of the singing voice.

As Leopold stared intently at me, I realised that he was taking precautions because he needed to use Nirvah as a scout to locate the Siren.

“I’m not going to try anything,” I told him.

“I don’t believe your words.”

“How are we going to capture the Siren?” I asked him.

“*We* are not doing anything. You just do as I tell you until it has been caught.”

I saw how he briefly glanced to the spider that waited in the tree nearby, then realised he planned to catch the Siren in its ethereal web. The Pridelings pulled me further out into the water, a body-shivering cold flowing up my legs as I became more-and-more submerged.

Owl’s words from long ago suddenly rang through my head: “*What does every good trap need?*”

I was dragged further out into the stagnant swampy water, while the song of the Siren grew louder and I felt it begin to affect my body. The Ward that I’d placed on the front of my clothes began to glow faintly and I knew it was working to counteract the charm. I turned my head to look back at Leopold who remained by the waterline with the doll in his right hand and saw that his Ward was glowing too. I wondered what would’ve happened if we hadn’t worn them.

When I was submerged to my waist and most of my robe-coat was soaked-through, the Pridelings let go of my wrists and waded back to their master.

“Don’t move!” Leopold yelled at me.

I frowned. Once again I was being used by someone else as bait...

As I stood there, shivering from the cold water, I felt *things* occasionally bump into my legs, as though investigating this new presence in their stagnant watery home. I didn’t want to imagine what sort of critters lived in the swamps of this world, but it was hard not to imagine monstrous leeches and flesh-gnawing eels.

I suppressed a shudder.

The song grew louder as its source moved closer. Almost as if it could taste my presence in the murky water.

As it came closer-and-closer, but I still couldn’t see the Siren anywhere, I started to worry that it was under the water or somehow invisible to my eyes. It was either that or its voice was so incredibly loud that it could be heard from kilometres away.

With every moment, the mournful aria grew in volume, and when it was starting to hurt my ears, I felt a strange euphoria overtake me, feeling not too unlike when Armen’s magic healed me.

“**You are being charmed,**” he reminded me.

I hope the Ward will hold.

The Wraith did not reply, which felt ominous.

A tingling sensation began to crawl across my skin and I took an involuntary step towards the singing voice, before the glow from my Ward suddenly exploded with light and started to shine a muddy pink hue that was visible to my eyes despite not wearing my Spirit Glasses. At the bottom of

the Ward strip, the crisp paper was starting to char, as though held near an immense heat. However, the subconscious pull halted immediately.

I looked back to Leopold, and saw that he was standing ankle-deep in the water. He must’ve stepped towards the sound too before the Ward properly kicked in.

It seems as though there’s a delay on them... that could turn out to be a bad thing.

Then a trembling came from nearby and I saw the enormous spider shift in the tree it waited atop of, as well as Nirvah in her harpy eagle form floating high above.

When I turned back to the sound, I didn’t fully register just how loud it was, but I realised I couldn’t hear anything except that sad singing voice. Looking down at water, I saw how countless ripples emerged from something just barely poking above the water some hundred metres ahead in the bog water.

It looked like a floating mass of seaweed, but then I saw the glint of two almond-shaped eyes that were as black as the ink I’d used to draw the Wards. Only the top-half of the creature’s head was above water, and yet its voice was so incredibly loud, as though blasted through the huge speakers I’d seen at concerts and festival stages.

The water shook as it came closer to me. As it closed the distance, it lifted its head up out of the water, the dead plants and leaves falling off her head. Her face was revealed to be an ash-grey colour with those bottomless black eye and long sharp ears like those of an elf from fantasy stories. Black hair fell down in front of her hair and down its back, and her overly-wide mouth was full of hooked needle-thin teeth and it moved weirdly as she sang.

Her upper body was slowly revealed as she raised herself further out of the water, coming ever closer. My Ward was starting to smoulder at the bottom, as it was struggling to halt the charming spell of her song. I looked back towards Leopold, but he held out the voodoo doll in front of him, telling me to remain put or face excruciating pain.

I flicked my eyes back to the Siren, just in time to see as its lower body became revealed. Thick and slimy grey tentacles pulled themselves out of the water as she reached the shallower water near me. There were at least eight of them, possibly twelve, possibly more.

I took a step backwards, and felt a heavy pressure, knowing that Leopold was squeezing the doll tightly.

A long purple tongue emerged from her overly-wide mouth and a few of her tentacles lifted themselves fully out of the murky water, trailing mud and dead leaves, reaching for me like alien arms.

Armen stood before me like a bulwark and easily deflected her first attempt to grasp me.

The Siren looked at her tentacle in confusion, then gingerly reached for me again, but this time Armen seized hold of it and she struggled to pull it free from his grip.

In that same moment, the Ethereal Spinner leaned out of the tree above, holding a complex web between four of its spiky leg-tips like a net. Then, from one moment to the next, moved its disgustingly-long limbs down and caught the Siren in its web.

Despite the Siren being larger than a person, she was still dwarfed by the enormous spinner. She trashed against the ethereal bonds and Armen let go of her tentacle.

The song died down and was replaced by melodic screeching. Like a scared animal caught in a beartrap and yelling that it didn't want to die. For one very brief moment I almost wanted to attack the spider and free her, but then it passed and I realised that her charm still was active, even if she wasn't singing.

The glow from my Ward died down but still pulsed in rhythm to ever sound the Siren made.

A dull tinnitus whine replaced the loud song, but I could at least hear the sounds around me now. Like the splashing of water as the Siren attempted to break free, and the careful approach of Leopold and the Pridelings that flanked him.

“Cease your struggling or I will kill you!” he yelled.

I thought for a moment that he was talking to me, but then saw that his eyes were fixated on the Siren, there was a hunger in his eyes that made me think that now was my time to strike. The shadowy harpy eagle landed on his shoulder and directed its bright gaze at me, making Armen disappear and the heat vanish from my Ifrit Claw.

Seramosa, if you can hear me, get ready. I might soon have the chance to break free of my bond and get rid of the creature that you fear.

I felt a weak pulse in my right hand and knew that she had heard me, even if she was unable to manifest while Nirvah stared at me.

“*I don't want to die!*” the Siren screeched in a melodic and pitch-perfect lilting voice.

“Then cease your thrashing! You will not break free!”

The Siren immediately stopped struggling.

Holy shit, he's speaking to the Siren using Omniglot... I had no idea that was possible.

I suddenly wondered if it was possible to communicate with Goblins as well, since seemed to possess a primitive language.

“*I starve! Feed me that one and we may speak!*” she screamed and pointed at me with a tentacle, one of her few legs/arms that wasn’t bound by the sticky ghost web of the blue spider.

Leopold was not so far away from us now, so he didn’t have to yell his answer. “I will not feed him to you.”

The Siren thrashed against the net in response, like a petulant child being denied ice-cream by a parent.

With a gesture, Leopold sent one of his Pridelings forward, and, when it stood next to the Siren, two-thirds of its body was submerged. A loud crackle came from its right claw as it stabbed into one of the tendrils.

The Siren’s body spasmed and its tentacles collapsed under it. It let out an angry snarl that had none of its melody or beautiful tone. Then one of the untethered tentacles reached out, wrapped around the Prideling’s neck, and *snapped* its spine. *Just like that.*

I took a step back, and when I realised that Leopold wasn’t watching me as intently, I backed away until I was next to him. Meanwhile, the Siren was back to trying to break free of the bonds, while the Spinner worked to spin another web to add to the first.

A look at his Ward showed that it was as close to falling apart as mine. Within the next few minutes they would deteriorate to the point that the sigil I’d drawn would be broken at the bottom, which was probably not a good thing...

“We don’t have much time left,” I whispered to the Summoner, not wanting the Siren to hear.

“I know,” he said through gritted teeth. “I’m so close.”

“Are you trying to make it fear us and submit?” I asked.

“Obviously.”

“Let me try something,” I told him and withdrew the Focus from my pouch. I felt as his hand cautiously squeezed on the doll in his hand.

I lifted the Focus towards the Siren and filled it with my energy, but tried to imagine that the shape of what would be blasted out was a wide field and not a narrow impact, such that it affected the creature’s mind more than its physical body. I imagined that it bore the shape of monsters and ghost, while filling it with the fear that I carried with me like a constant companion.

“Repel!” I shouted and saw the trembling water in front of me be pushed aside by a roiling invisible orb of pressurised air.

When my spell hit the Siren, it immediately stopped its attempts to break free. It didn’t even utter a word. I had no idea what it had seen nor felt as my spell took hold, and I couldn’t help but feel bad.

But I wanted to live, and tormenting this creature was part of how I’d get out of this mess and break free myself.

“Contain it now!” Leopold ordered. “Before it comes to its senses!”

He shoved a wooden box into my left hand. Nirvah was still staring at me, so I could use my right hand without damaging the box, as I opened the lid to see that there was an intricate metal mechanism within, which, like the carriage that Leopold owned, seemed out of place in this world. I recognised the mechanism as being that of a music box.

He wants to trap the Siren’s voice in a music box. Why?

“What’s her name!?”

Leopold looked to his Soul-Pacted Nirvah, then turned his gaze back to me a moment after and said, “Lyssalynne.”

I wondered how he had learnt the name of a Siren, but his reliance on Nirvah made me certain that he was just doing as he was told, lacking any say in the matter. I shuddered. A soul-pact seemed a tremendously-stupid decision, no matter the reward or power it might give.

With the Music Box in my left hand I waded towards the Siren, who lay half-submerged and was completely silent.

I’m sorry for what’s about to happen.

I reached my charcoal-black right hand out towards the Siren and then invoked the Binding Litany, while cautiously reaching towards its soul with a tendril formed of my own.

As our souls touched, I felt a surge of euphoria and my skin tingled strangely, but I managed to keep my head.

*Lyssalynne, Siren of the Silvermarsh Swamp,
Obey mine desire and render thyself to mine design,
Hark mine words and kneel to mine command,
Lest thy soul be cleft in twain,*

As I used the tendril of my soul to pull the Siren’s soul through me, the euphoric feeling intensified and I began to hear her singing deep in my ears. I gritted my teeth and hurried through the last half, while mentally moving the creature’s soul to the Music Box in my hand.

I still tried to implement an insidious trap that I had been planning for some days now. I was not sure if it would work the way I thought, but, instead of selecting a specific ability or trait of the Siren, I wanted to try and imprison its entire personality into the Music Box, such that it could lash out at Leopold when he tried to use it. Or at least, that was the hope.

*Lyssalynne, servant to mine will,
Offer me thy entire soul,
Become one in bond with the object that I wield,
And until thy task has ended,
Obey mine whims and wishes.*

Suddenly the Siren glowed and began to thrash. A muddy pink light suffused her entire body and began to devour her as it moved across her body. The Music Box likewise began to glow, growing in intensity with every passing moment.

I knew that it was too late for Lyssalynne to fight against what was happening to her, so it was a tragic thing to watch her struggle as she was pulled, body and soul, into the Music Box.

I wonder if there’s a way for a trapped spirit to be released.

The Binding Litany did always end with “*Until thy task has ended*”, but I had no idea how it was possible to determine that a contained spirit’s ‘task’ had ended. Maybe if I met another Exorcist I could ask about it. Although, tracking down other Exorcists seemed more likely to invite trouble than anything else.

The glow subsided and I felt the Music Box in my hand tremble, as though the creature within was struggling to get out.

Before I could even attempt to touch the lid of the box, Leopold grabbed it from my hands and hurriedly waded back through the waters to the shore of the swamp.

I followed behind him, not too close to alert him, but close enough.

Armen appeared next to me.

And so did Seramosa.

My Ifrit Claw, my charcoal-black right hand, suddenly sputtered to life as fire bloomed from the palm and crawled across its surface. As it reached the tips of my fingers it grew and created claws, fulfilling the prediction Armen had made.

Leopold crouched on the ground with the Music Box opened before him. Even Nirvah, in her harpy eagle visage was utterly obsessed with the object. Neither of them noticed how my hand was vaporising and flash-boiling the water near it thanks to the unnatural flames that covered it.

“Play me the Keening’s Choir!” Leopold demanded of the instrument wherein the Siren was trapped. I had no idea what sort of melody *that* was supposed to be, but I guessed it was probably not good, especially considering how even the Soul-Pacted Nirvah on his shoulder was anxiously staring at the box and waiting for its answering sound.

“*I will eat your eyes!*” screamed the melodic and lilting voice of Lyssalynne from the Music Box.

Leopold didn’t have time to turn before I grabbed him around his neck with my flaming Ifrit Claw. In the same moment, Seramosa became corporeal and flew into the air, before descending on the Ethereal Spinner that still sat atop the tree in the water.

I squeezed my Claw around Leopold’s neck, hearing the sizzling and bubbling of his skin, fat, and flesh. He didn’t have the ability to scream and for some reason Nirvah didn’t turn to look at me, as though her spirit had been defeated or as though Leopold’s no-doubt-intense pain was making her freeze-up.

With a powerful wrenching move, I tore my flaming hand through his neck, while feeding my remaining energy into the roaring flame in my hand, turning his neck to ash, such that only the charred fragments of his spine connected his shoulders to his head, but this quickly fell apart as well.

His head fell to the ground with a *thud*, and I saw as the Prideling that’d been charging for me vanished. I turned and looked behind me and saw that the enormous spider had vanished as well.

A second later, I felt the overpowering exhaustion as my energy flared out and I stumbled back a few steps before dropping to my knees.

Just a metre away lay Leopold’s burnt and blackened head.

I had taken a life again.

But this time I didn’t feel bad about it.

46 – The Soul-Pact

My eyes were fixed on the blackened head of my erstwhile captor and torturer.

“His soul-pacted familiar is still here.”

I looked up at where Leopold’s headless body slumped and upon the corpse’s shoulder sat the harpy eagle born of shadow. As I observed it, it began to melt and the air around me started to vibrate, quickly picking up pace.

“You should not stay around,” Armen advised.

“It is possessing the body,” Seramosa added.

I scrambled to my feet and quickly went over and grabbed the Music Box, as well as the voodoo doll made from my severed hand. I knew that he’d kept the Bone Whistle and other trinkets in his belt-pouch, so I quickly looted that as well, unable to take my eyes off his headless corpse that the shadowy Nirvah was melting into, as though flowing through its pores and open neck.

When I finally got the pouch detached from his belt, I went over to his severed head and picked up the Spirit Glasses that somehow still adorned it. My robe-coat was fluttering in the vibrations of the transformation that Nirvah was undergoing, so as soon as I had the glasses in hand, I sprinted out of the sunken village.

The metal frame of the glasses was discoloured slightly, but had otherwise not been damaged by my Ifrit Claw, which was fortunate.

After putting a hundred metres between myself and Leopold’s corpse, I put the glasses on and looked at what was happening. The air was audible making a deep pulsing *thrum* and a buffet of wind accompanied the sound, hitting my chest with enough force to push me slightly.

The craziest part was what my Spirit Glasses revealed however, as I saw something like a black hole which swallowed light from its surroundings. It was perhaps Nirvah’s full aura being unleashed as her bond was severed and she was able to occupy Leopold’s vacant body.

“What’s happening!?”

“*The In-Between Hunters always seek an entry into the real world. You have slain the fool who bonded himself to one, and now it is free to roam as it has always desired.*”

I didn’t like the sound of that. Not one bit.

“How do I stop it!?”

“I do not believe you can do it alone.”

“It’ll eat you!”

“*Eat your eyes!*” the Music Box suddenly yelled, as though able to hear the voices of my familiars. *I feel like I’m going mad with all these voices...*

“You should seek the town nearby and find transport to Helmstatter.”

I gave it some thought, but realised that I agreed with Armen. I couldn’t be expected to handle something like Nirvah on my own, but I wouldn’t just run and leave this area to her clutches.

“I’m gonna go straight to their Adventurers’ Guild and warn them of what is coming!”

“Admirable, but I doubt they will know how to deal with it.”

“It’s the only thing I can think of,” I replied.

The thrum grew in volume and I was smacked so hard by the resultant buffet of wind that I slammed me onto my back, cracking my head against the ground and making my vision blur and swim, while little shiny dots appeared in my vision.

“*It has manifested,*” the Ifrit commented ominously.

“You need to hold it back!”

“*Fool!*” she yelled at me and then vanished.

“For the record, I would also refuse such a command,” Armen added unhelpfully. **“Entities like Nirvah are not meant to exist in the real world. Her powers may very well transcend the laws of magic. It is possible she can eat the souls of familiars. I do not wish to know true death and its black oblivion.”**

“I thought you believed in an Afterlife?”

“The Afterlife is only accessible to those who pass on peacefully. If my soul is consumed, I will either cease to be or I will become part of my devourer. I doubt that I could ever reach the Afterlife if that were to happen.”

“What if I try to Banish her? I know her name after all!”

“There is no reassurance that Nirvah is her true name, or perhaps it is a fragment of a whole. But it might work, I cannot say.”

“I should try it then,” I said, attempting to convince myself. I had no idea why I felt the need to attempt such an obviously suicidal heroic deed, but maybe it was the sense of responsibility I felt.

Then I remembered what Rana had told Lukas and I: *“Sometimes you have to focus on yourself. Playing hero will only lead to your own suffering.”*

I bit my lower lip. I had to make a decision now before it was too late. Should I run and warn the town, but save myself, or should I attempt to Banish the monster and potentially save a lot of people?

I pulled open the pouch I’d looted from Leopold, as though hoping to find the answer to this dilemma within. What I found inside however, was: the Bone Whistle; a few silver and gold crowns, totalling three-gold-and-thirteen-silvers; a second Music Box identical to the one within which resided the Siren’s soul, likely a backup if the first one was destroyed; the voodoo hand I’d put in there; a strange copper puzzle orb thing; some jewellery that looked valuable; and Leopold’s Guild Card.

I blinked in surprise, then immediately pulled the Guild Card out of the pouch, hoping to find the answers within:

<i>‘LEOPOLD SCHOBER’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Summoner</i>		RANK: <i>Savant</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>35</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>C</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>C</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>A</i>	LUCK: <i>C</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>B</i>	STRENGTH: <i>D</i>	VITALITY: <i>D</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Summoner V’</i> <i>‘Soul-Broken’</i> <i>‘Curse of Inevitable Demise’</i> <i>‘A Voice in the Aural Apocalypse’s Choir’</i> <i>‘Soul-Pact (Observer)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Servant)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Trapper)’</i>			

I was confused by what I read. It was as though a fragment of Leopold’s soul still remained in the Guild Card, but it was visibly fading before my eyes, while I tried to glean any information from it that I might use to counter Nirvah.

Armen looked at the Card in my hand as well, and said, “**He had the same Soul-Broken status as your mentor.**”

“I can’t use *this* for anything!”

“**I concur.**”

I stood around for a moment longer, then with a frustrated snarl, I ran towards the town on the horizon. The *thrum* in the air had died down, but when I looked towards the sunken village, I saw that the black hole aura had become something like hundreds of feeble shadowy hands grasping high into the air. It terrified me and I felt suddenly certain that I would never have been able to get close enough to the transformed Nirvah to attempt to Banish her.

Her powers had been frightening enough with her just confined to the role of ‘Observer’, so given free reign, as it seemed she now had, I couldn’t even imagine the kinds of devastation she could cause. If the Demon in the Galleon had been of the Calamity Type, then the quest to take down Nirvah would no doubt be the same.

I just hoped that if I passed on her name that someone else, perhaps a strong Summoner or Exorcist, could come and do what I was incapable of. Rana was right, it was folly to attempt to do what I could not. I wasn’t a hero, I knew that already, but for one brief moment I’d thought that maybe I could be.

As I ran towards the town as fast as my body could go, I vowed to myself that I’d survive long enough in this world to become so powerful that I’d never need to run from a threat like this ever again.

“So, let me get this right: A Calamity-rated shadowy monster called ‘Nirvah’ has appeared in the Swamp northeast of town... But a Siren lives in that swamp. *Everyone* knows that.”

“I’m telling you: the Siren is gone and now this monster is there! It might be heading for this town right now! You have to get people to safety before it’s too late!” I yelled at the Clerk of Silvermarsh Town’s Adventurer Guild, my face flush and my temper high.

The Clerk sighed. “I will pass this on to my supervisor, thank you for your report.”

I slammed my right hand down on the counter, leaving a charred-black indent on the wooden surface, and making even more heads turn my way. “You’re not listening to me!” I yelled at the man.

The Guild Hall was quite different those in Arley, since it seemed more like several buildings mashed together, as people nearby were standing in line for counters that handled sending-and-receiving mail, storing items and valuables, and hiring Mercenaries. Almost everyone here were Natives, apart from two guards.

One of the guards put his chain glove on my shoulder and said, “Alright buddy, your report has been heard, now move on, you’re causing a scene.”

My face was red from embarrassment and the scene I was making, but I couldn't stop myself as I yelled, “Everyone is going to die if you don't do something! Why don't you understand that!”

The guard pushed me towards the door, but I pulled free of his grasp and stormed out by myself.

“It is no easy thing to convince people that disaster is imminent. Perhaps, if you had a higher standing in the Guild, your words might have carried more weight.”

This is ridiculous! I complained, frustrated. *In my world, if someone reports a crime or disaster or bomb or whatever, then the police listen and mobilises as fast as possible!*

“That sounds very prone to abuse,” he remarked.

At least reports are taken seriously!

“You have tried your best. I recommend you find transport out of here before Nirvah makes such a thing impossible.”

Do you think she'd come here?

“I do not think it would be advisable to stay around to find out.”

While I'd made my way to the town, I'd observed that the monster and its disturbing aura of grasping black hands had remained within the sunken village on the edge of the Silvermarsh Swamp, but there was no telling if she was building up her strength nor if she would make her way to where humans lived.

My mind imagined a horrific scenario that I tried to shake, but which would not leave my mind's eye: Nirvah, as an entity from beyond reality, struggling to come to terms with the human body she was now occupying, trying to figure out how to move its few limbs, when she was used to having thousands of grasping hands pulling her around.

I shuddered. No matter the cause for her staying put, I doubted it would last indefinitely. She was not like the Siren who could not leave the water and thus was beholden to where it flowed and pooled.

I had done what I could for Silvermarsh and its people. It was quite possible that had I not messed with the Binding Litany for Lyssalynne, that whatever the ‘Keening Choir’ was, it could've caused untold devastation.

After speaking to more than half-a-dozen carriages heading for the border and being denied a seat, I eventually found a Messenger who had loaded up his sturdy horse with two large bags full of letters. He at first seemed reluctant to let me sit on the back, and though I knew it would be far from a luxurious ride, I was desperate and knew that he would be quick to get to Helmstatter, although he said he had two stops along the way.

I handed the Messenger a gold crown. He had yellow-tinged skin colour like most of the people in Silvermarsh and his eyes were emerald green. Dark-brown and tussled hair was almost contained by a fancy stainless-white hat he wore to mark him as a Mail-Carrier.

He stared at the coin in his hand and then bit into the edge of it, leaving a small mark.

“A real Gold Crown,” he muttered in awe.

“I’ll let you keep it if you take me where I want to go.”

“But I have stops along the way,” he said, seeming very dutiful in his job.

“How much are they paying you for delivering all these letters?” I asked.

“Eight silver Nirrah,” he said. Harrlev, as well as other nations according to Armen, used the Nirrah, which was valued slightly lower than the Crowns used in Arley and Lacksmey, due to the coins contained a larger percentage of lesser metals. This meant that eight silver nirrah were the equivalent of six silver crowns.

I undid the straps of the bags with the letters and put them on the ground next to the horse.

“Take me to Helmstatter, then find a different job or maybe take a vacation. Don’t come back to Harrlev. Trust me.”

The Messenger stared at the coin in his hands, then at the two large bags of letters, then at me.

He nodded to himself, coming to a decision.

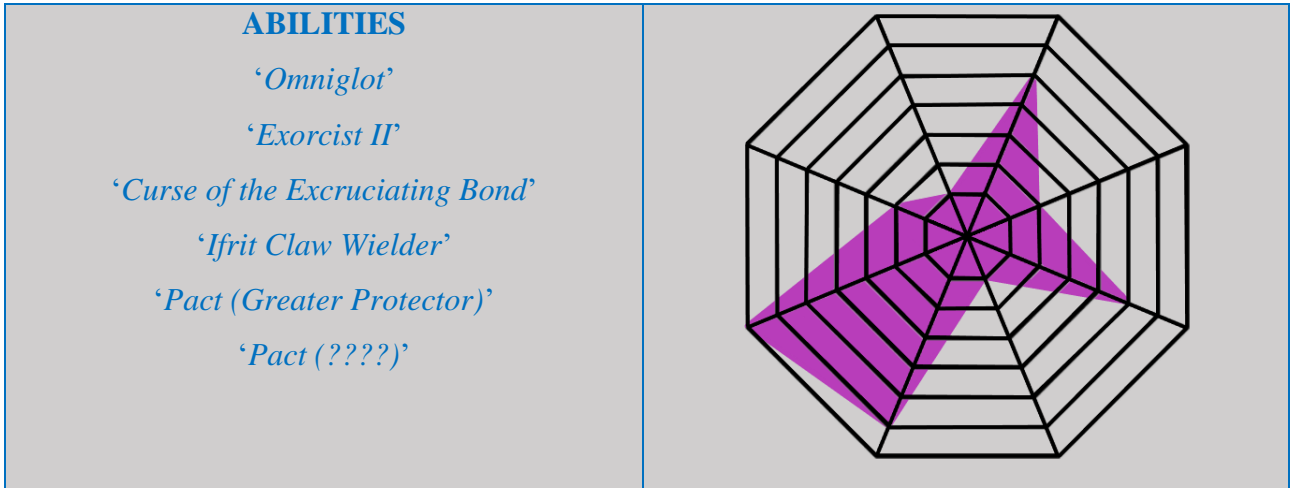
“Hop on the back.”

The Messenger’s horse was not only sturdy, but it was also fast. It probably wasn’t as fast as Leopold’s spider-drawn carriage, but it was still many times faster than normal transportation.

While we tore across the landscape as we headed north, I pulled out Leopold’s Guild Card, but only the top of it was visible now, showing just his Rank, Role, Age, Gender, and Name. The rest of the soul-stone card was blank, as though the soul that enabled text to appear was running out of ink.

I pulled out my own Card as well, already knowing what new entry I’d find on it.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
<i>ROLE: Exorcist</i>		<i>RANK: Seeker</i>	
<i>GENDER: Male</i>		<i>AGE: 17</i>	
<i>ACUMEN: B</i>	<i>DEXTERITY: E</i>	<i>INTELLIGENCE: B</i>	<i>LUCK: F</i>
<i>PACT: A</i>	<i>SOUL: S</i>	<i>STRENGTH: E</i>	<i>VITALITY: F</i>



I had expected to see the curse there, as I knew that was what bound me to the voodoo doll Leopold had made. I still carried the hand doll with me, but had contemplated tossing it somewhere or burying it in a hole, but had been too afraid that it would be discovered. Hopefully I could have the curse lifted, but until then I didn’t want to let the doll out of my sight.

The *‘Ifrit Claw Wielder’* was one I hadn’t expected, but it made sense that my magically-imbued hand would somehow show up on my Card, as it measured my soul. Part of me wondered if it was considered a Possessed Weapon, and, if so, would all Possessed Weapons I wielded show up on the Card?

What really surprised me though, was seeing that my Exorcist level had gone up to rank two. I immediately clicked on the entry and it unfolded to show all the skills within and their individual levels:



- *Offering I*
- *Pact of the Familiar II*
- *Possessed Weapon Wielder II*
- *Repel II*
- *Sanctify I*
- *Soul Barrier II*
- *Spirit Sight II*
- *Staff Wielder I*
- *Summon II*
- *Unleash I*
- *Ward Crafter II*
- *Worship I*

It took me a moment to realise that there were two new entries, but I had gone well past the half required to reach the next rank, as eleven of the eighteen, now twenty, entries had gone up to rank two.

I thought it would take a lot longer to advance in ability ranks.

“Adversity breeds strength.”

I wonder what ‘Drain Spirit’ and ‘Unleash’ do.

“As I understand it, the theory is that the abilities unlocked at higher Role ranks depend on the abilities that were used to reach the threshold. Those who are guided well through their training can predict the types of new abilities they gain from reaching a new rank. I believe your new skills are offensive in nature, no doubt shaped by ‘Repel’, ‘Possessed Weapon Wielder’, and ‘Contain Spirit’, as these are the few of your original abilities that could be considered offensive.”

I wish I’d know about this ahead of time.

“Leopold may have been many things, but he was correct in asserting that your mentor left a lot of gaps in your tutelage.”

I frowned.

Then something caught my eye to the right of the road we were thundering down. The sound of the hooves seemed to fade into the background as I beheld the roiling mass of shadow that slowly

crawled towards Silvermarsh Town. In the front of the mass was something like a horned harpy eagle head with three large eyes that shone with a bright pale light.

I swallowed hard, while the beat of my heart filled my ears, and adrenaline flooded my system.

I did what I could for Silvermarsh, I assured myself, while desperately hoping the Messenger didn't notice.

Then, we passed by a copse of trees and the distant monstrosity vanished from my view.

“You did your best to save them,” Armen said. I couldn't tell if he was consoling me or trying to convince me that I'd done the right thing.

Either way, I felt an immense burden of guilt fall upon me.

I had doomed hundreds to Nirvah's predation.

But could I really have prevented it if I'd tried?

I took a deep breath and forced myself to believe that Armen was right.

I did my best.

47 – The Runaway Bride

I was thinking about all the things Leopold had told me, since I finally felt safe enough to try and absorb the nuggets of knowledge he had unwittingly handed me. The thing I couldn't avoid thinking about the most, however, was that there were more Encyclopaedias out there. I desperately wanted to get my hands on them and the knowledge within. Perhaps I could find a lead on such tomes if I sought out a Librarian or Genius in Helmstatter, although from what Rana had told me, I didn't expect the greatest of welcomes from the city.

The horseback riding was uncomfortable, and I constantly had to steady myself with my left hand, since I felt like I was gonna fall off. But at least it was fast, though Armen had said it might still take several days to reach Helmstatter.

I hoped Rana and Lukas were safe. If they had found the meagre clues I left behind, they might have seen the Mercenary Contract to its end in Helmstatter and tried to find me there. At least, that was the scenario I figured would be the most likely. After all, Rana was level-headed even in a tough situation, and I felt I knew her well enough to predict that *that* would be the move she'd made.

“They may have sought out a Hunter to track you down,” Armen added. **“They specialise in such quests.”**

I nodded as I thought about it. If they had indeed taken this route, then they would stay in one place until we were reunited or the Hunter returned empty-handed.

Wishful thinking perhaps, but it's important to stay positive.

I desperately wanted to spiral into a self-pitying spiral and feel bad for myself and the torment I'd gone through, but I knew it was counter-productive. I had survived Leopold and I ought to be proud of myself.

“When last I was swept away by Nirvah's Banishing Gaze, I had a realisation,” Armen said. **“Your Soul Barrier ought to prevent such direct interference.”**

Really?? I'd completely forgotten about that ability...

“Unfortunately, when I had the realisation, it was too late for me to communicate it to you.”

Do you think it would work against the magic those Witch Hunters used to constrain you?

“Quite possibly. I am afraid that it is taking me some time to understand the true scope of your abilities.”

You do not have to fret about it, I said. Blame my Mentor and my own short-sightedness.

“I wish for you to live and prosper, Ryūta, and thus my duty as Protector is more than a bulwark between you and your foes. I must also teach you how best to defend yourself, just like my own mentor once tutored me.”

Thank you, Armen. I feel as if I do not deserve you.

“I have not talked about my previous ‘Masters’, but know that you are leagues above them in integrity. It is refreshing to be treated as the person I once was.”

I smiled to myself. His kindness and sincerity suddenly reminded me of Renji. I felt bad that I hadn’t thought about my best friend in such a long time. While held in Leopold’s leash, my thoughts had been consumed entirely by my own survival. A guilty feeling washed over me, but I shoved it down, knowing that it was unfair to chastise myself for so human a thing.

“It is few people who are able to help others while they themselves are struggling,” Armen commented.

With a loud whinny, the horse suddenly came to a stop, rearing up so high that I slid off the back and fell to the gravel road with a hard *thump*.

“Ow,” I complained, getting up to see what had caused the commotion.

The Messenger was yelling at someone in front of him.

“Get out of the road, you madman!”

I walked out from behind the horse to see a figure that’d burst from the treeline nearby and who wore a large hood that obscured most of their face. In their right hand they held a bow and it was tensed and ready to send an arrow straight into the Messenger’s neck.

Their aura was prominent if compared to a Native’s, but I couldn’t tell if it was strong enough to belong to an Otherworlder or not, since it was somewhere in-between the two. Nonetheless, their aura was a greenish-brown and spiked erratically. They were *not* bluffing.

Armen, protect the rider and horse!

The Wraith floated forward, putting himself between the cloaked figure and us, such that he’d be able to intercept any arrow as soon as it was fired.

If only I had made his bond less restrictive, then he could’ve simply taken them down...

“You live and learn,” Armen remarked.

“*Get off the horse or I’ll shoot!*” the person yelled, clearly a woman from the sound of her voice. Its cadence sparked a cord of familiarity in my mind. It took me a second to pinpoint it, but by the time I realised what it reminded me of, the Messenger brazenly drove his mount forward, making the woman to release the arrow, before diving out of the way of the horse’s path.

Armen easily intercepted the arrow, but the Messenger just thundered down the road without looking back.

“Come back here!” I yelled at the same time as the woman.

She turned to look at me and then pulled another arrow from a narrow quiver and knocked it, before aiming right at me.

“*Don’t move!*” she demanded.

I pushed energy into my Ifrit Claw, but in the same moment that heat flared from its charred palm, Seramosa appeared next to me in her incorporeal form and put her hands on my Claw.

“***We do not burn Elfin,***” she said and then vanished, taking the blossoming heat in my hand with her.

What the hell was that!?

But now it was clear to me why the cloaked woman’s voice was familiar to me: it reminded me of Seramosa’s, except with a stronger sing-song lilt to it. There was also an element of Lyssalynne the Siren’s cadence in there.

With the heat vanished from my right hand, I used it to take my Focus out of its bag on my belt. The woman saw the movement and fired an arrow at me, but it was snatched out of the air by Armen.

Then I lifted my Focus up and aimed my hand at the woman, who was looking at the arrow that had just randomly stopped midair and clattered to the ground, at least from her point-of-view.

“Repel,” I said and released a weakly-charged shot at her.

To my surprise, she dodged out of the way of the whirling ball of pressure, even though I knew she would barely be able to see it.

Before I could try again, she lifted her bow above her head, along with her empty hand.

“*Truce!?*” she yelled.

If she tried anything, try to constrain her, I told Armen.

“Fine!” I yelled back at her.

After a moment of neither of us moving, I awkwardly started walking towards her, while she kept her arms in the air. Once I was a bit closer, she lowered them slowly, trying to seem non-threatening, though her greenish-brown aura was still full of violent spikes and something else.

Fear, I realised. She was scared of something.

“*I needed that horse,*” she said, frustrated, pushing her hood back to reveal her face.

“I paid a gold crown for that damn horse,” I shot back. Then paused as I took in her appearance.

I’d never before seen someone like her. Her ears were large pointed and droopy, not too dissimilar to the Goblins I’d encountered, though not hairy and gross. Her eyes were large and almond-shaped and seemed to glow slightly, and had a slit iris like that of a serpent. The nose was tiny, but her mouth was wide and almost lipless, and when she spoke, her prominent carnivore teeth were revealed. Most fascinatingly, two short horns sprouted from the top of her forehead, and from her scalp ran silky hair that was beige at the roots and progressively turned red towards the ends of the hair, creating a gradient.

“Why are you afraid?” I asked her.

She narrowed her eyes and sneered, then said, almost with a snarl, “*I am on the run from my Enclave. They wish to strip me of my freedom, but I wish to see the world. That is why I am on the run!*”

Enclave? What’s that?

“She is an Elfin. All Elfin live in a type of micro-nation within large forests inside larger nations, thus they are Enclaves. Their Enclaves are no bigger than most large cities, but may house thousands of their kind. They are not viewed favourably by the Native populace of the countries they exist in, but they are tolerated because of their trading goods, which Aristocracy seem to adore.”

“*You sing to the spirits,*” she said. It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

“I’m an Exorcist,” I answered, expecting the familiar scowl of recognition.

Her eyes widened and her stance changed significantly, her demeanour changing to something less hostile.

“*I am honoured to meet you, Andasangare. Please lend me your aid, I do not wish to be married to some dullard! I wish to soar like the birds!*”

“**She must be young and naïve,**” Armen said. There was a hint of something *new* in his voice. I couldn’t exactly tell what it was. Perhaps nostalgia or melancholy?

What did she just call me?

“It is their word for those who sing to spirits. As I recall from my time, the Elfin revere those who can commune with the dead and their spirits. They are the only people that actively tolerate Necromancers, or rather, I should say, they adore them.”

That sounds... strange.

“It is. I do not recommend getting involved with her.”

I looked to the forest she had emerged from. *I don’t think I have a choice anymore.*

“*Elye!*” roared a tall musclebound man with similar features and a long sword strapped up-side-down to his back with the handle poking out by his waist, providing a very strange drawing method for unsheathing it.

“*Father no!*” she screamed at the man and hid behind me.

Focus on keeping me safe.

“**What about the girl?**” Armen asked.

Seramosa suddenly manifested before me in her incorporeal form, and snarled, “***I will protect the child!***”

Flames sprouted from her body, just like it had the first time I’d summoned her.

Sera, no!

“***Do not bastardise my name!***”

Let us try and at least talk to these people before we potentially burn down their forest with them inside it!

Another snarl, but she stilled her flames. “***I will protect the child!***”

You do that... just don’t, you know, kill anyone. Not yet, anyway.

“*Why are you suddenly so warm?*” the woman whispered, her hand on my neck.

I pulled away, unable to keep myself from blushing at the sudden touch.

“Stop that!” I chided her.

“*Elye! You run away and already found yourself a replacement for the man I chose for you!? Your ancestors cry at the sight!*”

I looked at the man, who now stood only a few metres away, his figure towering over me. He had hair just like his daughter ‘Elye’, or at least I assumed that was her name, but it was braided and slung over his shoulder, such that its fiery-red tips were fully visible to me. His aura was, like her, prominent for a Native’s, but weaker than an Otherworlders’.

“I can explain what’s going on here!” I told him.

“*Outsiders do not have a say in the matters of our Enclave!*”

Behind him were eight other Elfin, six of which had bows, all of which were knocked but not aimed at us. Yet. The others had swords like the man before me.

“*Father, he is an Andasangare! He said that he has been called by our ancestors! He says that I am not meant to marry! I am meant to be free! He said so!*”

I glanced over my shoulder at her as she spoke and knew she was bluffing her ass off, using my apparent authority within these people’s culture to wriggle out of a forced marriage.

Armen let out a sigh, while Seramosa chuckled, sounding like a log crackling in a bonfire.

What on earth have I gotten myself into? I wondered.

“*Is this the truth?*” he asked me, a piercing glare in his eyes.

Then I made a decision, and looked Elye’s father directly in the eyes and said, “That’s right! I was sent here by the call of your ancestors!”

At the same time, I nudged Armen and Sera to become corporeal.

The congregation of Elfin all gasped in surprise and awe as my Wraith and unhinged Ifrit became visible to their eyes.

Seramosa leaned towards Elye, whom she was floating next to, and said, “***I like your hair.***”

Armen sighed again, but lifted his arms out, at least playing along with the show I was putting on.

Not how I imagined my day would go, I commented.

“Last time I was summoned, my ‘Master’ paraded me around in front of these Elfin for weeks. If you aim to do the same, I will be very upset.”

I suppressed a laugh, then looked at the Elfin before me.

What am I supposed to do now?

“You ought to think further ahead.”

48 – Skovslot Enclave

I had no idea why I was following Elye’s father into the forest they’d all emerged from. But here I was, already forty minutes into a trek towards their ‘Enclave’.

“I told you this was a bad idea.”

You’re just worried I’ll make you perform tricks for their entertainment.

“It is not just that,” he said in a way that seemed to imply that it was ninety percent of his reason for being on edge. **“Since Enclaves are sovereign states, they do not allow most Adventurers to venture into their land, meaning they are often full of dangers that they have simply learnt to deal with themselves or which they sometimes even co-exist alongside.”**

Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.

“In my time, there was an Enclave that was infamous for harbouring an Earth Dragon that had devastated the northern territory of Lacksmey. It caused a large political conflict, but eventually ended in the Enclave being burnt to the ground as Adventurers hunted down the Dragon.”

I halted in my tracks out of surprise. *A Dragon??*

Elye bumped into me a moment later, as she was walking uncomfortably close to me, while still using my body as a shield between her and her father’s ire.

“Why are you so warm?” she asked again.

Seramosa floated around near the girl, but I was pretty sure that when she was manifested that some of her tremendous flames flowed into me, making my body warmer, and also lending more power to the Ifrit Claw.

“Magic,” I replied and stepped away from her.

Elye stepped with me, as though taking part in some dance routine.

“You’re too close,” I told her, “It’s suffocating.”

“I do not wish to leave your side for my father is quite upset. And I like your warmth.”

Seramosa giggled to herself, sounding like a tiny flame pushed around in the wind. Apparently she had taken it as a compliment.

“At least don’t walking directly on the heels of my boots.”

She looked down at my boots, her horns nearly taking my glasses with them. Her scent washed over me suddenly, and it was like moss and cut grass, which somehow wasn’t surprising, given that her kind lived in a forest.

The people ahead had stopped to wait for us to catch up to them and I quickly continued forward, while Elye followed close behind, but this time seemed to be overly conscious of where she put her feet.

She’s an odd one.

“All Elfin are odd, but our standards.”

Our standards? I asked. We’re from separate worlds.

“And yet you likewise feel they are odd.”

Fair point, I admitted.

“To resume our conversation,” he started, “it was a Dragon, yes. I do not know if you have them in your world.”

We don’t, but they exist in stories and fairy tales.

“I see. They exist in Midrealm, but mostly in myth of old. They are said to be creators and givers of life. In Mondus, they are forces of potent magic, but they seem very much like any other monster native to this world, except tougher to kill. Where they appear, a large hunt is sure to follow. Tools and weapons and armour made from their bodies are after all very powerful and will outlast any person who is fortunate enough to wield them. The regalia of the Royal Family is made of such remains as a Frost Dragon and a Thunder-Bringer.”

The Gyldenrose Family?

“That is the name they bear in your time, but in my day they bore a different one: Harbinger.”

That’s ominous.

“Regardless, any family that rises to their station are powerful, in more ways than one. I have witnessed their presence on more than one occasion, and each moment was as though standing close to a kiln.”

I wonder what sort of aura they must have to wield such an effect? Then I thought about it for a moment and asked, Are they Otherworlders?

“It would seem likely, but there are always tales of their births, so perhaps not.”

Well, as we saw with Lukas, it is possible for Otherworlders to pass on their abilities and powerful souls to their children, even if their partner is a Native. It stands to reason that a union between two Otherworlders could potentially produce powerful offspring.

“I have heard such a theory,” Armen started, and I knew where it was going from the tone of his voice, **“but as a Priest, I oversaw many births and those of Otherworlder unions rarely produced healthy offspring, if any offspring at all, I am saddened to say.”**

Why not?

I wondered why this was the first I was hearing about this. Even when I had shared a bed with Rana, it was not something we talked about. I realised that contraception hadn’t even been brought up, as though she knew it wasn’t needed. I wanted to ask her about it, but perhaps it was something that people did not talk about for good reason? Perhaps the idea of being unable to bear children was too hard to bear for most people?

I currently didn’t think that I wanted children, but to have the option completely swept off the table hit me harder than I had expected, but also, who would wittingly bring a child into this kind of world?

“In truth I do not know. A large portion of my duty back then was to console the bereaved mothers and fathers, who grieved both for the knowledge and the loss of the future they had envisioned.”

So that’s why there aren’t a bunch of Otherworlder offspring running around? I had never fully put this observation into words until right then, but realised it was something I had subconsciously accepted, as my Spirit Sight made it fairly clear who was and wasn’t an Otherworlder.

“One persistent rumour I always heard is that the twisted offspring of Otherworlder Unions are what led to the existence of Elfin, but it bears no merit. They are simply a highly-intelligent sub-species of humans that has existed in Mondus as long as the humans.”

Are they long-lived? I wondered. I remembered *that* from earth fantasy, where elves, whom the Elfin reminded me of, were said to be long-lived and wise.

“They are,” he answered, **“But they, like Otherworlders, have difficulty rearing Offspring.”**

Could they pair with humans and have better odds?

I felt Armen’s glowing eyes behind his blurry helmeted face stare at me judgmentally. **“What are you planning?”**

You know that’s not what I meant!

I slowed down as the Elfin ahead of me were suddenly crouching low in the brush and grass. I followed suit when I saw even Elye mimicking them.

“What’s happening?” I whispered to her.

She held up a hand, palm-out. I took it as meaning: *hush*. A moment later I felt rumbling through the soles of my boots.

Suddenly something large and moss-covered broke through the trees ahead, coming from the left side and going right, while barrelling through the thick trunks. Splinters and branches flying all about as it tore through the forest, seemingly unimpeded by crashing against the obstacles in its way. It was moving with such speed that it was quickly out of sight a second later, with the rumbling receding until gone some moments after that.

“What the hell was that!?”

“***I will burn it to cinders!***” the Ifrit announced and soared after the trail left behind by the colossal creature.

Do not use your fire within the forest! I yelled at her in my mind, knowing that she would probably not heed my command.

“*It is one of the Welin that make a home near our Enclave,*” Elye’s father answered, his deep voice carrying the same lilt as his daughter’s voice. “*It is hunting. There must be a fresh corpse nearby.*”

“**I will resist the urge to say: I told you so.**”

About Elfin being trouble or Seramosa?

“**Both.**”

Wait, I recognise that name! It’s one of the entities from the Encyclopaedia. A Monstrosity type.

“**I have not heard of it before,**” Armen replied, surprising me.

I hope they don’t want me to help get rid of it.

Then I realised something.

“Did you just say ‘one of’!?”

“*Let us continue,*” the Elfin replied, not deigning my question with an answer.

“Why are we following them??” I whispered to Elye behind me. “Didn’t you want to run away from this place?”

“*I cannot outrun father without a long head-start,*” she answered. “*And with an Andasangare like you by my side, I may bargain for my freedom. This is a better choice for me.*”

“I hope I’m getting something out of this,” I replied. “I don’t work for free.”

She was about to answer, when I added, “And I don’t appreciate being used as a bargaining chip on your behalf! I don’t even know you and you’re just assuming I’m your friend or something!”

“*But the spirits sent you to me. It is fate that you must aid me!*”

I was about to argue back, but she had said it with such sincerity that it felt pointless, since I doubted she would believe anything that didn’t conform to her rose-tinted image of the world.

How naïve can she be?? What if I was some monster who just wanted to use her!? She must surely understand that the world is dangerous! Right??

Armen made a chuckling sound.

What?

“Do not mind me. I am merely enjoying the irony of this moment.”

We did not encounter another of Welin as we continued through the trees. I had no clue how the Elfin were navigating the forest, as I was fairly sure we were walking in circles, until, suddenly, a clearing manifested itself up ahead of us, suddenly just *there* after two hours of an unendingly-uniform horizon of densely-packed trees.

As we neared the treeline before the start of the clearing, three figures dropped out of the canopies and landed before us.

“You found her?” one of them asked, a woman who bore a striking similarity to Elye. Her aura was also similar to the Elfin behind me: greenish-brown.

“Is that your mother?” I asked Elye.

She came up directly behind me, trying to hide completely within my silhouette.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.”

The woman came closer, while the Elfin that Elye’s father had brought all dispersed into the clearing or crawled up into the canopies above. She was shorter than her daughter, but had an intensity to her, and her aura was covered in short needle-thin spikes, something I had not seen before. I wondered if it represented motherly anger.

“Foolish daughter!” she said and I could feel how Elye was cowering behind me, curling herself into the smallest size she could manage.

“But you brought us an Andasangare, so I will tell your father to listen to your plea.”

Suddenly the Elfin emerged from behind me, *“Really!? Thank you mo—!”*

The mother’s hand suddenly grabbed Elye by the hair and pulled her away from me.

“But you are coming with me until then!”

“No, please! Andasangare, save me from this witch!”

I sighed.

“Do not.”

Please just help her this once, I told Armen.

He made some kind of annoyed grumbling sound, then floated towards the mother dragging her child and easily seized a hold of her wrist, stopping her from moving.

“Let Elye go,” I told her. “While I am here, she is under my protection.”

Both of the women gaped as they looked at the Guardian Wraith that had manifested before their eyes.

“I would like to voice my displeasure.”

You already have, but it has been noted. I will not abuse your trust in me.

Armen released his grip and turned incorporeal, which I could only see thanks to the fact that the two Elfin started looking around in confusion.

“I do not truly believe you.”

I promise...

Elye pulled herself out of her mother’s grasp and then ran behind, putting her hands on my shoulders and peeking out from behind them at her parent.

“How old are you?” I asked, when she started pointing her tongue at her mother.

“Nineteen years!”

She’s older than me!? Are you kidding me!?

“I believe I mentioned that Elfin are odd.”

You did.

After some minutes, the stand-off between petulant-and-rebellious child and irate mother calmed down, with the latter stomping off into the clearing.

I sighed, again. Then I followed behind the woman.

As I broke through the treeline, my boots touched down on a carpet-soft moss floor that coated everything as far as the eye could see.

Wow...

The Enclave was absolutely enormous, with the clearing having to be at least ten kilometres across in both length and width to encompass the sprawling city that stood before me. Buildings like towering cocoons rose three-four-and-five stories into the air, with everything formed into organic shapes and not a single square brick in sight. My mind struggled to fathom just how much labour must’ve gone into shaping wood into such forms and bending it into such angles, but I then realised that a lot of the buildings were not put together from planks of wood, but rather the wood grown and grafted into the specific shapes. Houses had literally been planted and nurtured over what must’ve

been centuries to accomplish such sizes. Evidence to this lay further into the horizon as even taller pod-like towers rose eight stories high.

How is this not visible from outside the forest??

“I believe this clearing is in an artificial valley, so that even if you stood atop the tallest building, you would not see out above the canopies.”

This is so incredibly impressive!

“Why would you wish to run away from a place like this?” I asked Elye as I continued to look around at the tall buildings. They were connected between each other with bridges and ladders grown from roots. It was an astounding feature of botanical architecture, which would make any bonsai tree owner green with envy.

“I have already seen every corner of Skovslot, so it is boring! I would have stayed if not for father’s insistence that I marry one of the Trakysare!”

“What’s that? Some kind of occupation?”

“They grow the Enclave. But I want to run and explore. I may have accepted someone like one of the Scouts, but everyone knows that the Trakysare never leave Skovslot! They are dull and uninteresting and smell of beeswax!”

I sighed, contented.

“I think I could live here.”

“Really?” she asked sceptically with a frown.

“But there is just *one problem*,” I continued. “Your people are too odd for my liking.”

Elye nodded as though she did not count herself amongst her people.

“I will help you while you are here, in exchange you will take me to the city of helmets!”

“That is not at all what we talked about earlier... also, it’s called Helmstatter.”

“That is what I said.”

Armen made a sound like he was clearing his throat.

Don’t you dare say it.

49 – Rotmaker

Despite her insistence that she found the Skovslot Enclave dull and boring, Elye was clearly in a good mood as she took me down winding streets and raised walkways, while telling me about various landmarks and places she enjoyed. There were some Elfin her age who jumped around all over the place, vaulting-and-climbing the root-formed bridges and organically-curving and winding buildings and houses, all the while keeping pace with us. She kept following their movements with her eyes, and had a look that suggested that she wished she could be running with them instead of walking with me. Regardless, she stayed by my side.

“*That one,*” she started, pointing with her index and middle fingers at a bulbous-yet-tall building that stood at three-stories high making it shorter than all the buildings around it, “*is where the aquifer-taps are rooted.*”

“So that’s how you get water?” I asked, wondering if I had understood her correctly.

“*Yes! You are very smart for an outsider.*”

“Do you not get a lot of visitors?”

“*No.*” There was a disappointment in her voice. Perhaps she was enjoying herself now because she got to show off her home to someone new. After all, if you only ever hung out with the same people, the world could feel very small after a while.

“How do you get food around here?” I asked. “Do you grow and eat plants?”

“*No! We never eat the plants! Why, do you eat stones and bark? That would be strange.*”

“Never? Then what do you eat?”

“*We raise livestock for slaughter and our Scouts hunt, although they often have to fight with the Welin for prey. We also have a lake within our Enclave that we catch fish and harvest molluscs from.*”

“Are you carnivores?”

Elye nodded. “*Of course!*”

Not what I imagined, to be honest.

“**With their homes and technology grown from the ground, it perhaps is weird for them to consider eating plants.**”

Suddenly Seramosa appeared next to me. Elye took a step back.

“*Your body is very warm again,*” she remarked.

“***This place is but a spark from conflagration,***” said the insane Ifrit.

Did you follow the Welin until just now?

“I wish to burn it to ashes, but I couldn’t call upon my flames at such a distance from you.”

Good to know. But please, do not let loose your powers within the Enclave or forest. You would kill thousands like Elye.

The Ifrit moved in front of me, and even though she was not physically there, I tensed up at the gaze she cast upon me. *“I will not burn these people. They have done no evil.”*

I didn’t realise you were a righteous sort, I replied, but immediately regretted it, when the Ifrit took a step towards me and a flame sputtered to life in the palm of my right hand.

“My purpose is to burn those who harm the innocent! There is nothing more just than the flames I wield!”

I swallowed hard, but then said, defiantly, *Then you must learn control and precision. Your flames burn indiscriminately and have the potential to bring harm to many of those you seek to protect.*

She took another step towards me, and I could tell that Elye was staring at my hand in fascination, while also backing away with every step I made. But then the Condemned Ifrit seemed to understand the wisdom in my words.

The flame in my palm died down and I breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“Why is your hand like that?”

I thought about how to word it, but then said, “It was a gift from the spirits that cling to me.”

“Can I touch it?”

I frowned, but then nodded slowly, while imagining that the energy in my body came to a stop right before the wrist where my normal skin transitioned into the charcoal Claw.

Gingerly, Elye put three of her fingers on the back of my hand.

“It is hot like a stone heated by the sun during Summar.”

“Summar?” I asked.

Elye nodded unhelpfully.

“It is their word for Harvest. Elfin view the year as divided into six seasons, and not three like the humans.”

Seramosa walked over to Elye and put a hand on her shoulder, even though she could not actually touch the girl. *“Elfin seasons are based on the sun and the way trees change and plants grow and wither.”*

I looked at Elye and the Ifrit only I could see. Next to me floated Armen. The only thing missing was the melodic Siren who, thankfully, had remained quiet while imprisoned in the Music Box.

Were you an Elfin, Sera?

“Why do you insist on ruining my name!? But no, I was born of a union between man and Elfin, but belonged to neither. Half-kin are rarely tolerated. However, the Elfin of the Enclave I lived near were the only ones to accept me and seek me out for aid.”

As a Cursebreaker, right?

“You remember my talent but not my full name!” she grumbled.

In my world, it was seen as a sign of affection and familiarity to give abbreviated names.

“We are not intimate.”

“He bears a hand stained with your soul, so I would disagree,” Armen argued.

“He does not brutalise your name, so why only mine!?”

Armen looked at me with his glowing eyes.

“I am uncertain.”

Armen is already a short enough name, but Seramosa is too long to comfortably say.

“Why are you so quiet, Andasangare?” Elye asked, looking at me suspiciously. I didn’t realise that I’d just been staring at her all this time.

“I am conversing with my familiars. They are explaining your culture to me. One of them was very familiar with your people. Also, call me Ryūta.”

“Yuuta?” she asked, trying to mimic the sound.

“Close enough,” I replied, not feeling the desire to lecture her on Japanese pronunciation.

I looked around. The Elfin who had kept pace with us were gone, but down below on the ground, as well as on nearby root-bridges, were other Elfin going about their day, though all of them seemed unable not to stare at me.

The *thud* of a heavy landing came from just behind me, and Elye’s posture changed to defensive. I turned around and saw her father standing there.

“Andasangare. May we seek your aid?”

“Depends for what,” I replied, not wanting to get tossed into a fight I wouldn’t be able to deal with.

“A Rotmaker defiles Skovslot, but every time we find it and slay it, it returns soon after, wearing a new guise.”

I’ve never heard nor read about such a creature, I said internally.

“Nor I,” followed Armen.

“Rotmakers are what Elfin names any creature that harms their Enclaves.”

Thank you for the clarification, Sera.

The Ifrit grumbled and whirled around Elye, trying unsuccessfully to play with the girl’s hair.

“I am an Exorcist,” I reiterated to the man. “I cannot fight something *like you can*, but if it is an entity that straddles the border between life and death, then I may be able to help, though I make no promises.”

The man curled his right hand into a fist and bumped it into his chest, loud enough to make a sound. “*I swear I will not allow harm to befall you.*”

I reached out my hand and said, “Well, then. My name is Ryūta. You can start by explaining it to me.”

“*Yuuta?*” he asked and my right eye twitched in response. “*I am Imir. I would show you the problem instead of talk.*”

I nodded. “Very well.”

Imir took me along the root-bridges that floated between the towering buildings far above the ground, setting a pace that was brisk but still possible for me to keep up with, though I could feel the strain in my calves and perspiration was beading on my forehead and trickling down my back below my white shirt. Or well, it used to be white, but now it was stained to hell and back.

I really need to get my hands on some of those Vitality potions. And a dry-cleaner...

We seemed to be heading towards the centre of the enormous city, although it was tough to tell exactly, as the tall plant-and-tree tower buildings obscured any references to the forest beyond at this point.

“I believe it would be a good idea to contract a Watcher before taking on an Exorcism Quest.”

Quite right. Although, taking a page out of Leopold’s repertoire, I am considering forming an Observer Pact, rather than solely a Watcher Pact.

“I know not the difference,” Armen admitted bluntly.

Well, if I understand it correctly, a Watcher is confined to merely its sight, while an Observer may transmit more than merely sight, such as sounds, scents, and so forth. Likewise, instead of a Tracker, Leopold had a Trapper Pact with his enormous spider, since that was its main purpose.

“He also had a Servant Pact with the Pridelings, it seemed.”

There are no doubt thousands of variations out there, but, like you told me when I made that bonfire for the assailants we met outside Ochre, it is the intentions that matters most.

“I bear none of those definitions!”

You defy definition, Sera.

The Ifrit giggled like a fluttering flame. I considered that, perhaps, her strangeness stemmed from her association with the peculiar Elfin.

“Have you decided what sort of familiar to summon?”

I haven’t had a lot of time to study the Encyclopaedia, but one I recall from reading it a while back, is a Shade by the name of ‘The Many’. It is a sort of hivemind of several entities, or a single entity which splits into many. It does have some downsides, like not being able to go incorporeal once summoned, but from the descriptions, it sounds like it often wears innocuous forms, like lizards, bugs, or birds.

“It may be that your mentor had a similar entity in his employ, given his ability to track so many people at once.”

I would not put it past him. Regardless, I am sure that whatever means by which he tracked me before became useless after Leopold abducted me, since Nirvah could dull such magic as tracking and possibly scrying.

“Perhaps he will pick up your scent when you go to Helmstatter.”

I’ll be ready for it by then, I hope.

Suddenly, Imir stopped on the root-bridge and I almost bumped into him, emerged in my thoughts as I were.

I blinked as I looked at the building in front of us. It was enormous. Easily seven or eight stories tall and thought it might once have resembled the other cocoon-shaped towers, formed of roots and trees and branches, it was now a deflated tilted edifice with clear signs of disease marring its façade. Where the other buildings and towers were naturally green and brown and the colours in-between, this rotten tower was pinkish-purple and reddish-brown. What’s more, large sections that were like discoloured bone jutted out at random, while a sticky-looking sap emerged from many open sores in the plant-mass and cast a pungent smell of decay into the air.

Part of me couldn’t help but recoil at the sight. It was a moment away from collapse, or so it seemed.

“Is this what you wanted to show me?”

“Yes. This is where it first emerged, but it has caused such rot to appear nearby as well. We believe it is a parasite that drains the vitality of our plants.”

It must be quite powerful to reduce one of the towers to this state, I mused ominously.

“You said you had slain it several times? Has it killed anyone while you fought it? And what does it look like?”

Imir pointed to the diseased tower with two fingers, *“It bears a likeness to the carcasses it leaves behind and seems to form its body from that which it consumes. When first we fought it, it bore a resemblance to a snake. The second time it was like a lizard. Then it was bear. But after that its visage became more incoherent and difficult to explain, fusing together many different animals.”*

I frowned. The ability to return anew was troubling, although it reminded me of the description of the Welin that roamed beyond the clear of Skovslot Enclave, as the Encyclopaedia said they could only be killed once the effigy that bound to them to Unlife was purified with Sanctify and burnt, otherwise their bodies would regrow lost limbs and heal all wounds. However, the Welin possessed no unique abilities beyond that and their brutish power. This clearly was something else.

“And has it slain any of your warriors?”

“Yes. Of our warriors, eight have lost their lives, and fourteen of those who lived in the houses that it drained also succumbed to its greedy appetite.”

Crap... if the Skinstealer was deemed a Perilous foe at Novitiate rank, then I’m willing to bet that something that has taken down several warriors, damaged a city significantly, and cannot be defeated by conventional means would be Seeker rank or possibly Eminent, with a Perilous difficulty, at least if the Guild were to assign the quest.

“**Your estimation sounds accurate,**” Armen said. Unlike most times, I was unhappy to be praised by him for this guess.

Elye looked at me expectantly. Her father remained still like a statue, waiting to hear my answer.

I frowned. “I would need aid from your warriors,” I started.

Imir did the curled fist smack against his chest. It seemed like a gesture of affirmation or promise, or maybe both.

“And we will also need to discuss my payment for when I have eradicated this pest.”

Imir grinned, revealing rows of pearlescent carnivore teeth.

50 – Parasite Insidious I

Ritual requirements:

- *A fitting vessel (Corvids or Rodents are recommended)*
 - *Blood of the Invoker*
 - *Blood of a Stranger*
 - *Scent of Death*

The ritual to summon the Many did not specify if the vessel ought to be alive or not, but I was glad that Elye had killed the crow she brought me, since it felt unnecessarily cruel to summon an apparition into a body with a life still inside. I wasn’t sure how I felt about having a crow familiar, as they were ominous animals, but it was either that or a chubby fieldmouse that Elye had also found for me.

“I need a bit of your blood,” I told her.

Without hesitation she pulled out a little knife and nicked her finger, letting drops fall freely. I scrambled to catch the falling blood and ended up using a piece of bark that’d fallen off a building nearby as a makeshift bowl.

We were in a sort of alleyway near to the diseased tower that Imir had taken me to and I had already drawn out the simple diagram for the summoning using the Blood Chalk Owl had given me. It resembled a diamond with a triangle inside and erratic straight lines piercing from the triangle and out through the diamond. At the centre of this I placed the dead crow, which fit neatly within the triangle drawing. I placed the candle behind it and laid the dead fieldmouse in front, which I poured Elye’s blood over.

The candle was made of beeswax, which the Elfin seemed to keep in special buildings. She had gotten me several of the candles, which were long and thin, unlike the Black Tallow Candle which had been thick and stubby.

“*Am I a stranger to you?*” she asked, sounding offended. I had told her the ritual requirements before she’d gone off to fetch candles.

“We just met today,” I reminded her. “Until half an hour ago you didn’t even know my name.”

“*But our meeting was foretold!*” she insisted.

I just nodded, not knowing what to say to that.

“I’ll need silence for this next part.”

“*I can be silent!*”

Why does she remind me so much of Lukas? I contemplated. I knew it was mostly just the hyperactivity to blame, since personality-wise they weren’t truly that similar.

I pulled out my small blade and the staff hanging over my shoulder. Then realised that it would be too fiddly to hold both of them.

“You will be fine without the staff,” Armen assured me.

Then why do I even have it?? I hardly seem to use it.

Instead of putting the staff away, I used the small blade to cut open my index finger of my left hand and grasped the staff with my right hand, praying that I could keep my focus and prevent the Ifrit Claw from activation randomly. This was easier said than done, since it seemed to respond to Seramosa’s presence.

Try and reign in your powers, Sera.

The Ifrit grumbled, but I did feel a noticeable shift in how much I needed to use my own energy to quell the heat in my possessed hand.

I took a deep breath, then began the invocation.

“Formless and seeking of a vessel; the Many, I call upon thee!”

“Lay thy countless eyes upon the feast I have brought!”

I moved my left hand over the corpse of the fieldmouse and let eager drops of blood fall from my index finger and down onto its corpse.

“Now behold the fitting vessel I have prepared!”

“I ask only of a simple service in exchange.”

The candle lit up with a tall red flame dotted with black spots, and after only a moment, the fieldmouse, the so-called ‘scent of death’, was consumed by a thousand invisible mouths, until nothing was left, not even bone.

Apparently sated, the invisible presence took hold of the crow’s body and it started wriggling to life. From the advice written on the entry on the Many and its summoning, I knew that I should not waste a second, lest it try to multiply and flee.

I immediately flung out my spirit like grasping hands, and felt a sensation of thousands of eyes shifting their intense gaze to me as it connected with the entity inside the crow’s body.

Thou have taken up residence in the vessel I have prepared.

In exchange thou must act as mine Observer.

And for this purpose, I name thee:

Karasumany.

With a flap of its wings, the crow shot up out of the ritual diagram, before alighting on a branch that reached out of one of the buildings next to us in the ‘alley’. I realised that the beeswax candle had completely melted away into a sticky puddle. It was a good thing I still had a few left.

CAW! it said, surprising me.

“**It seems you have yet another familiar that speaks,**” Armen said in a friendly-yet-mocking tone.

As long as it keeps to just sounding like a crow, then I’m okay with it.

CAW! Karasumany said again, before my eyes its form shimmered and then it had a twin on the branch.

“**What does its name mean?**”

Karasu means crow. It’s supposed to be a pun, although I doubt it makes sense when translated.

“**Your naming-sense is awful! The name you gave me is unspeakable!**” Seramosa complained. I rather fancied the name ‘Okuribi-Hime’ that I’d given her.

“*What have you brought to life?*” asked Elye, gaping in awe. Normally, people would probably view what I had just done as a form of vile Necromancy, which I suppose it probably was, but the Elfin seemed to revel in such displays.

With a gesture that played right into to her fascination, but made me blush a bit with embarrassment, I sent off the newly-formed copy with the simple command: *Travel North to the city of Helmstatter.*

The copy cawed again, then took off.

Before it had disappeared behind the towering buildings, another copy had already taken its place.

“*Can I eat one?*” Elye asked.

“Erm... I don’t think so?”

Or maybe this world doesn’t follow the Conservation of Mass law?

An arrow whistled through the air and struck the copy, making the original Karasu hop to the side with an outraged *CAW!* The copy disappeared with a poof, leaving no body behind for the voracious girl.

“Don’t do that!” I scolded the Elfin.

“*Aw...*” she complained.

“Alright, I have the familiar I need now, so let’s go find your father and the other warriors.”

Karasumany hopped off the branch and followed me from the air. I knew that within just a few hours there’d be two dozen crows flitting about the place.

“Andasangare, why is there a murder of crows following you?”

“It’s the new familiar I needed to summon,” I told him.

“And this will allow you to see the Rotmaker?”

“Hopefully.”

I had already spread many of the crow copies out around Skovslot Enclave, but I was having some difficulties connecting to them individually. Connecting my eyes and ears to the main body wasn’t an issue, although its sight and hearing overlapped my own and made it impossible to hear what was going on around my body, which made it dangerous to use. That said, changing the Pact from the simple ‘Watcher’ type to ‘Observer’ was definitely a huge improvement over the information I could gather through the familiar, as one of the main issues I’d faced with Sumi, my Eye of the Observer, was that it did not convey the sounds around it.

But the issue with the Many was that each of the copies was like a cable connecting back to the one that had created them, and, as I had realised to my horror, the copies themselves could also make copies, meaning that it was like trees with branches sprouted from the original Karasumany, and mentally sorting through those was a great recipe for instant headaches.

Once I had some time to fully dive into my new familiar’s powers, I was going to try and have the original body act as a sort of switch between the copies.

I returned my focus to the tall Elfin and the building he and his warrior fellows were standing in front of. Unlike the tower he had first show me, this building was four stories tall and though the disease had taken hold here, it was not as advanced.

“Have you been inside yet?” I asked them.

“No.”

I frowned.

Do you think I should go inside and have a look? Maybe I could find clues.

“If you do, I will protect you as best you can.”

That’s not the kind of answer I was looking for.

With a gesture, I sent Karasu inside, and it was followed by a swarm of its copies. Like most, or perhaps all, Watcher familiars, it didn’t seem that the Many possessed the ability to see auras like I could with my Spirit Sight, which meant they also wouldn’t be able to see ectoplasmic trails or prints. But they should be able to see things that were hidden from my eyes.

I imagined that my essence swirled in my chest and then moved to my eyes and ears as I connected with the main body of Karasumany. With a loud *woosh* and *pop* my ears adjusted to the sounds heard by my crow familiar, and shortly after my eyes saw the interior of the wilted building through its eyes. While controlling Karasu and sharing its senses perfectly, it was as though I was standing in its place, which was an unnerving feeling.

I took a deep breath to steady my pounding heart, and it was hard not to be disturbed by the lack of sound from my real body, overshadowed by the senses of my Observer as they were. But at least I still had my sense of touch and could feel that someone was touching my forearm. I wondered if it was Elye.

“**The Elfin is saying that your eyes look like pits of darkness,**” Armen informed me, acting as my bodyguard while my mind was disconnected from my body.

As I moved Karasu through the interior of the diseased tower, I saw how the walls were drooping and mulch and gloopy decayed mass covered the floor. There were no bodies, thankfully, but from what Imir had informed me, it seemed that the first tower had been the only case where noncombatants had died to the ‘Rotmaker’ and its destruction.

The flock followed behind the main body as I manoeuvred it through the interior and up through curving tunnels that acted as stairwells to the floors above. The higher I ventured through the interior, the worse the decay and disease seemed to become. I had initially assumed that the Rotmaker would attack the buildings from the bottom, or perhaps even underneath it in the soil, feasting on the roots like a burrowing insect, but it seemed that it instead sought out the highest point and ruined the tree-grown edifices from there. I suppose that it might make sense, as consuming a building from the bottom would make it collapse faster, especially when the buildings in question were *this* tall.

I broke my connection to Karasu, returning my consciousness to my real body, and commanded it, *Alert me if you find anything of note.*

A loud and angry **CAW!** came from the inside of the building in response, and a sudden spike of pain shot through my head, making me gasp and drop to my knees.

“Argh!” I groaned, unable to keep the exclamation from coming out.

“**It is foolish to command a familiar to violate the terms of its Pact,**” Armen admonished me.

Elye, who had indeed been the one holding on to my forearm, helped me stand, with a confused look on her face.

“I’m okay,” I told her, even though it felt as though the spike was still in my head, making every thought painful.

I thought an Observer would be able to follow such a command, I replied.

“It is an Observer. Implied in its duty is no mention of informing you of what it sees. It simple observes.”

But you perform many tasks beyond the purview of a Protector.

“I am bending my duty to include such things, but I cannot perform a task that is not, in some way, related to protecting you.”

So if I asked you to assault someone, I would feel a similar spike lodge firm in my brain?

“Possibly, yes. I hope you will remember this pain you are feeling now, and understand that abusing or misusing your familiars hurts them as much as it hurts you. If you do it enough or to the wrong sort of familiar, it may prove fatal.”

I recalled Owl’s explanation of how he’d lost his eye. “...*she tore my eye out when I tried to ask her to do something not included in my Pact.*”

I’ll be more careful.

I tried to focus on my bond with Karasumany, then told it, *I am sorry. I am still learning. I will rephrase my command: if you spot something worthy of my attention, leave behind a copy in that area.*

This time no angry caw or painful spike assaulted me, so I knew it was a command that did not violate the Pact by asking it to do something an Observer couldn’t.

Thank you Armen, I don’t know what I’d do without you.

I turned to Imir and his men, who had simply been watching me.

“I have seen the interior and have come to a conclusion about the Rotmaker’s habits.”

The Elfin nodded seriously.

“I am confident that it starts its assault on a building at the very top, moving down as the building begins to collapse.”

“Why do you believe this? We have always encountered the Rotmaker on the lowest floor.”

“Look at the tower,” I said, gesturing towards it. “The top-half is slumped together and diseased, if it drained the life of your buildings from the bottom, we would be staring at a collapsed ruin.”

Imir considered this explanation for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

“What do you suggest we do?”

“If we want to find its current hideout, we should be looking at buildings that show signs of decay and disease at the top.”

Imir nodded and sent his men out. *“If we find such a place, we will send for you.”*

“I will stay here and try to use my familiars to find it as well.”

The Elfin nodded again and then he was off. Elye looked at me and then at her father who was quickly scaling the root-bridges and moving through the city.

“You can do the same as them, if you wish,” I told her.

She seemed tempted, but then lowered her head in determination and said, “*I stay with you, Andasangare Yuuta.*”

51 – Parasite Insidious II

While most of Karasumany’s copies were spreading out across Skovslot, I prepared to enter the decayed building with Elye. I had no clue if the entity we were dealing with, if in fact it was such a thing, left behind any intangible clues only visible to my eyes, but my dealings with the Weeping Widow had taught me not to be too hasty nor leave stones unturned, as not having learnt the name of the minstrel had seriously set me back and caused undue death and devastation. Mistakes as an Exorcist were costly, and I didn’t want to impact the Enclave in a similar way if I could help it, even if the Elfin were odd creatures.

“You can let go of me now,” I said to Elye, who had been holding on to me since I had collapsed.

She let go of me and looked at the opening leading into the diseased building. Suddenly I wondered if she had been holding onto me for her own sake.

“You don’t have to go with me. I’ll just be looking for clues.”

“I will go!”

I nodded.

Make sure you protect us both, in case I missed something lurking in there.

“Understood.”

“I will protect the child!”

You sure do like Elye, don’t you Sera? I remarked.

She grumbled like a menacing fire.

If you can quell your flames, perhaps I wouldn’t mind you revealing yourself to her. It must be hard to have this unrequited affection for someone who doesn’t even realise you exist.

The Ifrit floated around Elye and over in front of me. **“Do not lie to me, Exorcist.”**

I’m not. But I’ll only give you my energy to manifest if you don’t hurt her or burn down your surroundings.

“I will contain my fire.” The gravity in her voice made it sound like I had offered her a chance to return to life.

“Elye,” I started, turning to the Elfin, who was staring at the opening into the tower with some consternation.

She looked at me with a sideways glance.

“One of my familiars would like to meet you. In the flesh. Or well, what amounts to it for a spirit.”

“Really!?”

“Let me know if she scalds you with her heat though. She is after all an entity born of fire.”

Without allowing for a dramatic pause or anything, Seramosa manifested herself before the Elfin. The only part of her body that was on fire was her face and hair, but the rest was as the first day I had seen her: a charcoal-black body not too unlike that of a burnt corpse.

Elye took a step back in surprise, her eyes going wide at the Ifrit that had just appeared out of thin air from her perspective.

“Hello Elfin child,” said Seramosa. **“I am Seramosa.”**

“My name is Elye,” she replied.

I blinked in surprise. *Okay, I wasn't prepared for her to be able to speak to others.*

“Unlike myself and the crow-spawn, Seramosa is untethered by the terms of her Pact, thus she can freely interact with the real world.”

I was glad that she was not hostile towards me, since that kind of freedom was terrifying for such a powerful apparition to wield.

Seramosa reached out to touch Elye on the cheek, but the Elfin took a step back with a wince before she could get too close.

“You're too hot, Sera. You'll burn her if you touch her.”

“I can make it no less than this!” she complained.

Elye suddenly took my right hand into hers. *“Yuuta has the same skin as you on this hand, Seramosa.”*

“He stole my powers,” she said spitefully.

“I did no such thing!” I argued.

Alright, you've said hello. Time to go incorporeal again before you burn through all my energy.

“No!” she screamed and Elye took another step back in surprise.

“Don't be obstinate now.”

“I can help with the Rotmaker!”

“If I run out of energy, I'll be completely exposed. Just wait for me to call you.”

The Ifrit turned to look at me, a dangerous glare in her eyes.

“Make me.”

Fuck.

“It would perhaps be best to acquiesce to her demands,” Armen said diplomatically. In his words was the unspoken warning that to make an enemy of a Condemned Ifrit was a quick way to learn what burning to death felt like.

I let out a deep sigh.

“Fine, lead the way and we’ll be right behind you. You can be our vanguard.”

“I will burn all who threatens Elfin!”

“Remember: don’t burn down the city.”

“I have honed my flames. They will not burn those who do not deserve it.”

With a tiny spark, the Ifrit’s body suddenly became coated in a layer of fire that took on the form of a summer-dress with mid-thigh-length skirt. The stubby horns on her head also seemed to lengthen as fire gave it shape, and her hair swished around in an unseen wind, yet somehow reminded me of the wagging tail on an excited dog.

Seramosa moved through the opening, which was really just a large aperture in the wooden structure that led into a raised walkway which opened up further to reveal the bottom floor. Elye and I followed a few steps behind.

“She does not seem to respect you much,” Elye whispered to me just as we crossed the threshold.

I just shook my head, not knowing what to say.

Though I had been in Skovslot for some hours now, it was my first time setting foot inside one of their strange ‘living’ buildings. The floor was formed of interwoven roots and felt no different than any wooden floor, though the roots seemed to shift ever-so-slightly, as though the whole place was breathing. Most unsettlingly, the Foresight granted to me by the Prideling in my glasses showed the future movements of anything I laid eyes on, and the walls, ceiling, and floor were all a blur of very faint movement, something which had not been perceptible from the outside. It was as though we were within the bowels of a benevolent creature that allowed for its internal architecture to house us.

“Are all the buildings like this one?” I asked, putting a hand on one of the walls. It was trembling slightly.

“This one is in pain.”

“But do they all move like this one?”

She nodded. *“Do your houses not grow and shift and move?”*

“Absolutely not.”

“That is weird.”

I don’t even know what to say to a comment like that.

“We are all the product of the environment into which we are born and raised. To an Elfin, our ‘dead’ houses are strange.”

I guess...

As I watched the Ifrit move around in front of us with rock-hard confidence and a I-will-burn-down-any-foe-I-see swagger, I felt a pang of sadness. I really missed Rana. And while Elye was similar to Lukas, it was not the same. It wasn't like my *real* team.

I truly hoped that I could reunite with them again as soon as I was done mucking around in the Enclave. Although, when they saw me and noticed the differences, would they still want to be around me? After all, I had become closer to the image of Exorcists; the sort of villain that held monsters on a short leash and possessed the literal body of a demon, shaped by unholy rituals.

Every passing minute siphoned more of my energy to the Ifrit, but not so hungry a rate as when she went all out. Still, my most optimistic estimate was that I had perhaps forty minutes before I'd run out of steam, and *that* was if she didn't go haywire and start setting everything ablaze.

The first floor seemed a mix of individual rooms like in a hotel, but there were no doors, and all the furniture sort of just grew from the floor, walls, and ceiling. Chairs were little more than hanging vines, and tables were either stumpy growths or large flat-topped mushrooms of dense-yet-spongy material. Shelves were much the same, either protruding growths or mushrooms shaped to specific length and depth. As for light, there were luminescent flowers that looked like tulips, which grew from the floor up through the cracks between the roots, as well as glowing toadstools that sprouted from the walls and ceiling.

“Have you guys not invented doors?” I asked. “There's no privacy for people living here.”

Elye gave me a strange look.

I shook my head. “Let's go to the next floor, I don't see anything here.”

As I'd noticed from when I'd moved through the space while connected to Karasu's senses, the way up to the next floor was like a tunnel, rather than a stairwell like I'd expected. The emphasis of the root- and tree-based buildings seemed to be on organic shapes, or perhaps it was not so much intentional as it was an unavoidable limitation.

On the second floor was much of the same as the first, though here the signs of decay and disease the tower was stricken with was more evident, as the ceiling was drooping in places, as though having lost rigidity. Some foul-smelling water was dripping down in places, and it would only be a matter of hours before this floor looked like the ones above. But still there were no signs of the perpetrator, at least none that registered as those of an apparition.

“*This is a sad thing to see. This home has stood here for many generations to growth to this size.*”

“We'll continue up,” I said. Seramosa had already gone that way, and we were mostly just trying to catch up to her at this point.

After moving into the tunnel that led to the third floor, the decay that I’d seen through Karasu’s eyes became strikingly evident. The root-formed floor and walls were squishy, having lost much of their density, and the ceiling looked deflated, and in many places drooped so low that it nearly touched the floor. It was a mess to move through, which I had underestimated when traversing the place in Karasumany’s small crow body.

Just as we’d made it halfway across the floor to the next tunnel, Seramosa returned from that way, grumbling about the place being deserted. She was hungry for a fight, which worried me.

“There is nothing but the leavings of the Rotmaker!”

“Did you see any signs of what sort of creature it might be?” I asked.

Her fire flared briefly, then she said, ***“Come.”***

I looked back at Elye who, despite the melancholy of seeing the diseased and dying tower, had a twinkle in her eye, just like I’d often seen from Lukas. She was having fun exploring and investigating it seemed.

The mulch and soft root-floor was uncomfortable and precarious to walk across as I followed the impatient Ifrit. Once I got to the tunnel, there was a giant tear in the floor which just led to a straight drop down onto the street outside. I swallowed my initial fear and manoeuvred around the hole, feeling the breeze that blew up through the gash. Unlike normal buildings, the floors of the Elfin root-grown towers were much taller and thus the fourth floor of this tower was equivalent to the sixth floor of an apartment building in Japan.

I let out a gasp of relief as I got to the fourth-floor landing, then immediately lost my breath as I saw what resided within: an enormous cocoon. It was torn open as though something had hatched from it, and decay filled the air thanks to the ‘juices’ left inside the pod. The ceiling above was full of holes where the roots had simply just wilted and decayed into brown-and-black matter. Connected to the cocoon were hundreds of cable-like roots. These were not the roots that the buildings were grown from, but rather ones that seemed to emerge from the cocoon itself, like feeding tubes for whatever had resided within.

I gritted my teeth. Whatever had been within the cocoon had to be massive. Easily the size of a polar bear, perhaps even bigger than the Welin I’d caught a brief glimpse of before arriving to the Enclave.

What’s more, there were huge ephemeral-red claw-marks all over the cocoon and ceiling. The ceiling had not caved in on its own, no, the creature torn through it on its way out. And if the traces

left behind were an indicator, it was clearly not just any ordinary creature. I could sense a vile malevolence from the stains of its claws, as though they left behind stains of an insidious evil.

“We need to warn your father,” I told Elye.

Karasumany, do you have eyes on Imir? I asked, phrasing it not as a command, but rather as a request, such that I didn’t run the risk of triggering another painful brain spike from violating the terms of our Pact.

A distant **CAW!** sounded from above, where I guessed the main body was hovering over my position, accompanied by identical copies that swirled around it, as though it was the eye of a storm of black feathers and sharp beaks.

I sent my essence out to the Observer and saw through the eyes of one of its clones, though I had no idea which part of the city it was in. It showed Imir standing with two men, weapons drawn. Behind them cowered children, one of which I recognised as the youths that had been following us earlier.

The thing in front of them terrified me.

It was absolutely massive. Its maw alone could swallow a person whole, and its entire body was formed of diseased-looking and off-coloured roots, which were shaped into two enormous claws on bulky arms. It had at least six eyes, three on either side of its dinosaur-like reptilian head, and its lower body was like that of a serpent.

“Your father is in trouble,” I said, hurrying from the floor and to the tunnel. I slipped on some gloopy mulch and nearly fell into the hole I’d taken such care to avoid just moments prior, but Elye managed to catch me just in the last minute, so that just one of my legs poked through.

“Holy shit... thank you, Elye.”

She helped me up and then we sprinted through the third floor, down the tunnel, then the next floor, and down again, before making it to the street outside.

Karasumany, can you show me the way?

Another loud **CAW!** answered from above, and I saw the main body move, with its flock trailing behind it. It was heading northeast.

Get ready, Sera, you might be our best hope of taking this monster down.

52 – Parasite Insidious III

Sera was moving through the air, unfettered by gravity, while Elye and I ran after her, although I was starting to trail behind the spry Elfin. Not for the first time, I cursed my poor physique.

After moving between some buildings, we started up one of the root-bridges, which snaked between towers of various shapes and were intersected by other bridges. Quite a few Elfin were coming towards us, and a few muttered warnings to my companion, though seemed to not deign me with such courtesy.

Then we heard the commotion that had made the people run for their lives. It sounded like a bull trapped in a confined space, as sounds of slamming and thrashing echoed through the air with steady intervals. I was certain Imir was dead, because there was no way he could survive something like the monster I’d seen through Karasumany’s eyes.

We went around the curving wall of a balloon-shaped house, before catching up to Seramosa, who was hovering just beyond the edge of the root-bridge, looking back at me expectantly.

“I will destroy it utterly.”

I blinked. She was staring at me intensely.

“You’re waiting on my permission?”

She grumbled.

I nodded. “Reduce it to ashes, but spare any who might still be alive.”

With an elated shriek, the Condemned Ifrit shot down towards the ground below, like a missile of incandescent fire.

I ran over to the edge of the bridge and looked down towards the ground. The root-formed monstrosity was so much bigger than what I’d seen and a dirty-red aura was emanating from it like noxious vapour. I hadn’t seen a Haunter with an aura before, but it was nothing like the kind that humans and Elfin had, as it moved about too erratically and seemed to almost be controlling the monstrosity like some ghostly rider. Before every enormous slam of its claws, the ‘aura’ moved a moment early, telegraphing the move.

In a narrow alley between two spiralling three-story buildings, Imir and another warrior was squeezed in tight, with some civilians behind them. The monster was trying very hard to get at them, but it was too large to get a hold of them. But that did not stop it from trying, as indicated by large hideous gashes in the outer walls of the buildings, as well as torn up dirt and moss from the ground.

Seramosa crashed into the back of the root-formed Rotmaker, releasing a burst of superheated air that I could feel all the way from where I stood like a dense wall of pressure. Then came a loud and intensely-bright pillar of fire, which seemed to connect the ground and the heaven with a spear of scalding fire.

I gasped and lost my footing as every last bit of my energy was forcefully sucked from my body. As my knees hit the roots of the bridge, my vision blacked for a moment. When I looked up, I saw that Karasumany and its countless copies were all sitting on nearby buildings and the ledge of the root-bridges, watching me with an intense glare.

“Are you okay?” Elye asked.

I sucked in a breath and exhaled slowly. “My Ifrit went overboard,” I answered. “But I’m fine.” She helped me stand up and I leaned over the edge of the bridge to stare down below.

That’s insane...

The ground where Seramosa had landed atop the monster was like a perfect sphere of carbonised glass, forged through heat so immense that it might very well have come from the bowels of a volcano. There were remains of the root-formed Rotmaker, but it was clearly dead, as the majority of its body had instantly been vapourised. The nearby Elfin looked terrified, but were otherwise okay. The same could not be said for the nearby buildings which had been charred and blackened from the fragment of a second where it’d seemed as though an unfiltered solar-ray had impacted the planet.

With Elye’s help, we moved down off the root-bridge that hung about four stories above ground. I had scarcely set foot on the ground before Imir and some of the children he had been protecting came up to me.

“Thank you Andasangare Yuuta,” said the tall Elfin. His right arm hung limply by his side, but otherwise he seemed alright. His fellow was worse off however, as he had clearly broken his hip and femur. It would be fatal if he did not get immediate aid.

“See to your friend,” I told him, “I will follow the Rotmaker to its den.”

“What do you mean? You have defeated it.”

I shook my head and moved to where the remnants of its body lay. As Elye lent me her shoulder and I hobbled over, I felt the heat radiating off the carbonised glass left behind by Seramosa’s insane attack. I looked at the little bit of root-formed arm and tail that remained of the body, then tracked the noxious thing that flowed away and up into the air with my gaze.

“What do you see, Yuuta?”

“It is like a spirit that possesses the roots and forms them into malevolent shapes.”

I bit my lip. I knew for a fact that nothing of the sort was described within my Encyclopaedia.
Perhaps if I had the other tomes that Owl kept from me...

“Perhaps it is a Shade, or some manner of Poltergeist.”

A Poltergeist is a type of shade, I corrected Armen. But I have never seen an apparition with so strikingly-malicious a form. And it is only visible to me, as though it is more akin to an aura than an invisible Shade. I do not believe it is a Shade at all. Perhaps it is something entirely different. Unlike a Shade, it seems to me that it requires a vessel to interact with the world. But I do not understand its motives. It drains the living buildings as though feasting and attacks the living with monsters shaped from roots and born from cocoons.

Imir came over to me, having left his friend in the care of a capable-looking woman, who also seemed in charge of the children, as though some kind of instructor or caretaker. Still, I did not think the man would live to see the morrow’s sun.

“*What did you mean when you said it was undefeated?*” he asked.

Elye glanced at her dad, then back at me, readjusting her grip on my side where she held onto me.

“I have not dealt with this sort of apparition before,” I told him honestly, “but it seems to possess roots and take on menacing shapes, while also consuming the lifeforce of your buildings, like some sort of energy parasite.”

His eyes narrowed. “*Are you certain in this, Andasangare?*”

“You cannot see it, but a noxious fume-like spirit is billowing from the Rotmaker’s corpse and moving into the air like smoke with a mind of its own,” I explained, pointing into the sky and tracing its path into the western part of the city with my finger, even though they could not see it.

“*Skovslot has dealt with this kind of Rotmaker before,*” he revealed.

“Really?”

“*Our Elders will know more. But you must first tell me where it is going, so I can prepare the warriors and scouts.*”

I nodded. “Fire seems good at taking it out, but killing its vessel will not slay it, only make it move to a new spot.” This latter part was mostly just guesswork, but it seemed to explain why, after each of its previous vessels had been slain, it had found a new tower in a different part of the city to infest. After all, the two places Imir had shown me were in different parts of the city.

Grim determination fell over Imir’s face, and he said, “We will make torches.”

Elye looked at her father with a face mired in disbelief.

Until then, I hadn’t realised that there had not been a single fire in Skovslot until Seramosa had summoned a pillar of righteous flame. In a city made of plants, wood, and other easily-combustible elements, it seemed a given that fire was frowned upon.

I had recouped enough energy to walk on my own again, but it was slow going. If the parasitic Rotmaker had more of its monstrous vessels waiting across the city, then there was nothing I could do to help.

I had pointed Imir to the area where it seemed the noxious aura was moving, and Elye was now taking me to the very centre of Skovslot, where a tall spike at least eight stories tall stood. Its design was far more aggressive than the cocoon-and-pod-shaped towers, and it was also far wider, each floor seeming as wide as three towers’ floors combined.

“This is the Heart of the Enclave,” Elye told me.

Evidence to its importance was seen in the many warrior Elfin that moved about the area. They were obviously on high alert given the monster that roamed their city.

When one of the men saw Elye and me, he came up to us and asked, *“Andasangare, what business have you here?”*

“Imir told me the ‘Elders’ might be able to help me deal with the Rotmaker.”

The man took my words at face value, with not a trace of suspicion, and said, *“Follow me.”*

I was led into the enormous spike and up to the third floor. A large portion of the floor was occupied by what looked like a lounge, as spongy moss-covered sofas and tables and other indiscernible shapes took up a lot of space. There were also a portion reserved for making food and beverages, almost like a bar, and it was tended by two stoic-looking women and a man. They were each holding plates of food, which seemed some sort of beef and fish sashimi, as well as some strange treacle-consistency beverages.

You would think they are facing a life-or-death situation and not simply making meals and drinks for some old people.

“Elfin hierarchy is bizarre.”

Suddenly Seramosa appeared out of the ether, becoming visible to me as she took on her incorporeal form. ***“Be respectful of the Elders!”*** she warned.

I was planning to.

By the way, next time you want to use every last molecule of energy within my body, it would be nice with a head’s up.

“I told you that I honed my fire!” she argued.

Perhaps I am the fool for believing that you meant it had become less destructive.

“You cannot argue with her results,” Armen said, praising the Ifrit, which I thought was a bad idea.

You most definitely can! Thanks to that stunt, I am running on fumes and have no recourse if we come across another Rotmaker vessel in the next few hours.

Elye put a hand on me.

“Yuuta?”

“Sorry, I was spacing out.”

“*You do that a lot,*” she remarked.

I frowned. I had to get better at handling the internal dialogue with my familiars in a way that didn’t make me seem like a weirdo. Granted, I was already talking to myself as far as most observers were concerned, so maybe it was a futile thing?

Our guide, the warrior Elfin, was standing before a group of three seated figures at the far end of the floor. The outer wall in that portion of the floor was like a gossamer film, providing a view out over the surroundings. Despite only being on the third floor, it was an impressive view.

With the Foresight granted by my glasses, I saw the Elfin turn towards me and gesture for me to approach, the telegraphed outline followed by his actual movements a moment later. I acquiesced and Elye followed behind me, though seeming to hide in my shadow.

A gnarled-and-wrinkled hand touched the warrior briefly on his forearm, and the man thudded his chest with a fist before leaving.

The same gnarled hand indicated a sofa for me to sit in. I did just that, relishing the spongy moss and the ability to take the weight off my legs for a bit. I was still groggy from Seramosa’s expenditure of my essence, so it was a nice respite. Elye remained standing, which I thought was peculiar.

I looked at the three seated figures, each of which were quite old, judging by their wrinkled skin and temperaments. Most Elfin were like energetic puppies, but these three were wise in their movements and their eyes gleamed with a cunning I had not seen in other Elfin.

“*Andasangare,*” said the first, a woman with her hair in a bun and two thin forward-curving horns. Her aura was blue-green and similar to Elye’s in terms of potency. “*You have dealt with the Rotmaker?*” she asked, each word sounding carefully-considered.

“Not yet,” I answered. “I was told by Imir that you may have the answers for how to deal with it.”

Two of the three shared a glance, but the third continued to stare at me. Even next to the two other Elders he was in a category of ancient of his very own. His horns were like the impressive antlers of a full-grown stag and his aura was powerful and orange, a colour I realised I had not seen before, but which I guessed might be equivalent to a Librarian’s. Unless, there were other Roles I had yet to come across.

“I have seen it before,” the man said, his voice having none of the lilting speech of his kin. It almost reminded me of one of my old history teachers from High School, who had a gruff voice from smoking too much and the personality of a hard-boiled detective. “The last one was vanquished by a Necromancer named ‘*Mortl*’.”

My attention perked up at the mention of another Otherworlder coming here. “When was this?”

The man eyed me for a moment, while his fellow Elders seemed to wait on his next words with bated breath. Even Elye squirmed a bit where she stood behind my seat. I got the sense that this man wasn’t just any ‘Elder’, but rather someone quite powerful within the Enclave, perhaps even a sort of leader.

“Your parents’ parents would have been but children back then,” he answered. “He called the Rotmaker a ‘*Necrotic Parasite*’ and left with me the means by which a similar Rotmaker might be vanquished. I possess not the means by which to carry out his instructions, however.”

This was a lot more than I could’ve asked for. I leaned forward and said, “Please tell me more.”

53 – Parasite Insidious IV

I was making my way towards the part of the city where I had sent Imir and his men. While walking there with fast strides and Elye slightly ahead of me, I reviewed the notes I had written down in my Encyclopaedia.

The man, Aef, had turned out to be the ‘Heart’ of Skovslot: a title given to the eldest of the Elfin within an Enclave. The Elders served as the wisemen of their society and were the heritors of knowledge, oral traditions, and, crucially in this case, dealings with Rotmakers, which seemed a common problem all Enclaves faced.

While looking through the notes, Seramosa moved in front of me, halting me in my step, even though I knew she was incorporeal.

What is it?

“Manifest me!”

I don’t have the energy to spare.

“I will be brief!”

I narrowed my eyes. I had no idea what she was planning, but she was looking at the tome in my hands. I had noticed in the past that she had looked at it weirdly.

Promise me that you will return to incorporeality before I am exhausted again.

“Just do it, Exorcist!”

I gritted my teeth and prepared for the worst, while hoping for the best. I had a slight suspicion about what she was planning, but she might as well simply fly off to summon a solar flare to wipe out the next Rotmaker.

With a nudge of my energy, the Ifrit took on corporeal form, startling a few of the Elfin guards nearby, although, rather than become alert and hostile, they seem to act as though witnessing a miracle.

Had this been anywhere else, this little stunt would surely have gotten me killed.

The charcoal-black half-Elfin half-human leaned forward, while the flames of her hair fluttered around. She reached out towards my tome and I instinctively started moving it away.

“Don’t burn it!” I warned.

She grumbled. **“I am not!”**

Her right hand started glowing with a mauve flame, before she swung it and seized something invisible to my eyes, but which, when she tugged on it, pulled the tome in my hand towards her ever so slightly. Then the mauve flame grew into a bright-purple one, before dying down. I pulled the

Encyclopaedia away again, and this time it didn't feel as though she was holding onto a leash attached to it.

“What did you just do!?”

“I removed the curse. It is what I do. I am a Cursebreaker you know.”

Can you remove the curse on the voodoo doll as well? I asked, switching to my inner voice again.

“No.”

I grimaced. I was still carrying around the doll made from my own hand in my pouch, and which was bonded to me with the awful ‘Curse of the Excruciating Bond’. Hopefully I could find a Cursebreaker in Helmstatter to deal with it for me.

Alright, time's up. I'd like to reserve my energy for what's about to come.

With a grumble, Seramosa actually let herself desummon, returning to her incorporeal state. Perhaps it was a benefit of advancing the rank on my Abilities, or perhaps it was a subtlety I'd started picking up on, but I could actually tell when my familiars were incorporeal or not, without having to rely on the sense of micro-fatigue that came with every time they expended my energy.

Visually, little changed, but there was still minor differences between corporeal and incorporeal forms, such as: a barely-perceptible transparency, though this was harder to notice with Armen who was naturally-transparent; the feeling of physicality, as in a very vague sense that they had physical forms or not, sort of like how even standing a metre from a wall you could notice how air rebounded off its surface; but, most relevant in this case, with the Ifrit it was the feeling of her heat going from being a physical thing to a metaphysical thing, with the latter feeling like an internal warmth and the former like a bonfire warming my skin.

What sort of curse was it? I asked, as I jogged to catch-up with Elye who was waiting at the ingress to a root-bridge. The people who had seen me manifest Sera were murmuring amongst themselves and watching me go, with the word ‘Andasangare’ being repeated a lot.

“What did you just do, Yuuta?” asked the Elfin.

“It was a Curse of Longing Attachment,” replied the Ifrit.

I could feel my head start to hurt from the effort of keeping up with two separate conversations. I decided to answer Elye first, since otherwise I might seem weird.

“She no doubt believes you quaint already,” Armen teased.

You're not helping. All these voices are splitting my head in two...

I let out a sigh. “Apparently there was a curse attached to my book,” I said, not realising how bizarre that sounded.

Elye simply nodded, then started up the bridge.

I should be concerned that she doesn't question that response, right?

“I have already made clear my opinion of these people,” Armen commented.

Alright... Sera, enlighten me about the curse please. Was it the means by which I could be tracked?

The Ifrit grumbled, no doubt upset about the nickname I was insisting on calling her by. **“It is a simple curse. To my eyes it is a strand of hair that is connected to an unseen end. It is no great feat to conjure and easy to break as well.”**

It surprised me that there were yet things I could not see. But I supposed that much like how I could sense auras and hidden prints of apparitions, so too could those with the ‘Cursebreaker’ Ability sense curses.

I wonder why Leopold didn't remove the curse then, he must have been able to see it.

“The curse put on the doll of your hand is exquisitely crafted, but he must have been bad at breaking curses if he could not remove so simple a thing from your book.”

I looked back at the entry I had made thanks to Aef's knowledge. At the top it said ‘*Necrotic Parasite*’ and I had added the descriptions of the Rotmaker according to the aura and root-formed monstrosity I'd seen. The Elder had said that it was ‘*Phantasm*’, which was a type of entity I had not dealt with before nor even read about in my tome.

It was an apparition born from negative emotions that had coalesced into a semi-sentient vague form, which acted upon the base desire of hunger, seen through its consumption of energy, especially the type found in people and long-lived trees. Both explained why it sucked the life from the buildings, but also made beasts to slay the Elfin that occupied them.

As for why the Phantasm was created, it seemed to be a by-product of the way Elfin carried out funerals, as they did not exactly purify their dead, but something close to it, as the deceased were turned into a sort of fertiliser for the buildings of the Enclave. Given that this sort of burial was carried out repeatedly in the same area for centuries, it meant that the little bit of leftover lingering regret and other negative emotions eventually pooled together in the soil, before coming together as a Phantasm. Due to the unique circumstances of an Enclave, they were a recurring threat. I had not dared point out that changing their ways might prevent the issue. It was not my place to say, and, besides, it was clear that Aef had known the truth of the matter already.

Besides the cause and descriptions, he had provided me with three methods of exorcising it. I reread the methods for the sixth time in the last twenty minutes:

—*Methods of Exorcism*—

#1 – Locate the Parasite in a gestating cocoon that is still developing into a root-born vessel. Poison the cocoon with Purified Blood to lay to rest the Phantasm. Burn the remains and observe the Ritual of Obsequy to ensure it stays dead.

#2 – Locate a vessel housing the Parasite and perform Contain Spirit to bind its soul to an object, which is then laid to rest with the proper rites.

Warning: Containing a Phantasm is not recommended.

#3 – Wait for the Parasite to run out of potential hosts, at which point it will starve to death.

Warning: may lead to it reaching a higher, unknown, form.

Just like with the Weeping Widow, one of the methods basically just involved waiting out the apparition. It seemed that most apparitions that were confined to a specific place would eventually disappear on their own when they ran out of hosts to feed on or their grudges subsided or were carried out through the natural passing of time.

It made me wonder if the Skinstealer I’d first encountered would eventually have disappeared once the man responsible for its creation died of natural causes. Likewise, the Remorseful Betrayer might have also vanished if the object of its love died or those who had slain it passed away.

If I followed that sort of logic, it seemed like Haunters were no different than fallout from a nuclear meltdown, just with a shorter time-frame attached to the eventual recovery of the land they occupied. The main issue was that they often appeared where humans lived and thus had to be dealt with before they lead to more deaths and caused a chain reaction of apparitions.

The warning attached to the third method made it clear that the Necromancer, Mortl, who had passed his knowledge on to Aef, or maybe one of Aef’s ancestors, had not been entirely sure about the entity. But from what I understood about it, a Phantasm was something that could only barely be considered an apparition, since it was a conglomeration of disparate negative energy from thousands of souls. It might, over time, consume enough energy to evolve into something like a Shade, Wraith, or even a Demon. Thus, it seemed a terrible idea to leave such a thing unchecked, especially when an Enclave was full of the sort of energy it loved to feed on.

I had a sudden thought.

“Elye.”

The Elfin stopped and looked back at me. We had still a few kilometres to cross to get to our destination.

“Why did Aef not seek me out if he knew that I could deal with the Rotmaker?”

She gave me a look as if I was stupid, then said, “*The Heart cannot leave the centre of the Enclave.*”

“He could’ve sent a messenger.”

“*The Heart is wise and knew that you would seek it out.*”

I frowned. I wasn’t sure I could get behind the Elfin’s idea of fate or whatever you called the idea that things happened as they were designed to happen.

Another thought hit me. “How many times has the Rotmaker appeared after being slain?”

“*I do not know.*”

I bit my lower lip as I thought about it. I hadn’t confirmed it with Imir, but I was sure he would inform me that each of the ‘vessels’ were bigger than the previous one if I asked. The one I’d seen had been bigger than what he had described as its first appearances, since he had mentioned a bear, lizard, and snake.

My fear was that, every time it regrew its vessel, it became bigger thanks to the growth in its essence from consuming those it slayed and the buildings it drained.

How many more cocoons before the Phantasm evolves beyond something incoherent and takes on a more ruinous form?

“**It seems ruinous enough already.**”

Imagine how much worse it might become if this is simply the prelude.

“**It does not bode well,**” Armen agreed.

Sera was hovering around next to Elye, trying to play with her hair. I upped my pace, wanting to get this over with before it became unmanageable.

I spotted the Elfin warriors outside the building: a five-storied bulbous tower, where each floor was like an orb stacked upon the one below, as though some demented design for a snowman. Already, Karasumany and its clones were alighting on the strange edifice, most of them looking at me, which was deeply unsettling.

“Where is Imir?” I asked.

“*Inside,*” one answered and pointed to the top of the building with two fingers.

I nodded my thanks and Elye escorted me inside the tower.

The climb up the many tunnels was draining, but I was glad to find that decay had not yet compromised the integrity of the place, meaning the Necrotic Parasite had yet to recoup its lost strength and build a new vessel. At least if I was understanding its pattern correctly.

On the top-floor, we found Imir and four other men gathered around a large cocoon. It was larger than the broken one Elye and I had found. That noxious aura I’d seen was present here as well, laying thick about our feet like some miasma or poisoned fog.

“*Andasangare,*” Imir said by way of greeting.

“You did well to find this,” I told him. “It hasn’t been able to drain this building yet. I should have ample time to perform the exorcism.”

“*What can we do to help?*”

“I require blood.”

Armen had told me the way to produce Purified Blood and it was quite simple: I only needed to utilise my Sanctify on any sort of blood. As for how I would use it to ‘poison’ the cocoon, I was unsure, so I needed enough that I could afford to waste it.

Imir nodded. “*I will find a worthy sacrifice.*” The way he looked at his fellows unsettled me.

“What!?! No! Don’t you have blood that you’ve drained from the prey you catch?”

He looked at me weirdly. “*It would not be a problem to procure a sacrifice. Many will consider it an honour.*”

I jabbed him in the chest with the index of my Ifrit Claw and said, “No one is getting killed for this!”

“*I see,*” he answered, looking down at my finger touching him. “*We will go find prey-blood then.*”

Suddenly the cocoon rumbled and the miasma about our feet began to stir.

“Hurry!” I told him.

The Elfin and his comrades hurried out one of the open ‘windows’ in the curving walls and scaled the outside of the building to reach the ground below.

I looked at Elye, “You should leave as well.”

“*I will stay by your side.*”

I sighed. “If things start taking a turn, you run away without me, okay?”

“*I will stay.*”

I shook my head, but couldn’t help but smile a bit. “At least I won’t die alone if this thing breaks free without warning.”

“**Do not take your own life for granted.**”

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

It was a joke, Armen. I’m not planning on dying. Obviously.

“I see.”

54 – Root of Evil

To my eyes, granted the Foresight by the Prideling trapped in the glasses I wore, it was as though the whole building was trembling, even though it was merely a mismatch of the future motion overlapping the current state. Still, it was off-putting to notice that the building was ‘breathing’. It was like watching bamboo grow before my own eyes. To make matters more unsettling, the miasma about my feet seemed to be pulsing according to this barely-perceptible movement, while the large cocoon occasionally rumbled.

Signs of the Parasite’s effect on the tower still had not manifest themselves, but I was surprised by how quickly it had formed its cocoon, unless these things were already scattered throughout the city, awaiting the host to come alive.

Imir and his men were taking a while to bring the blood I had requested, and with every moment that passed, I felt closer to another fight with the monster. I desperately did not want that to happen.

Elye put a hand on my shoulder. *“Your body is very tense. Like a bowstring.”*

“I’m just a bit apprehensive, that’s all,” I replied.

I had very little energy left, so I basically had no options if the cocoon broke and set loose the creature within. If that happened, my best course of action would perhaps be to nosedive out of the nearby window, after setting the tower ablaze.

I shook my head. It was clear I was letting my anxiety overwhelm me. With a deep breath, I tried to dispel the unease I felt. I hadn’t realised just how much I relied on the Encyclopaedia to feel competent against these apparitions. I was thankful that Aef, the ‘Heart’ of Skovslot, had provided me with instruction to follow, but it had reminded me that I was simply following the wisdom of past heroes, and had nothing particularly grand to separate myself from their achievements.

Once again, my mind returned to the fuck-up that had followed from trying to exorcise the Weeping Widow. Even if her manifestation was deliberately caused by Leopold, I was sure there was a way that I could have prevented undue deaths. Deaths like the man whom I’d killed with my Repel in an act of desperation. I was sure that, from the outside, the tragedy of Hearthshire would be attributed to me being an evil Exorcist, with all the minutiae disregarded in favour of a more compelling story.

What if Rana and Lukas believe that I wasn’t kidnapped, but instead ran away to escape the crimes I committed??

“*You are a foolish boy!*” Sera screeched. She was sitting atop the cocoon in her incorporeal form, as though waiting for the order to reduce it to cinders and ash. “*Negativity and self-doubt form a spiral of darkness. The more time you invest in such detrimental thoughts, the deeper the spiral travels, carrying you with it.*”

“**I concur,**” Armen said. “**Do not let your dark thoughts rule you.**”

Aren’t you both spirits who were unable to pass on because of lingering regret and doubts and hate? Isn’t it hypocritical for you to judge me?

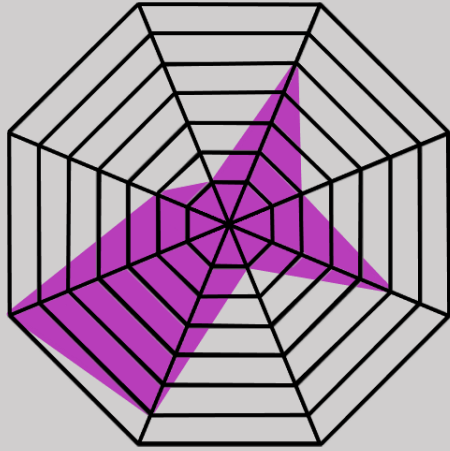
“**We are exactly that,**” Armen retorted with no malice in his voice. “**As such, we know best the place that such a path in life takes you.**”

I let out a sigh.

It was impossible to argue with that logic.

Sorry guys. I know you’re just trying to help me.

Seramosa grumbled like she always did, while Armen put his hand on my shoulder. Surprisingly, I actually felt its touch against my skin. I suddenly wondered if it was a result of my abilities ranking up, so I pulled out my Guild Card and tapped the Exorcist skill set to bring out the individual abilities:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist II’</i> <i>‘Curse of the Excruciating Bond’</i> <i>‘Ifrit Claw Wielder’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i> <i>‘Pact (????)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Observer)’</i>			

ABILITIES

‘Omniglot’

‘Exorcist II’:

- *Banish I*
- *Contain Spirit II*
- *Drain Spirit I*
- *Focus Wielder I*
- *Hymnal I*
- *Investigation II*
- *Invoke Ritual II*
- *Meditation II*
- *Offering I*
- *Pact of the Familiar III*
- *Possessed Weapon Wielder II*
- *Repel II*
- *Sanctify I*
- *Soul Barrier II*
- *Spirit Sight II*
- *Staff Wielder I*
- *Summon III*
- *Unleash I*
- *Ward Crafter II*
- *Worship I*

I was glad to see that the Pact with Karasumany was correctly registered as an Observer Pact, but, more excitingly, I now had two skills at rank three: Pact of the Familiar & Summon. From what I had been told, it usually took a while to level up the ranks, but some were easier than others. It was possible that Armen and Seramosa hanging around nonstop, as well as Seramosa’s repeated total draining of my energy were contributing to an explosive growth.

Sera, come here.

The Ifrit glared at me, but then floated down from the cocoon to land a couple metres in front of me. I reached out with my Claw to touch my fiery familiar.

Elye was watching me in *that* way that she always did when I fell silent.

As the tips of my blackened charcoal hand touched the incorporeal fire Demon, her flames coated my hand like a flashfire of superheated oil and I quickly pulled away, killing the fire as quickly as it started. However, for a moment, I had felt a sense of touch.

“*How did you do that?*” Elye asked. Instead of pulling away, she had leaned closer, as though to study my hand.

I was about reply, when the cocoon started bulging, as though something was pushing against it from within.

Shit, did I just trigger some automatic response by creating a fire!?

I swallowed hard as I stared at hole in the large cocoon, but, after a minute or maybe two, nothing happened.

A moment after that, sounds from below caught my attention, before Imir and his fellow warriors came striding up the stairs carrying heavy hide sacks, like enormous waterskins, which audibly sloshed with the contents within.

“*Andasangare,*” started Imir, pausing to catch his breath from carrying his burden up five stories, “*We have brought you blood.*”

I nodded my thanks and went over to the first.

Explain to me again how this ability works, I said to Armen.

After spending fifteen minutes Sanctifying the three bloated sacks of blood and my right arm coated in acrid-smelling gore up to my elbow, we were as ready as we would ever be.

The last man had carried several unlit torches with him, which were given to each of the warriors, as well as Elye. He had brought two flint pieces to work as a firestarter, but I decided to show-off my new ‘trick’.

While the warriors watched, Elye reached her torch out towards me and I put my left hand on Sera’s shoulder, causing a flame to spontaneously appear in my right palm. With a simple gesture, I lit the outstretched torch, after which the warriors, despite their apprehension towards fire, quickly reached out their torches to me as well.

“**Elfin are famous for their hatred of fire, but perhaps those belonging to this Enclave are more open-minded,**” Armen remarked.

Or perhaps they simply want to join in because I’m an Andasangare?

“***The enemies of the Elfin use fire to torture and slay them,***” Sera chimed in darkly.

Didn't you just tell me that negativity is a bad idea.

“Don't hide from the truth, Exorcist!”

You're sending a lot of mixed messages, Sera.

The Ifrit grumbled and floated off to sit atop the cocoon again.

With the torches lit in the hands of Elye, her father, and the warriors, there was nothing left to do but to begin the Exorcism.

I reread the entry and the notes I had written down after listening to Aef. In my mind's eye I plotted out the steps I would follow. First I'd douse it with the purified blood, but if it did not 'poison' the cocoon, I would try to somehow inject it into the roots directly. Then came the fire and the Ritual of Obsequy. I had taught it to the Elfin just in case, although Armen was doubtful that the ritual could be invoked by those without the prerequisite ability.

I gritted my teeth, then with a nod sent two of the warriors forward with a blood-sack, which they upturned over the cocoon, recolouring it in an unhealthy purple-ish-crimson. It ended up not looking too different from how the other cocoon had appeared in the decayed building Elye and I had ventured inside of.

“Is it working, Yuuta?” asked Imir.

I looked at the cocoon and the miasma around it. Although the noxious fog moved away from the blood, it did not dim in intensity.

“Let's try and pour it directly into the cocoon!” I decided, and Imir and another warrior moved forward, while the first two warriors made a hole near the top of the cocoon with their swords.

I hope the type of blood does not matter... what if Mortl used the blood of Elfin to exorcise the Necrotic Parasite he dealt with?

As Imir poured the purified prey-blood into the hole made by the other men, the effect was immediate. The cocoon started bulging as though several hands were pushing against it from within, and a rumble overcame the entire floor, producing a delirious blur of movements due to the Foresight of my glasses. To his credit, Imir did not leave the cocoon until every last bit of the blood was emptied into the hole.

“What about the last blood?” he asked as soon as he returned to where I stood.

“Let's not be too hasty with it,” I said. It had after all taken five minutes to Sanctify each of the three blood-sack, due to the monotonous way the ability had to be used. Basically, I just had to move my energy through the blood, but the duration depended entirely on the volume of blood, and the Elfin had been very diligent and collected more than ten litres' worth. Fortunately, the ability was not

as strenuous or draining as I had feared, and I still had just enough energy left that I could call upon Sera if needed, or have Armen absorb a few hits.

Although Aef had not specified how much time was supposed to pass between the poisoning of the gestating cocoon and the burning of it, I wanted to err on the side of caution and wait for irrefutable signs that the blood was truly working.

Imir and the four warriors were holding torches at the ready, alongside their swords. I stood behind them, which, although feeling cowardly, was exactly where I belonged in this formation. Elye, who only had her torch, was holding it in both hands like a baseball bat. I wondered what had happened to her bow, but guessed either her father or mother had taken it from her as a punishment for trying to run away.

The floor continued to shake and squirm, while the miasma about our feet condensed around the base of the large cocoon. It seemed to be evaporating into a barely-perceptible white smoke. From the way that all six Elfin around me were only looking at the cocoon itself, I knew that they could not see it.

“The purified blood is cleansing the evil aura of the apparition,” Armen commented.

White is a pure aura here as well? That’s very similar to the religions in my own world. Part of me had assumed it was different here, since their priests had beige auras, and paladins and crusaders were yellow and gold.

“It is said that it is the colour of spirits that are about to pass to the afterlife.”

With my Foresight, I saw one of the warriors, a man seemingly the same age as Elye, trip as the floor roiled suddenly. I reached out to steady him just as the movement in the floor happened as predetermined and he simply cast me a glance, not realising the favour I’d done for him.

Foresight is a powerful ability, I remarked.

“I believe it prudent to keep this ability to yourself. The Church frowns on those who associate with Demons and their ilk, like Imps.”

Would they even know it is an ability gained from a Prideling?

“I cannot say.”

I get it: better safe than sorry.

I saw the moment that the cocoon spasmed again through my glasses, and then the change flowed across the room like a localised earthquake.

“Andasangare!?! Do we need the rest of the blood!?!”

I looked at the miasma and saw that it had been reduced by more than half in volume already, but the purification was too slow for my liking. Clearly the root-born vessel was trying to hastily break free of its cocoon.

“Do it! Pour the rest of it inside as well!”

Three of them hurried to where the hide sack had been left, then hurried over to the cocoon where they emptied it into the hole, eliciting more rumbling and tremors. More half a quarter of the purified blood spilled onto the floor, and then a sudden convulsive spasm made every last root in the ceiling, walls, and floor readjust themselves. Even though I saw it coming through my glasses, I had no way to save myself from falling over.

No sooner had I landed on the floor than I yelled, “Burn it! Put it to the torch!”

Sera, make the last bit of energy I have left in me count!

With a gleeful scream, the Ifrit materialised and flames started coating her entire body as she started hugging the cocoon. Steam and smoke hissed from where her charcoal body touched the root-formed womb of the evil Parasite, and the room continued to be gripped by spasmodic tremors.

Like drunkards, the warriors and I got to our feet, while Elye seemed to fare much better. With an overhand throw, she hurled her torch at the cocoon, where it hit the side with hollow *thunk* and plopped to the base beneath it, slowly beginning to char it from underneath.

I could feel my energy being siphoned away by Seramosa’s steady smouldering of the cocoon, but I knew that she was holding back to not hurt the Elfin whom she held dear.

The warriors all placed their torches next to where Elye’s had landed, and a small flame was already beginning to lick up the side of the cocoon from their combined fire.

“We need to get out of here so my familiar can finish the job!” I yelled to them.

The very next moment, divined to me through my glasses, an eruption of roots came from the front of the large cocoon, sending one final destructive ripple through the top floor of the tower.

“Watch out!” I yelled, but before the words had fully left my mouth, all of us were tossed to our backs and some hideously-malformed creature stood before us. It was akin to a man, as though imitating the Elfin it plagued, but it had five arms and its head looked like a melted candle. A maw was situated in its torso, and on the side of its lopsided head, while each of its arms were twice the length of a human arm and capped with too many fingers. The purified blood stained its malformed body and the noxious fumes of the evil conglomerated Parasite was steadily boiling away into white smoke.

I imagined that it would scream, since I felt that all monstrosities would roar and scream when near to death, but apart from the sounds of its burning and creaking root-formed body, it was silent.

As I was getting back to my feet, I saw Sera pivot away from the cocoon to grip onto the back of the root vessel, increasing the intensity of her flames and immediately doubling the temperature around her to a sweltering summer heat. The hiss of evaporating steam and rapidly-burning roots and wood deafened the sounds of the fire and creaking of the monster’s body.

“Get out of here!” I yelled to the Elfin as I was moving towards the exit as well.

While Elye stayed with me, Imir and his men vaulted out the window and no doubt scaled the outside. I hoped they would warn those waiting at the foot of the tower, since I doubted it would stand for long once the fires really took hold.

I more-or-less slid down the tunnel to the fourth floor, but no sooner had Elye helped me to my feet than the temperature doubled again and the ceiling nearby began to bulge and turn to ash. The monster puppeteered by the Necrotic Parasite broke through the ceiling, landing only five metres from the bottom of the tunnel to the fifth floor.

Although it had no eyes, I knew it was staring at me, and it suddenly began moving towards me, despite smouldering and smoking. The evil aura that hung about it was very small, but it seemed intent on taking me down.

I had only barely started moving towards one of the windows with Elye, when I felt the drain of my final bit of energy truly hit me. The strength fled from my body and time seemed to slow as I saw Elye vault out the nearby window without looking back, as though believing I was right behind her.

I tried to yell at her, but my voice was immediately deafened by the frustrated scream of Sera, who, in one final vengeful blast, let loose the last of her potent fire, just as she disappeared, banished by my lack of energy to fuel her.

With one glimpse back at the monster, I felt heat flush my skin and a piercing light blind me, before a warm wind lifted me and threw me out the window with such strength that I had no time to grasp at the curving walls of the bulbous floors beneath me.

Then I was in freefall.

I got to see the moment that the top two floors of the tower collapsed in on themselves.

Then I blacked out.

I gasped loudly as I sat up. Then immediately groaned in pain, tears forming in my eyes. It felt as though a thousand frigid needles were piercing my body all over and my muscles were so sore and aching that it felt as though they had each been torn apart meticulously.

“**Lay back down,**” Armen demanded, and I didn’t hesitate to obey.

“Fuck, this hurts!” I complained.

I heard footsteps from nearby, which were approaching quickly. Just then I took in my surroundings.

“Where am I?”

“*Yuuta!*” Elye exclaimed through the open doorway to my room, which, like all rooms in the Enclave, had no door for privacy.

Stars were suddenly all over and I realised that I didn’t have my glasses. I also then realised I wasn’t wearing my clothes. Then I saw the bandages of bark and silk and root-spun twine.

“Am I in a hospital!?”

Elye knelt down by my side and I realised I was lying on some kind of strange mattress on the floor. I tilted my head to look at the Elfin girl and saw that there were moss mattresses all over the room. I slowly started putting two-and-two together.

“What happened?” I asked her.

The Elfin looked at me with an intense stare. Her eyes were red-rimmed as though she had been crying a lot.

“*I thought you were going to die!*” she exclaimed and started bawling, putting her head on my chest, where a reinforcing vest-like thing of bark was wrapped around my torso.

I reached up to pat her head, though it hurt to move my arm.

“I’ll be okay,” I assured her.

“*The Menders said you were going to die!*” Elye insisted.

“Look at me,” I said. “Am I dead?”

She lifted her head and looked me in the eyes. Then she started bawling again, her whole body wracked with the effort. I hoped they were tears of happiness or relief.

“What happened after I was flung from the tower?” I asked softly.

Elye sniffed loudly. “*The tower... it collapsed. Then the Rotmaker emerged from the ruins, but father and his friends took it down, before tossing its body back onto the flames.*”

I grimaced. *What a total mess...*

“**You need to plan your escape routes better.**”

It’s not like I planned to jump from a fourth-floor window... But, I’m guessing your healing magic is the reason I’m still alive.

“Indeed.”

“Thank you,” I said out loud. Both to the girl and to my Protector.

“Has the Rotmaker been spotted anywhere else?” I asked.

“No. Father and the scouts and warriors have all been watching for signs for the last many days.”

“Wait, how long was I out?”

“Eleven days,” she answered.

“Eleven days!?”

“You sustained a major concussion, broke several ribs and your right arm too. It took me a long time to heal it all. If your Pact of the Familiar had not evolved to rank three, I do not believe I would have been able to save you.”

“Holy shit...” I muttered.

Elye hugged me tightly. It was nice to have someone care for me this way, but I couldn’t help but wish that it was Rana whose embrace I was held in.

“Ow!” I complained when she started squeezing even harder.

The Elfin did not care.

I patted her on the head again.

I guess I won’t be leaving this bed for a while, huh?

“It would be inadvisable, yes.”

So much for hurrying to Helmstatter... this detour has really been a mess, hasn’t it?

“I believe I warned you on more than one occasion.”

You won’t ever let this go, will you?

Armen let out a chuckle. It seemed even he was glad that I was still alive.