

## 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 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>		
<b>EXTERMINATION QUEST</b>	<b>TYPE:</b> <i>Troublesome</i>	<b>RANK:</b> <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>		
<b>REWARD:</b> <i>50 Copper Crowns per trophy collected</i>		
<b>REWARD:</b> <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 right eye, I mentally moved it ahead of where the three of us hugged the cliffside to stay unnoticed. I had to squint my left 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*, 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 right 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 right 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 back to 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 heedlessly 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, 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 I saw the people without my Spirit Sight confusing 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 a wide brim. 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 recognised their attire.

"What is it?" I asked.

"They're Witch Hunters, Ryūta."