

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 lost 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 voracity, 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.

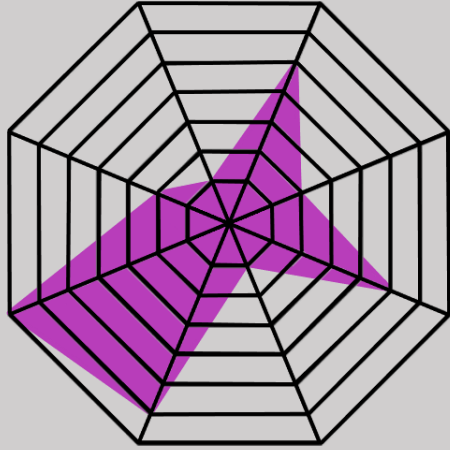
“Congratulations, you have ranked up to Seeker and can now take quests of this rank.”

“Thank you,” I replied and took my Card back.

‘TEMARU RYUUTA’

ROLE: *Exorcist*

RANK: *Seeker*

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>			

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 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 the 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.

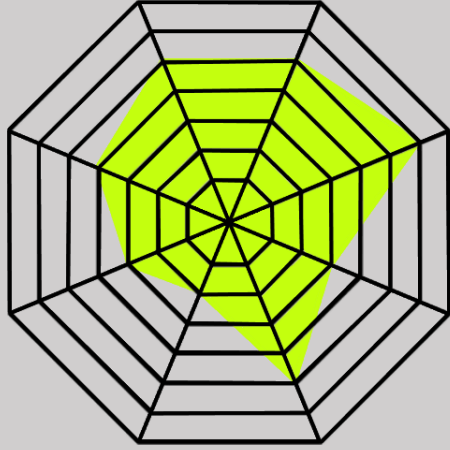
"Rogue," she stated.

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 too, 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 do 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 by 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 any established Exorcist over you any day of the week, but there's so few of us and this problem is only growing worse by the week, 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."