

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 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.

"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 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 or 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 or something?” I asked. “I feel disgusting having not taken in 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. “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 Lightkeepers 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."

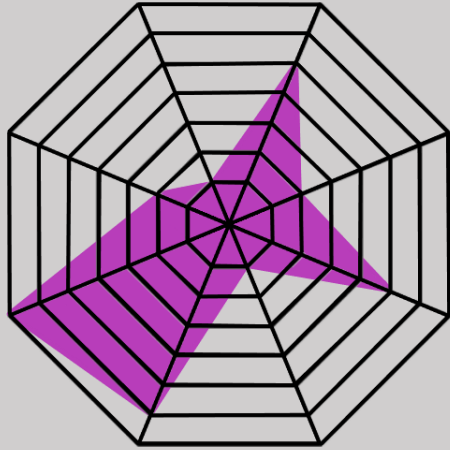
"Of course, Master Owl." Lia called over one of the other clerks and told her to gather the reward money, which was kept in a room behind the counter it seemed.

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.

Afterward, she brought out a disc-shaped soul-stone tablet and placed only my Card on it, before handed 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, 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. 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, on the other side was a single ten-gold coin. Upon seeing the money, a different kind of background murmur rose. 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 and you were left to walk home alone, wondering if anyone was following you to take it from your hands.

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. 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.”

"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.

"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?" said the owner of the restaurant as way of greeting when Rana and I entered. She laughed politely at the 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 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 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 was 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 popping 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. "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...”