

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.

The sound of a *woosh* came from the forest nearby and was quickly followed by a *crunch* as Armen intercepted an arrow mid-flight.

“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 line, 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 she 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 me, 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 ‘accomplishment’.

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 could also be 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 that we laid them on, 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 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, “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, 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 I was sure 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 sizable 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.

I sighed. *Thanks for that uplifting comment...*