

58 – The Disappearance of the Flunkie

He had changed a lot. The person I’d known had been tall, but maybe only a-metre-eighty-five not two-metres-plus. And he’d had perpetual game-binge-induced pallor, despite the fact that his dad’s side were all the kind of darker complexion you saw from a lot of people in Osaka. His hair had also been the traditionally-normal thin black. While I’d kept my normal hair, his had changed. A lot.

“I have curls now. Weird right?” he remarked mirthfully, playing with a bit of hair as he saw me looking up at it.

Though the strangest thing was that he seemed a lot older, despite the fact that his face was familiar to me, despite the fact that his eyes were now green instead of brown. I had seen him not that long before I disappeared to this world, so there was no way he should be that much older than me, unless time worked differently here. Back then, back on earth, he had only been two months older than me.

“Why are you here??”

“I know, it’s really odd, right?” he said with a laugh. But I had known Renji for so long that I could see the cracks in his charming façade.

“What happened?”

“It’s a bit of a story.” He looked around at Rana, Lukas, and Elye, his eyes lingering a moment on the Elfin, who still had her hood up. No one objected to it, so he began.

Mrs. Temaru had invited me over. She’d invited Kumi as well, but after starting in her new university and hearing about Ryūta’s disappearance, she had been oddly distant. So it was just me. Again.

My parents said it was a good idea to keep Ryūta’s mother company. She was going through a lot after all.

There were a lot of theories going around about how he could’ve just vanished like he did. The police investigation found that he’d been last seen at a 7/11 just a few streets from his house. After that, there had been no sightings. And his things were left behind in his room, so it didn’t seem as if he had run away, besides, despite everything he was going through, I knew that Ryūta wouldn’t run away from his troubles.

Some neighbours said it was the Yakuza. They had small foothold in this part of Kyoto after all, but I had asked Hanada, who ran with them, and he had said they hadn't kidnapped anyone. I believed him, because I knew he was a good guy just in with the wrong crowd.

For a few weeks there were ‘missing person’ fliers around the neighbourhood, and even a mention in the newspaper. But there had been a lot of similar cases over the last six months, so attention to his case was quickly replaced by the next story of someone disappearing.

Many people thought that maybe it was aliens.

When I arrived to his house, his mother greeted me by the door. She was smiling, but I could tell she had cried, because her eyes were puffy and slightly red. Ryūta had often confided in me about his strenuous relationship with his mother, but I knew they had still loved each other dearly.

After dinner, we talked a little bit, but it was always a bit awkward. Both for me, visiting her like this, and for her, having a friend of her son over to sit where he normally sat and talking about the things they normally talked about.

When I was about to leave their house, I paused as I heard knocking on the door. I had just put on my shoes, and opened the door, wondering if there was finally news about my friend. But no one was out there. I thought that maybe I was beginning to hallucinate, then shook my head and said goodbye to Mrs. Temaru. As I stepped across the threshold, it felt as though I had fallen into a hole, my stomach shooting up my throat.

Then I blinked, and found myself somewhere else. It took me a few confused moments of looking around in a medieval-looking renaissance fair place, before I realised that I had been transported to another world.

Suddenly, the disappearance of my friend made sense. I spent the next few days looking around for news about him and—

“Hold on,” I interrupted.

“What?” he asked, looking at me.

“You were transported here and just immediately realised you were in a new world!?”

Renji shrugged. “It was just like all those Anime we used to watch together. Although there was no ‘Truck-kun’.”

I shook my head.

“Anyway,” Renji said, returning to where he was:

After about a week, it was clear that no one in Lundia had heard of someone called Temaru Ryūta. What also just struck me as odd was the abundance of people like myself, ‘Otherworlders’ as the ‘Natives’ called us.

In just the first week I’d met people from six other worlds than Earth, as well as people from Earth that were clearly in a different time periods, such as Romans, Vikings, Mexica, Sengoku-era Samurai, and even a few people from Cold War America.

I spent a while talking to a Genius in the Adventurer’s Guild. A guy called Æmos. He taught me a lot and I confessed a lot of my problems to him. He said that if he heard about my friend Ryūta, then he’d message me.

After taking a while to get used to this new world, and working some odd jobs, which were only possible because my appearance had changed and seemed quite similar to the Native’s, I finally performed my Role Assignment.

Instead of giving the Guild Clerk my real name, I told them my name was ‘Skrald’. It was the name I had always used in games, because I thought it was cool. After completing the Assignment and getting the Role of ‘Brawler’, my friend Frode laughed and told me what my name ‘Skrald’ meant in his tongue. It turned out that my name translates to “*Garbage*” in his mother-tongue.

I was a bit dejected at being given the Role of Brawler, but over the next few months of working small jobs for the Adventurers’ and Mercenary Guilds, I came to really enjoy it. Although I never stopped being jealous of the Roles like Paladin and Spellhand, since they had such cool abilities.

When I’d been in the world for about two-and-half years, rising to the rank of Eminent in the Guild and nearing my Role Specialisation, I received a letter from my old friend, Æmos. He told me that someone with Ryūta’s name had just joined the Guild and been assigned the Role of Exorcist.

I left my Party behind in Lacksmey and headed to Lundia as fast as I could, but by the time I arrived there, he was gone. I followed in his track as I heard he had gone to Ochre with his party and mentor, a man known as ‘Owl’, who I had heard a lot of scary things about.

Once again, I was too late to find him, but discovered that he had taken a contract to escort someone to Helmstatter. After arriving in the stone capital of Arley, I spent a few weeks searching for him, but to no luck. The very same day that I was about to give up on my fruitless hunt for someone who bore my friends name, I found two members of his party by pure coincidence.

“And that’s how we got to here.”

I blinked, taking it all in.

“You’ve been here for over two years!?”

Renji laughed. “Yeah, weird right? But it’s apparently not unusual to end up in a different time-period of Mondus than people transported from the same time in their worlds. Frode, my Viking friend—”

“I’ve met him,” I told him.

“Ah, cool. He’s a nice guy right?”

I nodded.

“Well, he said that one of his friends, from his clan back on earth, is a famous historical figure in Lacksmey... from over a hundred years ago. The fact that we ended up in a time period this close together is quite lucky.”

“Lucky? Don’t you know my luck is F-tier.”

Renji grinned, then embrace me in a hug.

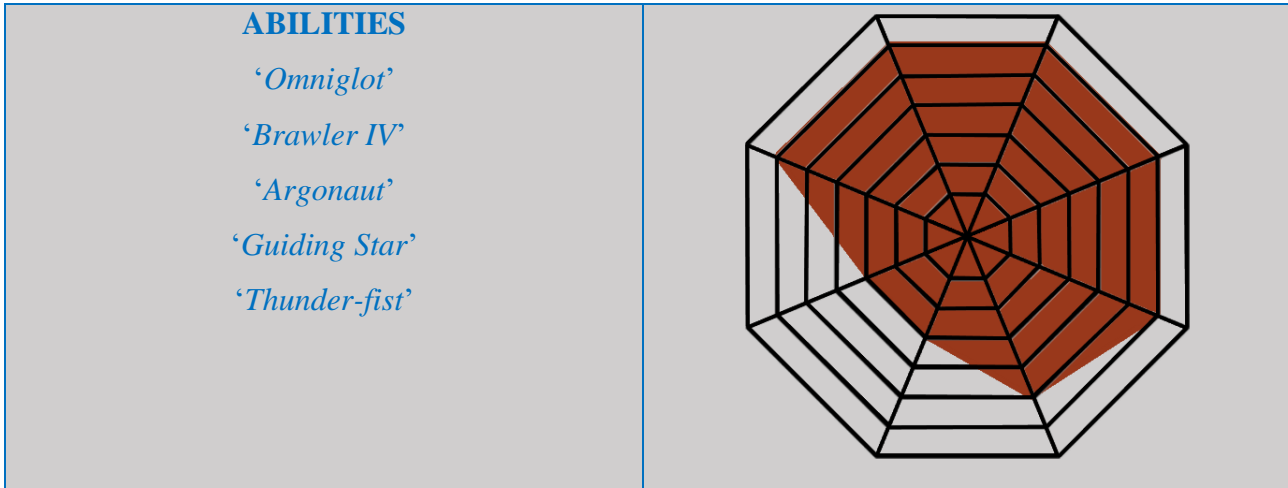
“I missed you.”

We were sharing a meal, all five of us. I had told them about how I’d been abducted in Hearthshire, and was now looking at Renji’s Guild Card, after handing him mine.

“Is it a good idea to trust this person?”

On this one point, Armen, I don’t want to hear it. Renji is my best friend. I trust him implicitly.

‘SKRALD’			
ROLE: <i>Brawler</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>20</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>A</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>A</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>A</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>D</i>	SOUL: <i>D</i>	STRENGTH: <i>A</i>	VITALITY: <i>A</i>



“Your attributes are crazy,” I mumbled, but I wasn’t surprised. I had always known that Renji’s latent physique was amazing. The track-and-field, football, and baseball clubs in Middle and High School had tried to scout him countless times, after he always showcased his amazing potential in friendly matches in PE. Occasionally, he had subbed-in to replace sick players on the football team at our High School, but he had never joined any of the clubs, preferring to stay in the Go-Home-and-Play-Games club.

“I don’t have a single S-tier,” he replied.

“Still, with these attributes, you could’ve become a lot of different Roles.”

“Except for those involving magic...”

“Brawler doesn’t have any kind of magic abilities?”

“None. Just like Ranger, Vanguard, and Rogue.”

“Brawler can specialise in Advanced Roles with access to magic,” Rana remarked.

Renji grinned. “I know, I’ve been aiming for Spellfist or Shaman.”

“I’ve never heard of those before,” I commented, curious. “I don’t even know anything about Role Specialisation. How do you ‘aim’ for an Advanced Role?”

“It’s a mix of what rank-skills you’ve gained from your original Role, you know, those extra abilities you gain as you rank up. On top of that, things such as unique abilities and personal accomplishments seem to also affect what Advanced Role you get.”

“Abilities like your *‘Thunder-fist’*?”

Renji nodded.

“But, you don’t get to choose?”

“Not really. It’s just like the Role Assignment. But, with proper planning, you can be pretty sure which Advanced Role you’ll be getting. But Shaman and Spellfist have very similar unlock requirements, but I’ll be happy with either, to be honest.”

I need to plan my specialisation better...

“**It may already be too late,**” Armen said discouragingly.

“Are you talking to your familiar?” Renji asked, his eyes glowing with excitement.

“How could you tell?”

“Brawler has a type of magic-sense,” Rana commented. Renji nodded in confirmation.

That explains how Harleigh’s Brawler friend could avoid your attacks, Armen.

I wanted to ask about Renji’s abilities, like ‘Argonaut’ and ‘Guiding Star’, but then Lukas spoke-up. He had been quiet most of the time.

“You didn’t say why your hand is like that.”

I grimaced. I was hoping none of them would inquire too much about it, since I’d glossed over that part of my retelling of events. But I decided to be transparent with them, and thus began rummaged through my pouch, until I found the voodoo doll, which I brought out. Although I didn’t let any of them touch it. I trusted them, but this was a literal link to my soul.

“Leopold chopped off my hand and turned it into *this*.”

“Is that... a voodoo doll??” Renji asked, confused.

I nodded. “It’s bound to me with the Curse of Excruciating Bond.”

“I’ve heard of that curse,” Renji replied.

“What does it do?” Lukas asked, while Rana just sat there staring at the hand in open disgust.

Elye was wobbling back-and-forth on a stool, not really paying much attention to the conversation. Seramosa, in her incorporeal state was fuzzing about the Elfin. Occasionally, Rana shot glances her way. I hadn’t yet explained my relationship with the Elfin to be fair, but I figured it could wait.

“It was a way for Leopold to hurt me and make me do his bidding.”

“...Did he make you do messed-up things?” Rana asked carefully.

“He forced me to use my ‘Contain Spirit’ ability to make items fused with summoned familiars, but that’s it. He didn’t force me to kill anyone.”

“But if that’s your hand,” Lukas started, “then what’s *that*?” He was pointing to my right hand, in which I held the doll.

I wasn’t sure when it’d happened, but the control of Sera’s heat was now fully under my command, when it came to my Ifrit Claw. At least so long as I didn’t touch her.

I put the doll back in my pouch, then was about to answer, when Renji cut in, “It’s this ‘Ifrit Claw’ mentioned in on your Card, right?”

Renji had always been quick on the uptake. “It is,” I said.

“An Ifrit is a Demon, isn’t it?” Lukas said.

Renji and Rana both nodded gravely.

“Look, I didn’t have a choice,” I defended myself. “And she’s good-natured, I swear.”

Suddenly Elye said, “*Yuuta’s flame-lady is really strong! She saved my Enclave!*”

“And this person is?”

“Elye,” I said. “She’s an Elfin I teamed up with for an Exorcism in the Skovslot Enclave.”

Renji’s expression suddenly changed to a triumphant grin. I could read his thoughts that very moment: “I knew it!”

Lukas reached out his hand to the girl, introducing herself. She took his hand in both of hers and rigorously shook it, which made him blush.

Then he turned back to face me, handing back my Guild Card. I returned his as well. I wanted to see the abilities he had, but didn’t want to intrude, though I’d probably ask him about it later. “The pact with this Ifrit. It’s a forbidden one, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“But when they appear like that, with the four question-marks, doesn’t that mean ‘forbidden’?”

“I just screwed up the Pact,” I explained. “It shows up like that because she doesn’t have a specific duty, like my Protector and my Observer.”

My friend nodded thoughtfully. “That makes sense. But your hand, how did you get it?”

Rana leaned in closer, taking her eyes off the Elfin who was now doing a handstand with a precariously-balanced stool under her. Lukas seemed very intrigued by Elye, perhaps because they were of a similar nature, both being quite hyperactive.

“My Protector has the ability to heal me, but because of my other Pacts, such as the one with the Ifrit, their various powers became mixed together, and it resulted in this.”

“Does it hurt?” Rana asked.

“Not at all. Although if she touches me, it sets on fire.”

“That’s so awesome!” Renji said. “Man, I’m jealous, Exorcists have so many cool abilities!”

Rana shot the man a glare, but I knew he meant well. He wasn’t downplaying the fact that I’d lost my real hand, but instead he was just geeking out like I’d seen him do a thousand times before.

It was honestly such a nostalgic feeling and I was glad he still had his original personality despite it all.

Upside-down and with arrows spilling from the quiver on her lower back, Elye said, “*Yuuta made a building go bwargh and crash with his magic!*”

Renji crossed his arms and nodded appreciatively. “When I unlock my Advanced Role, I’ll hopefully get cool abilities like that too.”

“Are you close?” I asked.

“I just need three more abilities to hit Rank V.”

It was really impressive how quickly he had developed his skills, but knowing him, he probably had some logbook with a hand-drawn spreadsheet, efficient workout routines, and risk-reward assessments of Quests. It was perhaps a bit of a cruel thought, given that being transported to Mondus was something none of us had asked for, but I thought that Renji was the perfect person for this world. After all, he looked like he was having fun. And he had reached a higher rank than Rana, despite being in the world half as long.

“I’m down to needing eight,” Rana said.

“Do you know what you’ll specialise in?” asked Renji.

She shook her head.

“I think I might end up as a Demonologist or Incarnate,” I joked.

There was a beat of silence as they both stared at me.

Then Renji said, “That sounds awesome!”

I shook my head with a grin.

After dinner and sharing some more stories, I followed the three of them to a different place that lay in the Artisan Quarter. It was dark out and torches were lit evenly across the main thoroughfares. Despite the lateness of the hour, there were many servants going back-and-forth, and a few wagons too. It seemed that Helmstatter was a city that didn’t truly sleep.

Eventually we came to a three-storey stone mansion that lay facing out into a plaza where a bunch of closed shop façades were visible despite the sparse light. I even noticed Jeweller.

“What’s this place?” I asked as we stopped in front of a clothing store that had been closed for the night. There was a door next to its normal entrance and Renji was unlocking it with a key.

“I rent the top floor here,” he said. “The owner of the store is a friend of mine.”

I looked up at the windows of the third floor. It looked huge.

After we all five went through the door and up a staircase to the third floor, we entered a massive apartment with a bunch of rooms, a large kitchen, a central lounge area with sofas and comfortable-looking chairs, as well as two cat-like creatures that meowed needily when they saw Renji.

“Holy shit, this place must be expensive!”

Lukas nodded in agreement, while Elye immediately started running after one of the cats, a chubby grey one with a clipped left ear.

“I figured you might as well stay here. There’s plenty of bedrooms. Just don’t go into the one in the back, that’s where the cats live and they’re very territorial.”

“Who takes care of your pets when you’re not in the city?” Rana asked.

“The owner of the store below. They’re actually hers, but they seem to like me, so they’re staying here.”

I smiled. It was yet another of Renji’s many traits: animals adored him.

“I guess I’ll take this one,” I said, after opening one of the doors and finding a simple bed. Immediately Rana was behind me.

“Does it have a lock?” she whispered, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

With a loud contented sigh, Elye plopped herself down on one of the sofas, then declared, “This is mine!”

Renji laughed, then said to the Elfin, “That big chair is mine though.”

Lukas looked around, before eventually picking a room and entering it alone, although he kept making glances towards Elye. I could already tell he was head-over-heels for her. It reminded me of my first adolescent crush, but I knew she was indifferent to him.

Renji also kept glancing her way, but that was something a bit different: he loved elves, as in, wanted to become one. In any game that allowed it, he had picked that race for himself, and he’d had many posters with both live-action and Anime elves in his room. As far as he was concerned, an Elfin was probably the closest thing this world had to offer in that regard.

With a light push, Rana shoved me into the room. I just managed to catch a glimpse of Renji grinning face before she shut the door.

“I will wait outside,” Armen said, while Rana was starting to lift my robe-coat up over my head. **“Ifrit, you ought to follow.”**

“Why!? What is happening!?”

“Best you do not stay and find out.”

Is there a freaking mute button for you guys!?

“You’re really warm,” Rana commented, then pushed me towards the bed.

“What is happening, Exorcist!?! Is this woman assaulting you!?! Why is she stealing your armour!?! I will burn her to ash!”

A flame sputtered into life around my right hand and Rana took a quick step back, before it could singe her hair or skin.

“Banish!” I said out loud and the Ifrit disappeared, taking the flame on my hand with her.

“Sorry about that,” I then told her.

Rana grinned, then said, “Where were we?”