

88 – A New Horizon

We left Linner the following dawn, leaving as the sun rose into the sky and the clouds were painted an amber hue. Renji had, unsurprisingly, stayed up all night reading and re-reading the Encyclopaedia about two dozen times. While our carriage bumbled up-and-down the hills, he snored contentedly with his head against the door. Elye was sitting on the roof of our vehicle and I was leafing through the time-worn Encyclopaedia, trying to figure out which of the entries could serve as useful familiars to bolster my arsenal.

Unlike my first one, the time-worn tome piece was full of additional information in its opening pages. It went into depth about Familiar Roles, explaining how and why such things were defined during a Pact of the Familiar. The original ones I’d been taught by Owl were among the first and most basic on the list, acting as the archetypes: Protector, Watcher, Fighter, & Tracker.

It was further expanded to include sub-types with specialised purposes and functions, such as: ‘Guardian’, which could be useful for protecting a specific location; ‘Lifeward’, which was a sort of bodyguard from the sounds of it; ‘Observer’, which I’d already discovered and which enabled the transmission of more than just sight; ‘Hunter’, an augment of the Tracker duty; ‘Trapper’, an ambush variant of the same; and ‘Seeker’, yet another Tracker sub-type that would search for something specific until it found it.

Fighter had quite a lot of variants too, such as ‘Predator’, ‘Assassin’, and ‘Exterminator’. The further into the variants you dove, the more overlap there was between the archetypes. However, there were also very fringe ones with highly-specific usages, such as ‘Healer’, ‘Messenger’, ‘Concierge’, ‘Servant’, and so forth.

The notes made a point of saying that, even these Roles granted to familiars were not absolute rules, since powerful spirits could accomplish feats beyond their assigned duty, like I’d experienced myself with Armen. One I wanted to utilise in the future was ‘Scout’, as it was advised as an augmentation of a Watcher familiar and was well-suited for preliminary exploration of Haunts.

Along with this deep-dive on Familiar Roles, was the mention of how to alter a familiar’s duty formed during Pact of the Familiar. It listed three methods: resummoning and redoing the Pact, which was the simplest one, but carried significant risk when dealing with even just semi-intelligent spirits; a complex ritual with quite a lot of unique ingredients, which was noted as having, at times, unknown

side-effects like invoking ‘Visitors’; and Object-Binding, which was akin to the way I’d made Armen into an Armour-Bound Wraith and reforged our Pact through the Binding Litany.

I frowned as I realised just what a trove of information Owl had wilfully kept from me. I suppose that, in his mind, an ignorant student was easier to manipulate. The realisation made me feel sick.

The door to the carriage opened next to me and I saw a golden-yellow field roll by outside, before Elye’s head appeared at the top, upside-down. “*Yuuta! Come! Join me!*”

“How am I supposed to get onto the roof? I’m not acrobatic like you.”

She reached towards me with her arms, while the rest of her body was on the roof above, unseen from where I sat.

I acquiesced with a sigh. “Fine, but don’t let go of me.”

With a grin plastered on her face and the amethyst necklace swinging about near her nose on its chain, she did a ‘Hurry up’ waving gesture with her hands and I put my book away, then intertwined my arms with hers. She began sliding back out of sight as I moved, hunched-over, towards the lip of the door. Although we weren’t moving more than twenty kilometres an hour, slipping and falling would no doubt still hurt.

Though it was awkward and my boots kept slipping, Elye managed to pull me out through the doorway of the carriage and up onto the roof, where I immediately collapsed onto my back, exhausted.

“*You need to train more,*” she told me.

I should’ve asked Mortimer if he had Vitality potions...

“Why’d you want me up here?” I asked, while I stared at the cloud-filled azure expanse overhead. The coachman at the front was sleeping with the reins of the two horses in his lap, ignorant to our defiance of conventional seating.

Elye pointed down the road towards the distant horizon, “*Look, Yuuta!*”

I sat up and followed her gesture. In the distance, beyond hills of farmland and the forests behind them, were vast and impressive mountain ranges, which seemed to run from one end of the horizon to the other and the tops of which were covered in white blankets.

“It’s just like Kyoto, wouldn’t you say?” remarked Renji from the opposite side of the roof, where he had suddenly emerged. With a heave-ho he was on the roof as well, and the three of us ended up sitting side-by-side with Elye in the middle, watching as the mountains seemed to not move a millimetre, despite our carriage continuing down the road towards them.

“They’re not as green,” I replied. I’d grown up not too far from the Higashiyama mountain range and they were always coated in a deep-green verdant carpet, which even heavy snow was incapable of overshadowing entirely. In contrast, the mountains in the distance here were barren from the half-way-point and up.

“Still, I think the Dragon Tooth Mountains are why Lacksmey always felt like home to me.”

“Quite an aggressive name.”

“Blame the Royal Family,” he commented. “They have a weird naming-sense to everything they do.”

“Arley seemed fine, naming-wise.”

“That’s probably because it didn’t use to be part of the Royal territory. You can usually tell which towns and villages are newer, since they’ll have strange names that often don’t fit in.”

I thought about it for a bit, then asked, “Like Ochre and Hearthshire?”

“Exactly. Lacksmey is full of names like ‘Evergreen’, ‘Altar’, ‘Slaughter’, ‘Conflagration Forest’, ‘Ominous Cavern’, and so on.”

“You know, when I met Prince Torvalder, I thought he was some kind of unique Advanced Role Otherworlder. His aura was really strong.”

“Really? I didn’t realise there was a difference.”

“Normally, Natives don’t have particularly prominent auras, which is why I guessed that Lukas could undertake the Role Assignment and join the Adventurers’ Guild. Elfin are like on the borderline between Native and Otherworlders in terms of aura.”

“You think Elye can be Role Assigned?”

“I don’t know.”

“How about it, Elye?” Renji asked.

The Elfin turned to look at him briefly, before turning back to stare at the distant mountains.

“I do not want to join a Guild.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough.”

“As I was saying though, I’d heard that the Royal Family were born in this world, but when I saw Torvalder’s aura, it was like looking at an Otherworlder. My guess is that they’re somehow able to have children and that they might’ve unlocked a unique inherited Role.”

“That seems pretty far-fetched.”

“If you had my Spirit Sight, you’d understand my reasoning.”

He nodded. “It’s not that I don’t believe you, but you probably shouldn’t mention your theory to anyone you don’t trust. The Royal Family is well-loved, even to the point of fanaticism, so to insinuate that they are Otherworlders is, to many, quite a serious insult. Perhaps it’d get you charge with treason or something crazy.”

“Woah, really?”

“Oh yeah.”

I frowned. The cynical part of my mind was sure that, given the Prince wielded Siren-like powers of manipulation, they’d planted the fanatical seed into the populace, allowing them to easily control them by becoming pseudo-deific characters.

“You’re gonna have your work cut out for you though,” Renji suddenly remarked.

“What do you mean?”

“Lacksmey is supposed to have a lot of ancient Haunters all around the place. I once worked briefly as a bodyguard for an Eminent-ranked Exorcist and he told me that his quests in Lacksmey were all super dangerous.”

I considered it for a moment. “Well, if Exorcists are as rare as I think, then it makes sense that most of those jobs go unsolved for a long time, given that they’re outside of Arley where Otherworlders appear.”

“That’s probably it, though he also told me that the Explorers’ Guild does a pretty decent job of dealing with minor Hauntings, so it leaves only the dangerous ones for Exorcists working in the nation.”

“I’ve heard about this Explorers’ Guild before, but I didn’t realise they undertook Exorcism Quests.”

“They kind of try to do everything, but, given that their members are Natives, the mortality rate is ludicrously-high. I’ve never seen one of their Exorcism Teams, but they’re supposedly like a lesser army of people working together to solve the quests.”

“That doesn’t sound like it would pay very well,” I remarked.

“On the contrary. Those Quests are paying something like ten gold, so even if it’s split between thirty of fifty people, that’s still a proper wage for most Natives who aren’t employed as skilled labour.”

I hummed to myself as I considered the prospect. “If they knew the incantations, and had the right tools and know-how, they probably could deal with most Exorcisms, even if they’re Natives.”

But then I thought about my first Exorcism Quest with the Skinstealer and reconsidered slightly. “But they must lose so many people every time... it sounds like a really terrible risk-reward equation to me.”

“And that gets to the root of why people like us are valued so much higher there. We’re uniquely suited for these tasks, and think about it: if you were to take on a Haunting there, you’re not only potentially saving dozens of Explorers that might have perished in the attempt, but also reclaiming territory that may have been off-limits for generations.”

“I wonder how much they pay for difficult Exorcisms,” I speculated.

Renji grinned. “Buying a castle wouldn’t be off the table for you, let me put it that way.”

I considered it. “Maybe I’ll try and create an Exorcist Guild if I make enough money.”

“That’s it! Dream big!”

I laughed. “I bet all your money go to a mansion in Lacksmey full of collectible trinkets and whatnot!”

“It’s not a mansion, but you’re definitely close to the mark.”

I shook my head with a smile.

Some things never change. It’s reassuring to know that Renji is as steadfast in his collectible-hoarding nerddom as ever.

Some days later we stayed overnight in a trading outpost not far from the border to the north. I spent the time browsing the stalls, pausing briefly as I saw some of the beautifully-handcrafted jewellery on sale.

I should’ve gotten Rana a necklace like what Lukas gave to Elye... maybe she’ll forget me without a memento of our time together...

Renji slapped me hard on the back, nearly knocking me head-first into a neatly-arranged display of trinkets and baubles. “Don’t look so gloomy now!”

“It’s just...”

“You can control your birds quite well, right?”

“What? I mean, yes, but why?”

Renji stooped to pick up a little frog pendant made out of malleable tin, then placed it in my hand. “Why don’t you send one of your crows off to find her and deliver a gift?”

I looked down at the frog pendant in my hand. “You want me to give her *this*?”

He smiled. “Rana means ‘frog’ in Spanish, didn’t you know?”

I shook my head in disbelief. “You don’t really understand gift-giving, do you?”

“What I do know,” he said, “Is that waiting around for something to appear out of thin air won’t solve anything. If you miss her, why not show her that you’re waiting for when she comes back.”

Kneeling down, I returned the frog pendant to where he’d found it. “I’ll find her something.”

“Attaboy,” he said, flashing me a smile before wandering off to a food stall nearby.

I tried to swallow the apprehension I felt. Part of me couldn’t forget about what she’d written in her farewell letter.

I can’t lose any more friends. All this madness, I need a break from it.

I don’t even know if I’ll come back.

What we shared, even if it was brief, meant a lot to me, and I’m sorry for leaving without saying goodbye. It was just too hard to look you in the eyes and say it.

I’m going west to the shoreline. I heard it should be nice and relaxing, and people like us are appreciated more over there.

Maybe I’ll find a reason to come back, but right now I just want to be alone.

I’m sorry.

Letting out a slow exhale, I attempted to restore calm to my tumultuous thoughts, but to no avail. Doubt and fear clouded my mind, and I worried that trying to find her, when she clearly wanted to be alone, would only alienate her from me.

I pushed the thought of buying her anything from my mind and continued down past the many stalls, looking for the requirements I needed for the summonings I wanted to undertake.

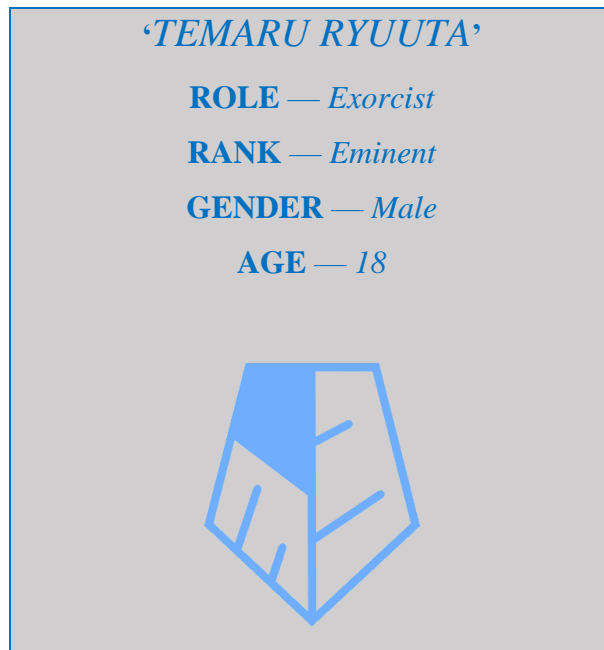
The following day we left the trading outpost and headed for the border gate. Elye, Renji, and I were all told to go through the individual inspection, which was a long line of mostly Natives, while our coachman and his carriage underwent inspection in a different area.

I was reminded uncomfortably of passing through the border control between Harrlev and Arley, but was glad to discover that the atmosphere here was less intense and scrutinising, even though there were three intimidating Witch Hunters overseeing the long procession of travellers.

As we waited for what felt like hours, a few people were occasionally removed from the line by powerfully-built guards and Otherworlders, perhaps because they’d tried to smuggle something on their person or maybe because they had a bounty on their heads. It was hard to tell.

Though I wanted to check out the actual inspection procedure, I was wary of using my Observer familiar to spy, as the Witch Hunters might misconstrue it as an act of hostility and easily pin it on me. Despite the fact that they didn’t have the ability to see auras, the Witch Hunters still possessed some kind of way to discern a person’s character.

Eventually, it was our turn and though they asked to look through my belongings, they didn’t seem to realise the value of my trinkets, tomes, or items like the Music Box. I also got away with just showing them my Mercenary Card, which, given that it stated my rank as ‘Eminent’, seemed to make them more lenient towards me, despite my Role.



When we finally came out the other side of the large gate, we found our coachman asleep at the head of our carriage. With a slight nudge I woke him and we continued on our way towards Altar.