

89 – Detour

As the border gate disappeared behind us, our carriage immediately started down the northeast-bound road that within an hour saw us deep into a peculiar forest. The trees here were towering reddish-brown spires that stood several metres apart and had canopies over forty metres above ground, while the forest floor was a thick carpet of moss, where smaller bushes and plants struggled to survive. Strangely, many flowers bloomed a few metres up the thick trunks, sprouting from the fur-like bark, almost as if hiding from the all-consuming moss that seemed incapable of climbing the tall trees.

We were all sitting atop the roof of the carriage, taking in the sights, though the coachman had complained when he saw us up here. Renji promised him to repay any damages we might unintentionally cause and that seemed to placate the driver somewhat, though he kept glancing back up at us from his seat at the front, while grumbling something unintelligible.

“Those trees are called Troll Spires. Supposedly they are likened to trolls because of their soft fluffy bark and the fact that they protect other plants.”

“I didn’t know trolls were a thing here,” I remarked.

“They are long-extinct in Hallem, but I’ve heard they live on the continent of Asra to the far east.”

“*Is the Redmoss Enclave close?*” asked Elye.

“Is that a place near Altar?” I wondered.

“I’ve never heard of it before, but there is a place called Redmoss Wilds further northeast of Altar, maybe an Enclave lies within it?”

“*I wish to go there. My father said I should visit it if I were to travel to this nation.*”

“Imir did? Why?”

“*I do not know.*”

Suddenly a light *thud* came from the roof in front of us, where a small blotch of water now lay. Then came three more, followed by a sudden deluge of uncountable droplets.

“Let’s get inside,” Renji urged and I clumsily manoeuvred down the side and in through the open door of the carriage. My hair was already completely soaked through from just a few seconds in the sudden rainfall and, as I tried to dry it while sitting on the bench inside, the sounds of the thousands of drops hitting the road, forest, and roof produced a strangely-calming melody.

Renji leaned back out through the door on his side. “Aren’t you coming, Elye?”

“*Why? The forest is bathing me.*”

My friend made a sound I’d never heard him make before, then quickly returned to his seat, his expression wide-eyed and embarrassed.

“Is she not coming?” I asked. “She’ll catch a cold.”

“Erm... she’s... erm...”

I was about to lean out of my door to check, but he grabbed me in a powerful grip and forced me back into my seat, then said, “She’s bathing in the rain!”

“What do you...?”

“Oh...”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and pulled out one of the Encyclopaedias to concentrate on, so my mind didn’t try to form a picture of what I imagined Renji had seen.

After about a minute of being unable to stop my thoughts, I turned to him and couldn’t help but laugh at his expression.

“I thought you’d be less affected by seeing *something* like that.”

“It’s not funny!”

“Prude,” I teased.

“I’m not a prude! I just didn’t expect to see... to see...”

He fell silent.

“See. Total prude.”

Some hours later, I was violently startled awake by the pained screech of one of the horses dragging the carriage. Elye, who had returned to catch a nap on the opposite bench in fully-soaked clothes, leapt to her feet and flew out the door, followed quickly by Renji.

I scrambled out after them, managing to catch a glimpse of something dark and fuzzy clamped about the throat of one of our horses, while the other was panicking and trying to wrestle free of its reins.

A *fwoosh* sounded as an arrow curved around the horses and struck the attacking creature in its neck, sending it to the ground as it released its grip, before quickly scrambling off the road and into the bushes that grew in the ditch. The horse was already bleeding out and too late to save, though the coachman tried to staunch the profuse bleeding, while bawling his eyes out.

As Elye chased after the fuzzy animal, Renji came over to my side and said, “There should be a village nearby, can you check it with your familiar?”

“Why? What the hell was *that*?”

“They’re called Black Hounds. They always hunt in packs of six, so there are bound to be more around.”

I nodded. “I’ll look. Which direction is it? Further up?”

Renji pointed in a direction almost perpendicular to the road, meaning it was somewhere inside the forest to the west. As I sent Karasumany off to explore it with our senses connected, I quickly saw a dirt road that’d split from the main one about a hundred metres behind us. It was still raining profusely and much of the forest floor had become a muddy hard-to-traverse terrain, with small ponds having spontaneously formed on top of the mossy understory.

I saw Elye leap across the ground in long skips, while letting loose arrows that seemed to defy the laws of physics by bending nearly ninety-degrees to strike the Black Hound she was chasing. The creature itself was like a dog-sized four-legged tarantula with two sets of mandibles.

I was really hoping this world didn’t have giant spiders...

“Let me burn it to cinders!”

Absolutely not. Besides, there’s no way your fire will be effective in this weather.

The Ifrit grumbled, then flew off to follow Elye in her incorporeal form.

As I moved my crow familiar along the muddy dirt road that snaked into the forest, I spotted the outskirts of a village and heard screams upon the air, while seeing Natives battling a veritable horde of the Black Hounds using basic tools.

“The village nearby is under attack!” I said to Renji, while my right eye saw the devastation unfolding. There were already so many dead. “There’s at least twenty of those hounds.”

“Got it. Let’s go!” Renji said and immediately started running down into the ditch and out into the forest.

“What am I meant to do!?” I yelled after him, but he didn’t respond.

Fuck...

I broke the connection to Karasumany, then went over and checked on the coachman. He was sitting on the wet gravel, holding the head of his dead horse, while the other was ruffling his hair with its large mouth, almost as if to comfort him. The carriage wasn’t going anywhere, but I worried that he’d be vulnerable if left alone.

“Do you want me to stay with you?” I asked. “More of those things could come back, they’re swarming the village nearby.”

“Don’t worry about me,” he said in a sombre tone. “Go help your Party.”

I grimaced. Part of me had hoped he'd ask me to play guard, since I had no idea what aid I could lend Renji and Elye, who clearly were more suited for fighting terrifying animals. Nevertheless, I gave him a curt nod and then followed after my friends.

Branches pulled at my clothes and skin as I forced my way through the bushes in the ditch, as I broke free of their grasp, my right boot immediately sunk into the soft moss-covered earth. With a grunt of effort, I pulled myself loose, then began trudging after Renji, who strode across the understory with ease.

I reconnected with Karasu as I laboured towards the village some half-kilometre away. Though the giant trees of the forest weren't densely-packed, they still managed to obscure anything further than a hundred metres in. My main concern, as my breath came-and-went in quick burst, was not getting lost.

Terrified screams and angry yells floated through the air, reaching my familiar in the sky before touching my ears. Loud *cracks*, *thumps*, and *slams* followed the yells, and each of them elicited a warbling screech.

Moving Karasumany further ahead, I saw that Renji and Elye were already laying into the Black Hounds that'd overrun the village. The Brawler stomped and punched the animals into smithereens, while the Elfin parkoured around-and-over fences, houses, and people running for their lives, letting loose one curving arrow after the next. It struck me then that I'd never truly witnessed Elye fight, but she was clearly a natural, although the Elfin were in general nothing to scoff at when it came to martial prowess.

As I watched her dispatch several of the dog-sized creatures, saving dozens of lives in the process, I knew that there was a Ranger hidden in her. It was a shame that she didn't want to undertake the Role Assignment, but I wouldn't force her. After all, if I was understanding the System of this world correctly, the only thing offered by the Guild Card was a visualisation of the talents tied to a person's soul and their gifted Role. It obviously helped with guiding one's progression and revealing the abilities inherent to one's Role, but it wasn't as if it was a key to unlocking those talents. But I would try and learn about Rangers' abilities, such that I could help guide her a little bit.

I finally reached the muddy road, which was elevated slightly above the moss-covered understory, and began running towards the nearest group of villagers fighting off three Black Hounds, armed with simple spades and axes that had little effect against the animals' deceptively-strong hides.

Pulling the Singing Branch from my back, I aimed it shakily towards the frontmost Hound, before expelling a tiny bit of energy out through my right hand, where it brought along some of Sera's soul

that filled the charcoal limb. I pictured the shape of the spell I wanted to cast and used the staff as my Focus.

“Repel!” I yelled, sending a condensed spear of invisible energy covered in a fine layer of flames into the nearest animal.

As my spell connected, the Hound exploded into a red mist with a *bang* and the two behind it were flung several metres into the air.

I came to a halt, looking at the staff in my hand. *Why didn't I use this as my Focus from the start!?*

Moving closer to the villagers I was defending, I prepared another charge, imagining something wide, like a scythe, before repeating the invocation.

“Repel!”

The wide spell managed to hit both of the Hounds, where they had landed in a discombobulated state, and, with a concussive *boom*, they were both smeared into paste along the dirt.

I couldn't help but smile at how powerful my Repel had become. The Singing Branch was obviously the main source of the power, but it still felt amazing to have the ability to contribute outside my familiars, since it often felt like I offered nothing by myself.

“Are you alright?” I asked the villagers.

Two of them nodded thankfully, while the rest looked at the remains of their attackers, giving me cautious and apprehensive glances.

I used Karasu to look for more of the monsters, but noticed that the few left alive were quickly scurrying off to the southwest.

“I think you are safe for now,” I told the villagers, then left to find Renji and Elye.

After a few minutes, I found the Brawler cleaning his gauntlets by a little pond in the village centre, using a small bucket and a coarse brush. As I approached him, I spotted Elye running around the place, while pausing at the kills she'd made and retrieving her arrows, before moving on.

“Renji,” I said, feeling quite proud, “I saved some people all by myself, without my familiars.”

He looked up at me. “Good work, Ryūta.”

“I saw a bunch of them running away, but they might come back.”

He answered with a nod, then looked behind me at someone that was approaching. The rain had mercifully started to let up, but there was not a face in sight whose clothes were not soaked-through. I turned to face the approaching men and saw that one of them was part of the group I'd saved.

“Otherworlders,” said the frontmost of the men, someone in his late thirties perhaps, who had an air of authority about him and a faint yellow aura. “I must express the gratitude of Troll Root village for your timely aid. Without you, surely many of us would’ve perished, myself included.”

People in the houses nearby were cautiously opening their doors and windows to look out. Some of the homes had clearly been broken into by the Black Hounds, as attested to by caved-in doors and shattered windows, but it seemed that most of the children and elderly had still decided to trust the safety of their houses. Meanwhile, the men had been tasked with the defence, which was an unenviable task to be certain.

“You were fortunate we were passing by, but you have our Party Leader here to thank,” Renji said, gesturing to me.

The village representative reached out and grabbed my rain-slick hand, shaking it vigorously. Some of the villagers yelled their heartfelt thanks from their houses, but most were busy assessing the damage and lost lives. There were husbands, fathers, and brothers who had not survived the attack in order to defend their families and community.

“If you are okay with it, I would like to perform the funerary rites of the deceased,” I said.

After using some of the water from Troll Root’s pond and Sanctifying it to produce Holy Water, I performed the Ritual of Obsequy on the nine people who had died. The youngest among them was my age, while the oldest looked to be about sixty. It was hard not to let the sight of their deaths affect me, but I took solace in the task I was performing.

As I said the words, the village chief draped the men’s faces with some white cloth and then carefully dripped some of the holy water onto their bodies.

In total, it was no more than ten minutes of work, but I could tell that it was a gesture that had ingratiated me and my Party with the village to an extent I would normally not have thought possible. Part of me wondered if they believed that I was a Spellhand and not an Exorcist, given that my Repel was masquerading as a fire-spell, thanks to the Ifrit’s touch, but another part of me wanted to believe it didn’t matter.

I was suddenly brought back to the first time I’d used the ritual on a human, back when my Party had, while escorting Myrabelle Gyldenrose, been ambushed by Natives led by an Otherworlder. The memory was soured by the knowledge that, had I tried to listen to the Ambushers’ words, I might’ve prevented the calamity in Helmstatter, though I knew it could not be *that* simple. The lengths that Owl had gone to ensure Renji and Rana were in Helmstatter at the right moment seemed to indicate

that the arrival of the Flayed Noble was an inevitable event or that, perhaps, it was the event that led to the fewest deaths. It was a terrifying thing to consider.

When I returned to the central pond where I’d left Renji and Elye, I found the Brawler conversing with a village huntsman. They seemed to be talking about the nearby terrain.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I drew close. I then noticed that Renji had put his gauntlets back on. “Are you going after them?”

He nodded. “They must have a large den nearby for there to be so many working together.”

If Rana was here, she’d caution us to do a proper risk assessment and weigh the reward against the potential danger.

“You’re going too, Elye?”

“It has been long since I hunted. I want to help!”

I smiled. “I see. Well, be careful.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Renji asked, surprised.

“I’d just slow you down.”

“Your familiar could be quite useful in devastating their hideout,” he replied.

“Yeah, but the terrain is difficult to traverse and I think the two of you could do it more efficiently, but I’m glad you don’t see me as a burden.”

“Are you kidding me? When have you ever been a burden?”

“Yuuta is the most powerful Andasangare I know!”

Their sincerity hit me like a hammer-blow to the heart and I felt a clump form in my throat. “Be safe out there,” I just replied.

Renji grinned. “We’ll be back before you know it.”

And then they were off, the village huntsman leading the way.