

ISEKAI EXORCIST

I'm an Exorcist?

The 7/11 chime played and the automatic doors started closing behind me. In my hand was a plastic bag with a bottle of lemon tea, a salmon onigiri, and a lukewarm nikuman. Already the flimsy handles of the bag were digging into my skin.

It was late spring and the air had started warming significantly over the last few days. It was sure to be another sweltering summer this year.

The clap of my sandals against the heels of my feet followed me as I walked up the slope to the street where my house lay. In hindsight, it was still a bit too cold for sandals and bare feet, but I'd been too lazy to put on proper shoes when I left the house, after all, I was only going to be out for a few minutes before I went back to studying.

Although I'd failed this year's entrance exam, I was determined to study enough that I would ace it next January. Still, that was such a long way away.

I sighed as I pulled open my house door. I'd promised mom that I'd get into a good university, but look where that'd gotten me. Now I was a Rōnin, left to wander the streets of Kyōto until next year, while all my high school friends were having fun with their new classmates.

How long before they forget me?

I pushed the thought from my mind and hung my windbreaker by the door. The plastic bag with my lunch I placed on top of the console table next to the coatrack. It was ugly and its colour didn't match the walls whatsoever, but mom loved that thing and refused to throw it out.

Before I could take my sandals off, there came a knock from the door.

That's odd, I thought. I hadn't seen anyone else outside on the street.

I opened the door and looked outside, but there was no one there.

As I stepped through the doorway to check, I felt my stomach shoot up into my throat as though I suddenly fell through the ground and my vision flickered black several times.

A buffet of summer-warm wind ruffled my hair and I opened my eyes to my surroundings. The street outside my house was gone, its asphalt road and houses replaced with trampled dirt and a bustling marketplace.

Next to me, a woman yelped in alarm and I turned to look, realising quickly that I'd been the cause of her fright.

I suppose that makes sense. I did after all just suddenly appear next to her.

As I looked around, walking a bit aimlessly back-and-forth between the many market stalls, I felt as though I'd stepped through a wormhole to a different time and place. The people near me, all of whom were staring curiously at me I might add, looked distinctly European in their features and wore what could only be described as medieval peasant clothes.

I had to grab my head to stop my mind from reeling.

Am I having a really strange dream right now? Or maybe I'm hallucinating?

It was not yet warm enough for a heatstroke, but maybe this was the side-effect of not hydrating properly?

I pinched my cheek as hard as I could.

"Ow."

Okay... not a dream.

I crouched and scooped a handful of dirt from the ground, moving it around with my fingers. It felt very real, so hallucination was probably out of the picture too.

Not knowing what else to do, I walked up to one of the stalls. A blonde and tan trinket vendor with sausage fingers covered in rings stared up at me from where he sat.

"Excuse me? Where am I?"

He looked at me like I was stupid, then sighed and said, in perfect Japanese with the same Kansai dialect as me, "This is the city of Lundia. It sits eighty leagues inland from the port of Ochre."

"Thank you," I replied and walked away from his spread of jewels, rings, and timepieces. I had no idea what a league was nor why he was perfectly comprehensible to me, despite clearly being of a different nationality.

After walking around the marketplace for fifteen minutes or more, I found a guardsman who was clad in polished platemail and hugged a tall lance. He was standing guard outside a building that might have been a bank or luxury store.

"Excuse me," I started, but before I had a chance to ask my question, he took one look at my clothes and replied:

"The Adventurers' Guild is down *that* street and to the left, you can't miss it."

I followed the direction he pointed with his left hand and nodded my thanks before going that way.

I have no idea what I'm doing here, but maybe this Guild can help me?

The Adventurers' Guild was indeed quite easy to spot, as it towered over the nearby one-storey buildings and was built not of wood, but rather of stone, with green shingles on its roof. Its crimson wooden doors were flung wide open and there seemed quite a throng of people within.

After entering, I saw that half the place was like a tavern, with people drinking and eating around circular tables. Many of the people within, Adventurers I guessed, were dressed in elaborate flowing robes or brutal-looking armour, with their weapons of choice leaning against their chairs or strapped to their waists. Some of them turned and snickered when they saw me enter, but most seemed to purposefully ignore my arrival.

What struck me the most, however, was not their clothes nor weapons, but rather that many of them looked just as out of place as me, with their features showing more than just the European features I'd seen in all the people about town.

Maybe they're like me? I thought hopefully.

I walked up to the nearest person: a tall musclebound black man dressed in spike-covered leather armour who was leaning against one of the wooden pillars that supported the tall ceiling to the second floor. His palms were both placed on the pommels of two shortswords that hung from each hip.

Before I could utter a single word, he pointed to a queue of about eight people on the other side of the floor, "Newcomers have to register."

Puzzled, but assuming this was the way to get answers, I got into the line of people. At the front, a desk with a kind-looking woman dressed in a green blouse and skirt with blonde twin-tails was greeting the people and having them place their hands on a strange glyph-covered black-grey slate. The glyphs glowed a strange frost-blue.

After about twenty minutes, when my legs were starting to get sore from standing, I got to the front of the line.

"Name, please."

"My name is Temaru Ryūta. I was hoping you could—"

"How do you spell that?" she interrupted.

"Oh, erm, my family-name is the sign for Hand and Circle, with my given-name being the sign for Willow and the one for Fat."

She looked at me, confused, then showed me what she'd written on her scroll. She was writing in romaji.

"Hmm, I think it's T-E-M-A-R-U R-Y-U-U-T-A in Roman lettering."

"Thank you. My name is Caroline, and I will be performing your Adventurer Role Assignment today."

"My *what*? I don't understand what's going on or why I'm here. Or where 'here' is for that matter..."

She nodded, as if this wasn't news to her. As if my situation here was commonplace...

"I am unfamiliar with the World you are from, but you are currently in Mondus, specifically the western continent of Hallem. This city is called Lundia and is part of the Principality of Arley."

"Is it... common for people like me to be here?"

Caroline nodded solemnly. "No one knows why, but Otherworlders like yourself appear in Lundia quite frequently. It has actually become the backbone of the Adventurer industry, as most commonfolk would never take on such jobs as what we offer."

"How do I get back home? I don't want to be here... my family will be worried!"

"I understand this is hard to digest, Temaru-san, but there is no way for you to return to your world. My best advice would be to take the Role Assignment and try to make a living in Lundia for a while doing quests for the Guild. Hallem is a fantastic place for explorers and travellers, and many who were in your situation have found a new life here and even seem to thrive."

I was trying my best not to panic, while parts of my brain were still locked firmly to the belief that I was dreaming. In the end, as the next person in line voiced their frustrations at the delay, I caved in and told her, "I'll take the Role Assignment."

"Excellent."

Caroline brought out the slate I'd seen earlier and bade me place my hand on it. Its black stone was frigid to the touch and the glowing sigils seemed to throb gently as I put my clammy hand on its surface.

I held my hand on it for what might have been a moment, but which felt like hours, especially considering how I got the sense that everyone was staring at me and awaiting the result. As the slate's glyphs started blinking, she had me lift my hand, before, somehow, interpreting the response of the tablet. It seemed to make as much sense as reading the stains left by tea in a cup to me, but she apparently understood how to read it, because she announced, louder than I felt necessary:

"Exorcist."

I had half a second to think “Oh man that sounds super cool!”, but then I noticed the responses of the crowded tavern and nearby observers. Some laughed, a few sighed disappointed, but most seemed to just instantly lose interest.

Before I could ask what my Adventurer Role was good for, she handed me a credit-card-sized stone tablet of the same nature as the tablet. Rather than esoteric symbols I had no way of deciphering, the card was covered in legible symbols. I once again had to wonder why everyone spoke Japanese and why the card was covered in Japanese text, when they clearly did not use the language.

Caroline cleared her throat and told me, “This is your Adventurers’ Guild Card. Your first one is free, but, if you lose it, a replacement will cost three gold crowns. You can use this card to see your Status, Abilities, and Guild Rank. Make sure to always keep this on you, because it’s required when accepting and turning in quests.”

“Thank you,” I said, because I didn’t know what else to respond. Things were already completely beyond my control. “Erm, how am I supposed to learn about my Role, this world, and, you know... everything?”

“I understand that you must have a lot of questions, Temaru-san. You can learn the answers to many of them by speaking to the Genius in the library on the second floor or from your fellow Adventurers. I would also recommend looking at what kind of groups have openings for new members, although...”

“Although?”

“I’m sorry to say this, but your assigned Role is very specialised and does not have a lot of synergy in groups. It’s generally a solo Role that takes on very difficult quests which no other Roles are capable of dealing with.”

“Are you kidding me?” I almost blurted out, but instead I managed to keep my calm and simply asked, “Can I change my Role then?”

“Unfortunately, that is not a possibility. Although if you make it to a higher rank you will be able to specialise in an Advanced Role with more group utility.”

“...If?”

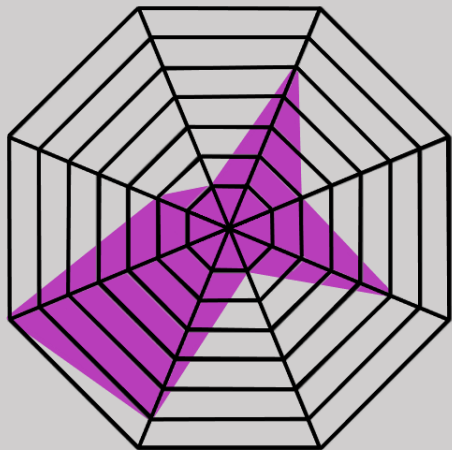
Caroline suddenly blushed, realising she had let that one slip in.

Great... Not only am I in a completely foreign land with apparently no way of getting home, but I had the misfortune of being assigned a Role that sounds like a death sentence...

“Thank you for your help,” I told her. She was not to blame for my circumstances, so I couldn’t exactly fault her for it.

I finally took the Guild Card from her hands, before leaving the line. There weren't a lot of people waiting in the queue for registration, but it had definitely grown while I was at the front of it, which made me feel rather guilty and embarrassed.

As I moved closer to the tavern section of the Guild Hall, where large boards were plastered with quest scrolls of varying types, as well as group posters, I looked down at the card in my hand and saw how I had been reduced to a bunch of very clinical estimates:

'TEMARU RYUUTA'			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Novitiate</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>			

Two E's and F's...

I didn't really know what each of the eight attributes represented, but I guessed that my Role was determined from all of these combined. Considering the brief description of the sort of jobs I could expect, maybe an F-rating in Luck was mandatory to become an Exorcist?

The E in Strength and Dexterity seemed pretty accurate to my real-life physical condition, as I had been one of the slowest and weakest boys in my high school class. As for Vitality, I had no idea what *that* represented, though it could possibly be my physical endurance, given that I tired easily from just a brisk jog.

Soul, Pact, and Acumen were not immediately clear to me. I had never been much of a gamer, so while I could recognise some game elements from this place and setting, my understanding was so shallow that I had no idea if it applied here nor how it could be applied...

Renji would've known what to do if he was here... I complained internally. He had always been the smartest of my friends, somehow managing to attain the highest grades in every field, while also maintaining an all-consuming Gaming Otaku lifestyle. I'd watched him play hundreds of games, and listened to his long exposés of how to do *this* and how to do *that*, though now I wish I'd been paying more attention, as it was clear that his wisdom had been wasted on me.

I bit my lower lip in consternation. My string of misfortune had only continued, even though I had done my best to improve. Failing to get into university had been a wake-up call for me to take life more seriously and do something about my many shortcomings. I had even managed to build up the courage to confess to my high school classmate Inoue Kumi, who, instead of flat-out rejecting me, had said she would think about it and let me know her answer during the summer, though now I would never hear what answer she had.

While I seared the image of the colourful little graph that was supposed to represent me as a person into my retinas, I felt an overwhelming wave of despondency settle on me like a weighted blanket.

What will mom say when she gets home and sees I'm no longer there? Will she be relieved that her failure of a son is gone? Or will she be sad and report me missing?

Given how our last argument had gone, I couldn't truly say I knew. I still remembered her accusations that I had wasted all the money she had spent on getting me into a private high school and prestigious cram schools. I had never wanted to be a doctor like she desired of me and perhaps, as a kind of rebellion against her will, I had failed the entrance exam intentionally. I hadn't been a bad student in high school, so perhaps my failure was a deliberate self-sabotage that I could never admit to myself?

The last time I had seen Renji before the summer, he had clapped me on the back and told me things were going to be alright. I had honestly believed him.

...but look at me now.

After shouldering my way to the Quest Boards and perusing the options for a while, I found a quest for an Exorcist of Novitiate Rank like me. From looking at the many other quests, I knew that those that asked for a specific Adventurer Role were extremely rare, and, besides Exorcist, the only other

ones I saw on display were Priest and Hunter, the former for its apparent ability to ‘heal’, and the latter for its tracking and animal handling. I had also gathered that, besides the Rank requirement, each quest had a difficulty/complexity scale, which ranged from Simple to Perilous. Unsurprisingly, the only Exorcist Quest on offer was ranked the highest difficulty...

If I were to actually take a quest from the board, I knew I’d go with the Simple-rated Gathering or Delivery types, which, although not having much of a reward, at least offered a steady income, although I didn’t really understand the currency here nor its value. Granted, if I were to actually take the Exorcism Quest and complete it, the reward was one gold and forty silver crowns, while the Simple everyone-can-do-it types only offered a few dozen copper crowns.

I seriously doubted I’d commit to the dangerous Adventurers’ Guild work though, and besides, no one had said I couldn’t just find a job in the town of Lundia. After all, I was okay with my hands when it came to repairing electronics and making things, plus I had some experience from my part-time job at a Yakitori restaurant, so I could make some simple meals and wait on customers.

Before really deciding on what I’d do, I wanted to speak to the ‘Genius’ on the second floor. I had yet to talk to any of the established Adventurers that lounged in the tavern and near the Quest Boards, but I was hardly the only Novitiate that found them imposing and intimidating. Although, when a person was announced as having the Priest Role, many of the lounging Adventurers had swarmed the guy, eager to acquire him for their group. Even Roles like Vanguard, Brawler, Ranger, and Spellhand had all found modest interest from groups. Unsurprisingly, female Novitiates were all given a lot of attention, which made me wonder how the mass of Adventurers would react to a Girl Exorcist.

As I began climbing the staircase to the next floor, I realised how ridiculous I must look, given how I was still wearing my sandals, as well as comfortable pyjama-esque pants and a threadbare t-shirt with a panda print on the front that said “*I hate morning people*” in English text. I doubted my bedhead hair and sullen eyes were much to write home about either. Not for the first time in my life, I felt envious of Renji, who had somehow gotten the S-tier package deal: he was handsome, smart, funny, and charming. The fact that he had been my friend since middle school was one of my proudest accomplishments, although it had been tough constantly being the go-between for the girls who wanted to ask him out, but I had treasured my friendship with him nonetheless.

I let out a sigh as I reached the first-floor landing and didn’t pay much attention to the floor before ascending to the second. With every step came the awful slap of the squishy plastic sandals against the soles of my feet. If not for the fact that there was dust, dirt, and errant stones everywhere in the

building, I would've taken the sandals off. If someone came to this world and brought the invention of the vacuum cleaner with them, they would become an instant billionaire, I was sure. No sooner had the thought hit me than I remembered that I had left my house with my phone and wallet in my pockets.

Stopping halfway up to the second floor, I began patting down my deep trouser pockets, but found nothing within except my new Card and some balls of lint...

So much for wowing the general populace with my hyper-advanced technology...

Then again, if they have magic here, maybe they already have some equivalent to the smartphone? I thought, thinking back to the stone tablet. And I could hardly be the only person here who had the thought of bringing technology with me. Perhaps the people of this world were reticent to change or maybe they just didn't trust people like me who randomly showed up?

As I reached the second-floor landing, I was greeted by tall bookcases that created a maze of sorts. Each shelf was half-a-metre deep, as there were as many scrolls packed in as books, but, just looking at it, I highly doubted I was meant to rifle through stuff and find the answers that way. The Guild Representative had mentioned a 'Genius', which I was mostly certain was a title for a person, though, as I began my foray into the bookcase-maze, I started to doubt myself. I began to double back, when I suddenly noticed a path that led deeper into the centre of the floor, and, as I rounded a corner, I entered into an office of sorts.

Three large desks surrounded a figure sitting cross-legged atop a wooden swivel stool, each of which was piled high with wobbling stacks of books and pyramids of scrolls. The figure was holding one end of a scroll high above his head, while using his free hand to scratch his chin as he studied the contents.

"Erm, pardon the intrusion, but..."

The man moved the hand holding the scroll slightly, so that he could see me. Round thick-lensed spectacles sat atop his nose and his long unkempt dark-grey hair fell down across his face and back. He went barefooted and only wore a lab-coat-esque garment with wide overlong sleeves and deep pockets on the side.

"You're the new Exorcist."

"Erm, yes, that's me. Wait... how'd you know?" I definitely hadn't seen this guy in the hall and it seemed like he might have been in this place for days, given that there was something like a sleeping bag on the floor, as well as the leftover dirty trays from at least a dozen meals.

"I expect you're looking for answers to your many questions?" he asked, not answering my question.

"Well, yes."

The Genius, or at least I assumed that's who this guy was, nodded sagely, then said, "You can't go home. Yes, you're stuck with your assigned Role. You could try to find work outside the Guild, but the native population of Lundia despises Adventurers and actively prevent them from finding honest work, meaning you'd no doubt end up in something shady and illegal if you *were* to find employment."

"What about my friends and family?"

The Genius tilted his head slightly, as though not following.

"Aren't people going to question my disappearance from the real world?"

He replied with a shrug, before adding, "No one knows, because, you see, none of us can go home to check."

"Are you an Adventurer yourself?"

"Of a sort, I suppose. I was assigned the Role of Librarian, then later specialised as a Genius. It's a comfy job if you like reading and organising information, but I don't do a lot of Adventuring."

"Can I see your Guild Card?"

He squinted slightly suspiciously.

"If you're willing to trade," he replied. That made me pause. After all, if he destroyed it or decided to not return it, getting a new one issue would take a lot of money. Money that I definitely did not have. But did it really matter either way? I was fairly sure I wouldn't do any Guild quests.

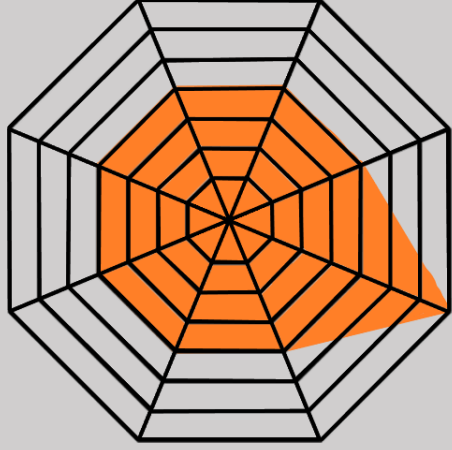
"You're thinking that replacing a Guild Card will cost a fortune, but that you don't mind losing the Card regardless."

"Does your Genius Role include mind-reading?"

The man shrugged.

I ended up handing him my Card and he handed me his in exchange. Before I could even take a look at his Status and Abilities, I heard him chuckle and say, "...Two F-tiers."

I couldn't help but blush. Showing someone else my status was surprisingly embarrassing. After all, it was like giving them a report card of all my grades from my finals exams. I looked down to the Card in my hand and frowned at what I saw.

ROLE: <i>Genius</i>		RANK: <i>Savant</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: 39	
ACUMEN: <i>C</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>C</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>S</i>	LUCK: <i>C</i>
PACT: <i>C</i>	SOUL: <i>C</i>	STRENGTH: <i>C</i>	VITALITY: <i>C</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Librarian V’</i> <i>‘Genius V’</i> <i>‘Nightmare Feeder’</i> <i>‘Omniscient’</i>			

C in everything except Intelligence, which is S-tier...

“How come you don’t have a lot of abilities?” I asked. I couldn’t tell if this was the norm or not, but I’d assumed that someone at his Rank would’ve had more. I almost asked what the ‘Nightmare Feeder’ skill was, but was honestly too scared by the title to ask.

“As I say, I stay mostly stay cooped up with my books, but my Librarian Skill Set allows me to create scrolls that mimic other Roles’ abilities, so long as I have the attributes to match. And before you ask, no, I cannot use any Exorcist abilities. They all require an S-tier in Soul.”

We swapped back Cards and I took a moment to look at my own abilities. Omniglot was self-explanatory, as it simply meant that I could understand all languages, hence why everything sounded and looked like Japanese to me, except for times like when the Guild Representative had written out my name or when I looked at the Genius’ unique name.

“What does ‘Exorcist I’ mean?”

“Each Role has something like it, but it’s your basic Skill Set that includes the abilities of your Role. To view them, you just have to tap it with your finger and it expands.”

I did as he said and tapped the ability name, which caused the list to expand and become a continuously-scrolling list, as it was too long to encompass all the elements within the frame of the card. Before I could really get a good look at all the abilities available to me, Æmos continued:

“Skills come in five levels, and with things like your Role Skill Set, the entire thing will reach level two after you train at least half the abilities within to that level. Think of it as different levels of math, with the first level being simple things like subtraction and addition, and the final being like quantum physics. Some abilities are easier to level than others, but I’ve heard it compared to training certain muscle groups, where some are quick to bulk up and grow stronger with hardly any effort, and others take more concentrated and specific training to accomplish the same results.”

I nodded slowly. It seemed quite an extreme comparison, but perhaps there was such an extreme difference in the Abilities and their power? After a few cycles of the scrolling text, I had a grasp on the abilities included in ‘Exorcist I’. They were as follows: *Banish; Contain Spirit; Focus Wielder; Hymnal; Investigation; Invoke Ritual; Meditation; Offering; Pact of the Familiar; Possessed Weapon Wielder; Repel; Sanctify; Soul Barrier; Spirit Sight; Staff Wielder; Summon; Ward Crafter; & Worship.*

“Could you explain some of the Attributes to me as well? Like, what does Soul, Acumen, and Pact mean?”

The Genius nodded curtly. “Of course. Soul is the counterpart to Vitality and represents your spiritual endurance and defences, governing how many spells you might use before exhausting yourself and how much resistance you have against spells that affect your spirit and mind directly, such as Possession, Sleep, Madness, and so forth. Some people equate Soul to the term ‘Mana’, but that excludes the defensive element, which is very important against many of the challenges and monsters Adventurers face. Particularly Exorcists who have to deal with wraiths, demons, and the like.

“Acumen is something like innate wisdom, but seems to affect accuracy and tinkering as well. A low Acumen is generally seen as impulsive and lacking forethought, as well as being clumsy with spells and ranged weapons. It’s probably the hardest of the Attributes to define, but you don’t have to think too much about it. Pact is one that is however quite easy to define, as it governs your ability to deal with anything like a ritual or summoning, but it also affects how easily you might form bonds with familiars and pets, hence why it is a C-tier requirement for Hunters, who have the ability to tame wild animals.”

“So the Roles we’re assigned is based on meeting requirements then?”

“As far as we understand it, yes. Amusingly, Exorcist is the only Role I am aware of which requires an F-tier in an Attribute.”

I frowned. It wasn’t really that amusing to me.

“Listen, Ryūta, this situation that you’re in is definitely bad luck. It’s very few people who would actively wish to be taken away from their world and be faced with perilous quests by an uncaring world that honestly despises them for their very nature. No one knows why all of us are here, nor why only we ‘Otherworlders’ have access to all *these* powers, but you’re going to have to accept your new Role. There is no room for mistakes and half-heartedness when it comes to being an Adventurer, especially not with a Role as difficult and complex as yours.”

I had a grim thought that I blurted out. “What’s the mortality rate for Exorcists?”

Æmos didn’t say anything for a moment, surprised by the question. “I don’t think you’d gain anything by me telling you that.”

“I’d still like to know.”

He unfolded his legs and rolled-up the scroll in his hand, before adding it to a pyramid stack on one of the desks. As he swivelled back to face me, he said, “For the first Exorcism Quest, the mortality rate is ninety-six percent. That means only one in twenty-five make it out of their first exorcism alive.”

My frown deepened. Now I understood the pitying glances I’d gotten and the unsaid warning in Caroline’s voice. “And what’s the general mortality rate?”

“Exorcist is the only Role that faces Perilous Quests right off the bat, but if you were to say within the first month of work, which might include Simple Gathering and Delivery, as well as Bounty and Extermination Quests, then it’s about forty percent on average. Those who make it past the first month of being an Adventurer generally only face a twelve percent mortality rate though. There’s a sudden spike when Adventurers reach the ‘Eminent’ Guild Rank though, since all available quests around that Rank end up ‘Dangerous’ or higher in difficulty.”

“I see,” was all I could reply. Having my expected lifespan and that of my cohort reduced to simple statistics was a demoralising thing.

“In case you were wondering, the Guild Ranks are as follows: Novitiate; Initiate; Seeker; Eminent; Savant; & Master. The deciding factors for going up in Rank is whether or not you are deemed capable of handling the responsibility that each Rank bears within the Guild, as well as how you’d deal with the kinds of quests you’ll face. Given that Exorcists usually always deal with quest of Dangerous and Perilous difficulty, they usually go up in rank quite quickly. In fact, I think it’s almost tradition to receive a promotion to Seeker upon completing your first Exorcism Quest, as it shows overwhelming talent.”

I nodded lamely. It was already too much information to bear and too much responsibility to deal with. A seventeen-year-old like me wouldn’t have been expected to face such overwhelming

adversity in the real world, but here it sounded like people like me who were stolen away from our worlds were just cast directly into the meat-grinder, with those few who came out the other end perhaps finding some purpose in life, though who could say for sure.

“That look on your face is one I’ve seen a lot before, but I will give you the same advice that I’ve given all the Exorcists before you: take your time to learn your abilities and rely on easy quests to make a living for a few weeks, before attempting to take on an Exorcism Quest. And also, try to find an established Exorcist to become your mentor.”

I nodded again, slightly more energy this time, though it was mostly faux. Suddenly a coin was shoved into my right hand. It was cold against my skin. I looked up, realising I’d been staring at my sandalled feet for a while, then I lifted the coin up and saw that it was of a silvery metal and had the engraved letters for “ten” on its face, alongside a stylised crown above a half-moon crescent.

“I’m giving you this money out of my own pocket, Ryūta, because I believe that you’ll be able to beat the stats that promise only failure. Use this to find a place to stay for the next week as you settle in. Don’t forget to check out our For-Rent Armoury on the first floor that you no doubt saw coming up here, but keep in mind that your equipment won’t magically make you better than you are. I recommend starting off with just some basic clothes to replace what you’re wearing, as well as a good pair of boots and a backpack of some kind. You’ll end up walking a lot for the Delivery Quests and you’ll need a way to carry stuff for Gathering Quests.”

I quickly put the coin in my pocket, then looked intently at Æmos, before bowing deeply. “Thank you so much! I will aspire to live up to your expectations of me!”

“It’s not like this is goodbye or anything. I’m here more often than not, so come back anytime you have questions or... you know... if you just feel like talking.” He said the latter with an awkward kind of hesitation, which made me think that he probably rarely got to *just talk* to people without the expectation of giving answers and advice.

“I will,” I told him and bowed deeply again, before leaving the maze of bookcases.

I went down the stairs, not bothering to check the first floor yet, and then left the Guild Hall out the open front doors as well.

I was greeted by a dark early-evening sky, though was fairly sure it was no more than five in the evening, which made me wonder what kind of night-and-day cycle this continent of Hallem had. Without any reference to the rest of the world of Mondus, it was hard to tell exactly how close I was to either of the two poles of this world, but if it followed the same pattern as Earth, then I assumed I

was somewhere semi-tropical, given that it was still quite warm, though not as much as summer-time Kyōto.

Letting out a sigh, I pushed the pointless speculations from my mind and began looking for a place I could stay for the night and get a meal for my growling stomach.

My First Friend

A limb-quaking yawn escaped my body as I stretched my arms and legs in the comfortable bed of the inn. A night had cost forty copper crowns and a simple stew had cost ten, so I could stay for a while with the money Æmos had given me.

Driven by a gurgling and demanding stomach, I left the cozy inn that a sign out front named as '*Hallie's Hospitality*'. I walked down the cobbled streets of Lundia's Commerce Ward, where shops, inns, and restaurants were plentiful, searching for this world's equivalent to a convenience store. Unfortunately, no such thing had been brought to this world by the influx of Otherworlders like myself, though I did manage to find a general store named '*The Choice Goods*'.

After stepping inside the wood-and-stone building, I was greeted with a neatly-organised store full of shelves and tables, whereupon was everything from boot polish to pickled vegetables, with no clear delineation between the wares despite the orderly fashion they'd been placed in.

It took me a few minutes of perusing before I found some sort of salami and some hardtack. Together they cost twenty coppers, but I reckoned it could last me a few meals, so I ended up buying them.

Another thing that had not been imported to this world was customer service apparently, as the owner of the store kept eyeing me suspiciously throughout my perusal and, when I paid, he looked as if he couldn't wait for me to get out of his sight. He didn't even let out a "*Safe travels!*" or "*Thank you, come again!*" to see me on my way...

I ended up finding a bench on the way to the Guild Ward, where I took a seat and ate a bit of the food I'd bought. It then hit me that I hadn't found anything to drink, and the dry hardtack and smoked sausage really left me parched. Although I spotted a few wells here-and-there, I was fairly sure that drinking well water would make me seriously ill, so I kept my eyes open for a beverage-type shop as I walked back towards the Guild Hall.

A while later I arrived to the Adventurers' Guild, having found some kind of cold tea store with drinks that tasted faintly of the mixture of berries and fruit that'd been cooked with the water, although it had cost me ten coppers per flask, so I had only gotten two. Suddenly it was starting to seem like the money from the Genius would not last *that* long.

After passing through the perpetually-open red doors of the building, I went over to the Quest Boards to see if there were any that seemed something I'd be capable of, but, when I considered the

rewards for some of the Gathering and Delivery quests, I realised that I'd already spent more on food and drink this morning than I'd be paid for potentially spending hours on such menial tasks as walking to a nearby farm to deliver a few letters.

My eyes kept slipping to the lone Novitiate-ranked Exorcism Quest that hung at the top of the rightmost board, but I knew it was folly to even consider taking it, doubly so when I had yet to even attempt to figure out my Role abilities.

There were some quests labelled Troublesome which paid a few silvers, but most were Bounty or Extermination, which seemed to be focused on killing specific targets and, from what I remembered of my abilities, that seemed far from my forte...

I let out a sigh, then decided to have a look at the Group Board, which was covered in handmade posters and scrolls, several of which featured cute drawings and artistic scribbles. I noticed quickly that several of them had written at the bottom "*No Librarians, Exorcists, & Summoners!*" Although it was frustrating to see, it did make me feel a strange sort of kinship with Æmos, since he knew what it meant to be excluded based on your arbitrarily-assigned Role, and I suppose that knowing that not just Exorcists were excluded also helped a bit.

"Hey, *newbie*, are you looking for a group?" someone behind me suddenly asked.

Newbie?

I turned around to face the guy who'd asked, suddenly very conscious of my dumb outfit.

The guy was about a head taller than me, but I hadn't really grown during puberty, so it wasn't anything new. He had an unkempt and thick dark-brown beard and knotted overlong hair that looked like it needed a trim. His clothes were loose with some leather padding on his forearm and chest, and on his hip hung a shortsword about a metre long.

"You just arrived, right?" he asked, moving closer. I didn't really know how to interpret his interest in me, but it seemed a bit overwhelming. From a look at the queue of people by the Guild Representative's desk waiting for their Role Assignment, I knew that there was still a steady stream of new people coming in, so his interest in me seemed strange, almost desperate.

"What's your Role? My group is looking for a spellcaster or ranger and you don't look like the brawny type."

"Erm, I'm an Exorcist."

Immediately the guy took a step back. "Ah, you were the new one. I see... Sorry to bother you." Then he was gone.

Not like I wanted to join your group anyway! I complained internally.

Moments later, a tall guy came over. He was wearing engraved expensive-looking plate armour that seemed to let off a faint golden shimmer.

If this guy is looking for group members, I'm saying yes no matter what! Even if I have to lie!

With a gauntleted thumb, he pushed the beak of his feathered helmet up to reveal his face. His eyes were warm and his skin was a pale tan. Light-brown locks of hair flowed out through the bottom of his helmet and ran down his back.

"Was *that* guy bothering you?" he asked in a deep thrumming voice. For some reason he reminded me a lot of Renji with his charming and comforting aura.

"Erm, no. Not like anyone want to team up with an Exorcist like me anyway," I replied with a fake laugh.

The man's heavy gauntleted hand landed on my shoulder and he looked me directly in the eyes. "Don't put yourself down like that. Exorcists serve a very important role in this world. I'm sure you were chosen for that Role for a reason." Even though I didn't really believe his words, his kind demeanour and aura made me want to believe that he was right.

"I'm pretty sure that I was chosen due to my bad luck," I replied, self-deprecatingly.

The armoured guy let out a chuckle. "I suppose that an F-tier in Luck is a bit worrying."

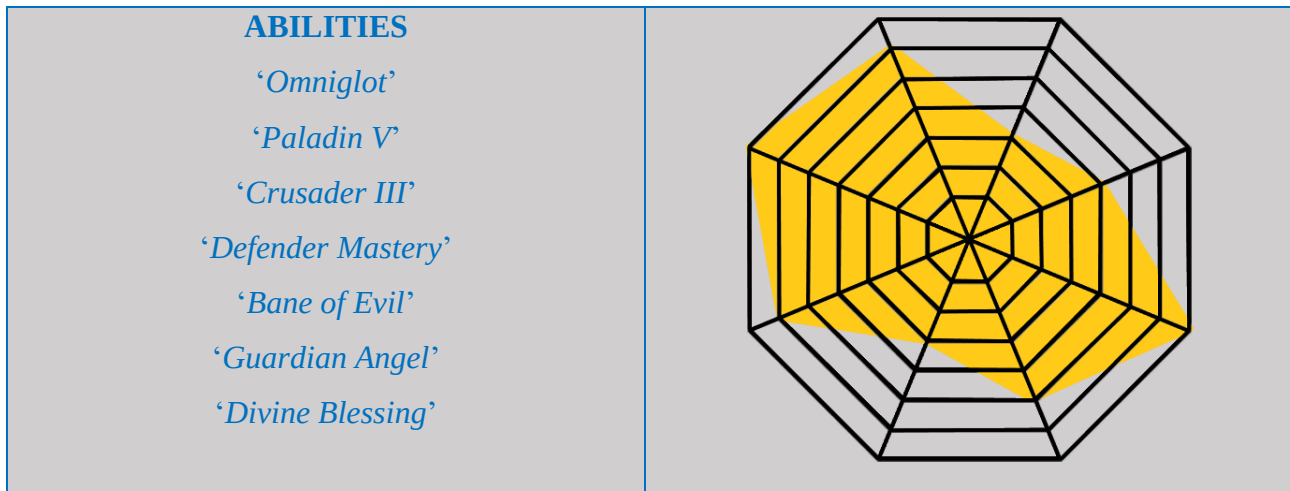
I frowned in response, although his chuckle made me want to laugh as well.

"Have you already spoken to the Genius? Roles like yours benefit the most from learning from people with a lot of experience."

"I did. What Role do you have, if you don't mind me asking?"

In response he used his right hand to pull his Guild Card from a small bag attached to his left hip, then he held it up in front of me. As an act of respect, I also showed him mine.

'HARLEIGH'			
ROLE: <i>Crusader</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>29</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>D</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>C</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>S</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>D</i>	SOUL: <i>A</i>	STRENGTH: <i>S</i>	VITALITY: <i>A</i>



“Wow,” I replied, seeing his incredible attributes. Not a single one of them was under D-tier... From the presence of ‘Paladin’ and ‘Crusader, I realised that he had an Advanced Role, similar to Æmos.

“My Attribute Graph kind of looks like a shield, don’t you think?”

I smiled weakly. “Thank you for showing me, Harleigh.”

“Don’t worry about it, Temaru-san.”

“Please just call me Ryūta,” I replied. “I feel like I might be the only one who gave my full name to the Guild Lady.” I’d been listening to the names people gave as they registered for the Guild and thus far I was the only one who given more than just my first name.

“There are a few different reasons,” the Crusader explained. We had moved a bit away from the Guild Boards so that we weren’t blocking the many people who looked through the postings. “Some people come from worlds where surnames aren’t very common, and some see this as a chance to reinvent themselves so they pick names that they aspire to match.”

“Which kind are you?” I asked.

He grinned, showing rows of perfectly-aligned white teeth, the very image of a picture-perfect smile. “I’m not telling.”

“Ah man, I wish I’d been as lucky as you. Crusader sounds like someone strong and reliable and popular.”

Harleigh shrugged, but I noticed the slightly uncomfortable look on his face. Perhaps it was a lot of work to maintain such an image, though he definitely radiated such energy to me.

“Can I admit something?”

I blinked in surprise. “What is it?”

"I recognised you from hearing your Role Assignment yesterday, and I approached you with hidden intentions."

Oh no... I replied internally, fearing the worst.

"Erm, what kind of intentions?"

"The last Exorcist Novitiate I saw before you was this really kind girl with a warm smile, but, like everyone else, I just ignored her. A few days later she was killed on a quest she attempted alone, and I felt really guilty for not helping guide her. Those of us who have been Adventurers for years understand how dangerous the job is, and know how especially hard it is for some Roles, so it ought to be our duty to educate Novitiates so they might thrive. But instead we just focus on ourselves first and only approach those whose Roles might benefit our groups in some way..."

"I... I'm not sure how to respond to that."

Harleigh grinned, though there was no mirth in it. "Sorry, that was probably a bit weird, right?"

I scratched my chin awkwardly, but then replied boldly, "If you want, I could use some help finding equipment to suit my Role, as well as some guidance on how to use my Abilities."

He nodded seriously and I suddenly felt like back when I'd approached Renji in middle school to hang out for the first time and he'd said yes.

Harleigh showed me the For-Rent Armoury on the first floor, where racks of every weapon imaginable lined the walls, and tables in the middle of the floor were covered in things like shields, spell tomes, and bizarre talismans. At the back of the floor was an archway past which lay a mirrored version of the layout, but instead with every type of imaginable armour.

"Exorcists have a limited kind of weapons they can use," he explained. "They are Staves, Foci, and a unique type called Possessed Weapons. The latter are pretty rare and quite dangerous, so the Guild don't keep them on open display, but if you make a special request you can rent such a weapon, though you need to be of Eminent Rank or higher."

I nodded. I remembered as much from looking at my list of Exorcist abilities. "Which one should I pick?"

"Actually, I think it's a good idea to get both a Staff and a Focus."

"I don't really understand the difference," I replied, nudging a two-metre-long metal staff with a ring at the top onto which had been fastened a bunch of small bells.

"Staves are used to channel certain things like prayers, blessings, summoning, and anything you might consider ritualistic, while Foci are mostly for offensive spells and things like banishment or detrimental effects."

That didn't truly make much sense to me, but it seemed that Harleigh realised as much, because he took the staff I'd been poking and shoved it into my hands.

"Oh, that's a weird feeling," I replied.

The moment my hands grasped the shaft of the staff, it was like a familiarity arose in my muscles and knowledge I'd forgotten resurfaced in my mind after a decade. Without even moving my hands, the bells atop the staff began to ring slowly in unison.

"Is *that* supposed to happen?" I asked, concerned.

"Right now, your Soul energy is unfocused and leaking from your body en masse, so this kind of empathic response from a magical tool that you're aligned with is quite normal. As you become better at utilising your potential, you can control the flow of your spirit. Picture it like holding a heavy weight in your outstretched arm: to begin with you can't really hold it like that without shaking, but as you practice, you'll be able to keep your arm steady."

"And what about the focus? I have no idea what I'm looking for. I don't even know what a focus is..."

Harleigh chuckled. "That's normal. When I first came here this was all very confusing to me as well. It took me breaking my arm twice to learn how to properly wield a shield," he said, laughing as though *that* was a fond memory.

He didn't notice my expression though and instead began searching for a focus I could try.

A few moments later he called me over to a table close to the archway leading to the other part of the armoury.

"There are a few here to pick between," he told me. I looked down at the objects he indicated, letting out an involuntary "Eww" when I saw that one was a horned skull.

Besides the horned skull, which was possibly the skull of a ram or a goat, there was a metal orb made of thin metallic string with a triangle within, a glass vessel that looked like an old lantern, a simple iron bell on a half-moon handle, and a doll made from some kind of animal fur and stuffed full of beans of some kind.

"Which one should I pick?"

Harleigh let out a contemplative "Hmm", before answering, "The type of magical effects and characteristics of your spells depends on the type of focus you're wielding. The skull and doll are

made from parts of animal parts, which makes them good for spells that affect living beings, such as curses, afflictions, and such things, but those are more suited for Summoners and Advanced Roles like the Necromancer.”

“Necromancer?” I asked, surprised. That sounded very ominous. From the little bit of fantasy I’d read in the past, Necromancer-type characters had always been exclusively evil...

“It’s one of the Specialisations that Summoners and Exorcists have access to. A lot of Summoners go for it, because it compliments their Summoner Skill Set, but I don’t know of any Exorcists who have picked that. But, then again, Exorcists are one of the few Roles where most of the Specialisations are still unknown.”

“Because so few live long enough?” I replied.

His smile faltered for a moment, but then he said cheerfully, “Don’t be so gloomy! Anyway, where was I? Oh, yes, the bell-type of foci are optimal for summoning spells, while the lantern-type is great for projections and illusions. But I think, for you, this steel ball is the best kind, since it is versatile and your Role has a lot of different spells. You could also benefit from using a tome as a focus, although it would require a lot of practice to utilise as effectively.”

I picked up the wire orb and it naturally came to rest in the palm of my hand. As my untrained energy surged into it, the wire triangle within lifted and began hovering perfectly in the centre, jittering slightly and letting out a deep pulsing hum. Once again, that bizarre feeling of familiarity flowed through me, as though I was holding a baseball and had in the past been a talented pitcher.

Looking back at the bell-staff that Harleigh was holding for me, I asked, “Do staff types also have an impact on my rituals?”

He nodded, “But don’t worry, this one will serve you well for pretty much any ability you have.”

With the bell-staff and wire orb in hand, I went up to the counter of the For-Rent Armoury and the Clerk tending it asked me, “You’re renting these two then?”

I nodded.

“That’ll be one silver crown per week per item.”

I nearly choked, not feeling like I had to money spend, but also feeling pressured by the Crusader’s in-depth help and expectations of me.

Harleigh immediately came over and placed four silver crowns on the counter. “He’s renting them both for two weeks.”

“Very well,” the Clerk answered and took the coins, before pulling out a slate similar to the one that had decided my Role, but wider, the size of a keyboard or thereabouts. “Card please,” he asked

and I offered him my Guild Card, which he laid atop the slate, alongside the Focus and then the Staff. Then he wrote down a note about the items and my name, Rank, and Role, probably so they knew who had rented what.

"Thank you," I said to the Clerk. Then turned to the Crusader and bowed deeply, before thanking him as well.

"Now let's find you some clothes as well," Harleigh told me, all but dragging me by the elbow into the other part of the Armoury.

"I can't have you pay for all of this," I complained weakly.

"It's not *that much* to rent stuff," he replied.

"Are you sure?"

He clapped me on my back, making me stumble forward and through the archway. "Don't be so serious about it, just let your senior treat you!" Then he laughed heartily. I suppose that in his own way he was making up for the guilt he felt from not doing enough as an experienced Adventurer to help the new members.

In the end, Harleigh bought me a pouch-like bag that sat on my lower back and attached to a belt around my waist, as well some sturdy grey linen trousers, a simple white shirt, brown hide boots, and a dark hooded travel cloak with pockets on the inside.

The Focus attached to a hook on my belt and the Bell Staff turned out to have a telescopic shaft that allowed it to be collapsed to a metre-long baton, rather than its usual two metres, and it too could be attached to my belt on a simple loop on my left hip.

In the end, he had spent a total of close to twenty silver crowns on me and I felt incredibly obliged to pay him back as soon as I could.

After the purchases and rentals, we had gone out back behind the Guild Hall to a vast courtyard with dummy targets and enough space to practice magic without damaging any of the buildings nearby, should something go wrong.

"I'm serious, Ryūta, *this* is my gift to you. This kind of money isn't really anything to me. My group takes on really dangerous quests that pay at least a few gold crowns each, so I mostly just have a bunch of money that I don't know what to spend on."

"Still," I replied, "I'm going to pay you back!"

He chuckled. "I suppose it's good to have goals."

"Now," he continued, "I don't know how to help with practicing the Pact-based abilities like summoning and rituals, but a few of your other abilities are similar to ones that Paladins and Crusaders have access to, such as barrier-type skills and offensive abilities like Repel. I think we should start with your Meditation ability though, since that's one I think will benefit you the most in terms of improving your skill with manipulating your soul energy."

Harleigh had me join him by a tree that shaded a corner of the courtyard, next to the backwall of the Guild Hall. We sat below its shade, as a gentle breeze occasionally washed over us and played with the leaves in its canopy. He told me that the posture did not matter, so long as it was comfortable, so I ended up seated with my legs folded across each other and my right hand resting within the palm of my left in my lap just below my stomach. The deep thrum of his voice guided me through the kind of imagery I ought to try and invoke within my mind's eye, and though it took quite a while, I eventually started being able to vaguely sense the energy that coursed through my body, picturing it as a continuous flow of light that ran down every limb, using the veins of my body as a highway.

I couldn't really sense how my energy was supposed to be leaking from my body, but I assumed *that kind* of awareness would come in time. For now I was just happy to be making a tiny bit of progress.

"The reason we started with Meditation is because it is the easiest to learn and is a great stepping stone to learning how to utilise your other abilities that require a specific image in your mind, as well as intense focus. I think we should try Repel next, as this is really the only truly offensive spell in your arsenal right now."

"It sounds quite strange that I am expected to take on very dangerous quests, but have no offensive capabilities."

"To my knowledge, Exorcists rely a lot on their summoned familiars or paid bodyguards for such matters. Exorcism Quests are, from my understanding, quite a lot like Investigation Quests, but narrower in the sort of expertise required."

I gave him a confused look in return, so he rewinded a bit and explained, "Investigation Quests are a type of unique Role-based quest, meaning that not all Roles are capable of doing them. As the name suggests, there's a lot of research and in-depth analysis involved. Exorcism Quests are basically the same, but with many esoteric elements added on top, which is why they are only possible for Exorcists to deal with.

"For example, an Investigation might deal with finding out how someone died through looking at evidence, witness testimony, following clues, and such. The difference with Exorcisms is that,

while the elements might be similar, they are basically invisible to everyone but Exorcists and might feature obstacles that only you might be capable of dealing with.”

I nodded diligently. Suddenly the idea of an Exorcism didn’t sound so scary, after all, from how he was presenting it, it was more like detective work that dealt with the supernatural.

“But, let’s return to the training for now. You shouldn’t even consider trying an Exorcism Quest until you have familiarised yourself with your abilities.”

“So, what should I do for Repel?” I asked, leaving the shade of the tree. The weather was nice like yesterday, sunny and probably around twenty-five degrees, but with a wind that had a cold edge to it, which made the shade a bit chilly after sitting there for what might have been half an hour.

“Repel is a concentrated blast of your Soul energy and depending on how much innate power you are able to put into it, it could potentially be quite dangerous, so I recommend we go over to the target practice area.”

I nodded and followed Harleigh to the part of the courtyard where primitive wooden dolls were placed at the end. In the interval since we arrived, a pair of bow-wielding Adventurers had taken up the spots furthest down the line of the eight targets that were spaced evenly along a ten-metre-wide wall.

One of the two archers was someone I recognised from yesterday as having been two spots ahead of me in line for the Assignment. He was a ‘Ranger’ if I remembered correctly. From what I recalled of Æmos’ explanation of Attributes, I assumed that his main ones were Dexterity and Acumen, as those seemed most closely connected to skill-based abilities.

“Eyes up front, mister.”

I immediately snapped back to look at the Crusader. “Sorry.”

“To be able to pull off spells, it’s important you don’t let your mind wander. You have to shut out all other unnecessary stimuli.”

“I understand,” I told him. I had a tendency to zone out though, so it was easier said than done.

“For offensive or target-based spells and incantations, it works the best if you say the name of the spell out loud and tether your imagination to its name. For this particular spell, I would recommend that you picture energy building in your body, before flowing down your arm and shooting out your palm in a particular shape. The result should be something that pushes targets away by metaphysically repelling their souls. Anyone hit by it will feel compelled to move away from you, but against inert objects it will seem as though a wind pushed them, if that makes sense.”

“Not really,” I wanted to reply, but I stayed my tongue. “Got it,” I replied instead.

Harleigh looked at me for a while and I wondered if he wanted me to go ahead and try it, but then he said, deadpan, "You'll need your Focus for this."

"Of course... sorry."

I pulled the wire orb from my belt and held it in my right hand. My jingling staff was in my left hand, though he took it from me and said, "Try to pull it off without holding the staff first, since it might make it more difficult to accurately channel the energy for it."

"So, should I give it a try?"

"Yes."

I swallowed hard, then took a step up to the knee-high wall that people were meant to stand behind while aiming for the targets that stood eight-to-fifteen metres away, depending on which you went for.

Thank god I went through that cringe-inducing phase in middle school where I thought I'd become an ESPer. I feel like my mind is perfectly suited for this sort of thing thanks to those delusions.

I held out my hand with the wire orb and pointed it towards the closest target, which stood maybe nine metres away from my position and off to the left slightly. Then I imagined *that* light I'd pictured while meditating and felt it swirl around my chest, building up power, before uncoiling itself and shooting down my right arm and entering into the wire orb, from where I released it by yelling:

"REPEL!"

The air itself began to sing and dust flew to the left-and-right of my invisible projectile as it flew down the range, before it collided with the target doll and blew it off its simple wooden stand and sent it flying down towards the backwall of the range. Upon impact with the stones, the dummy was pulverised into bits and came apart as a bundle of disorganised straw and broken sticks.

"As expected of an S-tier in Soul, your potential is very high with any skills based in that attribute."

"Thank you," I replied, letting the praise wash over me.

"However. You took too long to cast the spell. This is not an incantation with a litany that must be recited, so it ought to be something instantaneous requiring very little build-up."

It felt a bit harsh, but he was the expert here, so I didn't argue back. Besides, I was really just excited that I was capable of literal magic! I suddenly felt incredibly powerful, but then had a thought: *If I'm capable of causing this much damage to an object, but this is my only offensive attack, then what must other Adventurers be capable of?*

"Pick a new target and try to cast the spell as fast as possible."

I took in a deep breath, mentally picked a target that stood twelve metres away and then lifted my arm and yelled, "REPEL!"

This time, nothing happened.

"You forgot to picture your spell, didn't you?"

"I did," I replied embarrassed.

"Do it again, but remember the order of things."

I repeated the process, but it still took probably eight tries before I was able to instantly shoot off a Repel, though this time the power was only enough to tip over the target.

Harleigh nodded, satisfied with the results. "I think that's enough practice for today. You seem quite a natural at this. If you'd like, we could try some other abilities tomorrow?"

"I'd very much like that," I replied, "Thank you so much for your guidance!"

Harleigh smiled warmly. "Don't mention it."

Before I could leave, he added, "Try and make it a habit to meditate every morning and evening. It may seem pointless, but you will notice how much better your spells will work after doing it for a while. Just like a muscle, it is something you need to train and keep strong."

"Thank you," I said again. I couldn't wait to learn more tomorrow and progress ever-so-slightly towards the distant goal of becoming a proper Exorcist.

Master "Owl"

After I awoke and had some breakfast, I went directly to the Guild Hall, looking for Harleigh. Since I didn't immediately spot him, I spent some time looking at the Boards, noticing a few new quests and group posters on them.

I waited around for maybe an hour, but then decided to go out into the courtyard to check, after not being able to spot him in the Hall nor on the first and second floors.

Before trying to practice Repel again, I sat in the shade of the tree and meditated for a bit, though it wasn't as easy alone as when the Crusader verbally instructed me on how I ought to picture my inner spirit and the flow of energy through my body.

As I came up to the training range, I saw that the dummy I'd destroyed the day before had been replaced, which made me feel guilty for whoever had been charged with the task. I spent a while practicing my rapid-fire Repel, before giving up on trying to improve and returning to the Guild Hall, where I once again didn't spot Harleigh anywhere.

Though it felt awkward, I asked for a beverage from the tavern-esque counter and was handed a diluted sweet mead. I found a table and sat down, observing the hall and the newcomers, while weakly sipping the faintly-alcoholic beverage which most certainly wasn't something I fancied, preferring the fruity cold teas from the store I'd visited yesterday. But it was cheap, costing only three copper crowns, and slightly hydrating, so I still decided to try and finish it.

Sometime towards noon, a short chubby man in dark clothes and a heavy coat, wearing strange goggles and with shoulder-length greasy black hair, came over and sat down opposite me by the small circular table. I was surprised by his appearance, but didn't say anything, as I felt certain that he was my senior and figured I was intruding on what might be his preferred spot in the Hall. As I looked across the table at him, I noticed how the lenses of his brass goggles distorted the colour of his eyes, somehow continually shifting his irises through a rainbow of hues.

"Wanna be my apprentice?" he asked in a gruff phlegmy voice that made me wonder if he smoked frequently.

I blinked, uncomprehending.

Apparently he took it as a sign that I hadn't heard him over the noise of the Hall, so he leaned across the table, putting two fat-fingered and callused hands on the tabletop, nearly spilling my remaining bit of sweet mead as my mug began sliding away from me towards the edge before I grabbed it.

"Do. You. Want. To. Be. My. Apprentice?" he asked again, speaking as though I wasn't just deaf, but also learning impaired.

"I'm an Exorcist," I told him, thinking that the word alone would drive him off.

"Yeah, no shit. I meant as an Exorcist Apprentice, pipsqueak."

Who's the pipsqueak here? You're shorter than me, old man...

I didn't like his attitude, but part of me was eager to have a proper mentor. "Are you an Exorcist yourself?"

"That's right. Been in this business for over twenty-five years. But you see, I'm getting old and I want to train an apprentice to replace me when I eventually mess up and get eaten by a Banshee or something..."

That's grim.

"That's very altruistic," I replied politely. "But why me?"

"Don't kid yourself, I'm doing it as much for my sake as for the Guild's sake. And I just picked you because you look wet behind the ears and Exorcist Novitiates don't exactly grow on the trees. I'm sure if I had the pick of the litter, you wouldn't be it, pipsqueak, but alas, such is the state of our profession."

"Is this your attempt at trying to convince me to say yes?" I asked, cracks beginning to form in my polite façade. Something about his way of talking down to me was incredibly irritating and provoking.

"You don't exactly have many options yourself, young man. Æmos has probably told you that one-in-twenty-five Exorcists survive their first job, but he probably didn't mention that those who survive their first job always have a mentor to guide them. It's more like one-in-a-thousand who survive their first job without outside guidance."

"I already have someone showing me the ropes," I replied as way of declining his offer.

"Mister Holier-than-thou?" he asked. "I noticed he had finally found a conscience, but," he made a show of looking around the room, "he's not here today, is he?"

I was surprised that he knew Harleigh was the one I'd been referring to. "Do you know where he is?"

"His party was called in for an urgent Bounty Quest, so they'll no doubt be gone for a few weeks chasing whatever-it-is the Guild is fretting about this time."

I lowered my head sadly. "I see."

"So, what do you say?"

Æmos had advised me to find a mentor and, though he was very patronising, who was I to look a gift-horse in the mouth?

“Very well. What kind of training will we be doing first?”

Instead of answering, he eased back off the table and pulled a scroll from a pocket, uncrinkled it and placed it on the table such that the text was facing me. My heart sank when I recognised the Exorcism Quest I’d been glancing at for the past two days.

<i>‘The Haunting at Hamsel’s Rest’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Perilous</i>	RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>
<i>Eight people have gone missing from the village known as ‘Hamsel’s Rest’ and all signs point to a Haunting, though no one knows the exact entity behind the disappearances.</i>		
<i>You are to travel to the village and ascertain what nature of apparition is behind the tragedy, such that an experienced Exorcist can tailor their approach to dealing with the entity.</i>		
<i>You are under no circumstances to attempt Exorcising the apparition by yourself, as this is too dangerous a task for a Novitiate!</i>		
REWARD: <i>1 Gold & 40 Silver Crowns</i>		

A Guild Representative with shoulder-long blonde hair, dressed identically to Caroline in a green blouse and skirt, greeted us when we came to the Quest Counter with the Exorcism Quest. She took a look at it, then looked us over.

“A new apprentice, Master Owl?”

That’s a strange name, I thought immediately, but then remembered what Harleigh had told me about Adventurers and their names. From his title, I wondered if he was in fact of Master Rank in the Guild, as that would put him above Æmos. It was also possible that it was just a respectful way of referring to him, due to his advanced age.

“That’s right, sweetheart.”

I spotted the tiny twitch in the corner of her eye at his term of endearment, but she was a professional, so she didn't comment anything. I wondered if people often harassed the Guild Representatives and Clerks.

"Your Guild Cards please," she requested, and we handed them to her. I tried to get a look at Owl's card, but he purposefully angled it away from me, which I found to be very suspicious. After all, I'd yet to see it and ascertain that he was in fact an Exorcist, though I assumed that the Guild Representatives would at least ensure I didn't just go off on a Quest with some random guy... Right?

As she took our Cards and placed them with the Exorcism Quest scroll atop a magical slate similar to the one for renting equipment, I felt nothing but dread and apprehension. How many times had I been warned against taking on such a quest before being ready?

Owl seemed to notice my inner turmoil, because he leaned close and whispered, with a hot breath that stank of smoke, "They suspend your Guild License if you try to return a quest you have accepted. They're quite serious about that sort of thing."

I'm screwed.

I was trailing after the chubby Exorcist while heading to a part of Lundia that I hadn't seen before, called the Market Ward. It was similar to the Commerce Ward, but had more than just shops, as you could find livestock and horses, as well as people selling their services. These services included anything from bodyguards to prostitutes. Unlike the other ward, it also absolutely thronged with people and stank of oil, smoke, metal, and sweat.

"Anything catch your fancy, pipsqueak?"

"I'm not interested in *that* kind of thing," I replied. In my mind, I could still only imagine being with Inoue-chan. Of course, I would never see her again, and *even if* I somehow managed to find my way back to Earth, she would have no doubt moved on by then.

Master Owl paused, then turned to look at me, still wearing his bizarre eye-colour-shifting goggles. Then he laughed mightily.

"That's not what I meant," he managed to get out, before another fit of laughter came over him. "We're looking for a mercenary, to escort us."

I felt warmth rise up my face as embarrassment overtook me. After a few deep breaths, I managed to ask, "Why didn't we just make a quest for the Adventurers' Guild? We can do that right?"

"Don't be silly. First off, those things are way too expensive. Secondly, you don't know what you'll get. The Mercenary Guild is a far better choice for people like us. So, do you see anyone you like the look of? Intuition about these things is important you know."

"What do we need a bodyguard for?" I asked, while scanning the people showcasing their shiny equipment or glistening oiled-up muscles.

"Us Exorcists, we've got the kind of Luck that makes us magnets for disaster and misfortune. Trust me on this: we need a bodyguard. Best make it a habit to befriend strong people who can protect your sorry ass."

"But don't we have access to familiars? Can't they protect us?"

"Ehh, that's a terrible idea. Don't rely on something you summoned to have your best interest."

"Why not? I have the ability to make a Familiar Pact and I've been told they can be used for protection."

"You've been told that by people who haven't actually used familiars," he replied.

I couldn't really argue with that, but he seemed to believe that I still need convincing, so he pulled his goggles up over his head and pointed to his left eye, then lifted his long bangs to show a dark scar that ran up to his scalp.

"See this eye?" he asked, then tapped it with his index finger, producing a dull *clink-clink* sound. "Lost it to a Crimson Nightingale I summoned and relied on a bit too much when I was still a dumb Seeker, who thought I was hot shit. Dumb bitch tore my fucking eye out when I tried to ask her to do something not included in my Pact. So yeah, don't rely on familiars, for they do not have your best interests in mind. They're basically like spirits that we kidnap and bind to our commands by using contracts."

I frowned. The picture of Exorcists and their work that he was painting for me was wildly different than the romantic image of supernatural detective work that Harleigh had impressed upon me.

"Back to the matter at hand," he said, putting his goggles back on and scanning the crowds. "You see anyone?"

"There's a lot of people showing off, but polished armour and oiled-up muscles don't really say much about their skill," I remarked honestly.

"Huh, you actually have a good head on your shoulders, boyo. Good. I was starting to become despondent at your naivety."

"How about her?" I asked, pointing to a two-metre-tall woman whose dark plate-armour had seen many battles, but whose stance and aura was like the very image of a natural-born killer.

Master Owl appraised her for a bit, then turned to look at me with a stupid grin on his face. "Is *that* your type, huh? Tall and beautiful, but with the strength to snap you in half?"

"I just thought she looked strong," I replied, trying not to rise to the bait.

"Oh she's strong, that's for sure, but probably a bit of a hothead too. A lot of Vanguard's are like that though, sort of par for the course with their lot."

"You can tell what Role she has?"

He looked back at me again, then said, "You should be able to as well. You have the Spirit Sight after all. Argh, but, right, they don't give you Spirit Goggles *just like that*... hold on a moment." He began rummaging through a pouch on his right hip, but when he didn't find what he was seeking, he searched inside his heavy leather coat, before eventually finding what he was seeking in a breast pocket. He gave them a quick appraisal then rubbed the lenses on the edge of his stained shirt, before handing me a pair of goggles that were similar to those he wore, although the left lens was cracked down the middle. They also smelled of his rank sweat.

"Put those on and you'll see what I mean."

I pulled the goggles over my head, then had to tighten the strap on the back for them to fit to my face, but, as I looked through the lenses, I suddenly saw what Owl must've been seeing every day for years. Every person was lit up with some sort of glow, each with a certain colour that, for some reason, effortlessly translated into a tangible personality trait or mix of traits in my mind. When I looked at the curly red-haired and dark-skinned two-metre-tall Vanguard, her body was outlined by a pulsing spiky red aura that translated in my mind to meaning only one thing: danger.

Looking at Master Owl, I didn't notice an aura at all, but when he saw me staring at him, he grinned suspiciously, which made me think he had a way of hiding it.

"When you get enough practice studying people's spirit, you can immediately tell what sort of Role they're suited for. It's more-or-less the principle upon which the soul-stone tablets the Guilds use for Role Assignment works."

I scanned the crowd of people a bit longer and saw the same red glow on a few of the other mercenaries offering up their services, but while the tall woman's was spiky and menacing, theirs were soft or full of rounded bits, with some even having an aura that visibly trembled, perhaps due to some anxiety or fear.

The more I looked around, the more I noticed how, not just the mercenaries, but everyone, even the blonde lightly-tanned Natives of Lundia, had auras that could be translated into a Role for the Guild. I looked down myself and saw that my own aura was like a hazy outline that pulsed with my heartbeat and had the same violet hue that I'd seen on my Attribute Graph that was on my Guild Card.

"I thought only us Otherworlders had the ability to be Role Assigned," I commented.

"My guess is that, because we do not belong to this world, the Divine Ones that govern it decided that we must be given a purpose in such a crude way. But what you're seeing are the souls of people, expressed through the energy leaking from their spirit. Everyone has a soul, not just us Outsiders."

That makes sense, I suppose.

"So? Have you changed your mind?"

"I think she's the most competent one here," I told him. While looking around, I'd seen a rainbow of hues, although none like the colours of Æmos and Harleigh's Graphs.

"Alright, let's go introduce ourselves," Owl answered with a smirk. I doubted the woman would want to work with us when she discovered that I was an inexperienced weakling and he was a frustrating lecher.

A river of bodies moved back-and-forth between where we stood on an incline and where the tent with the mercenaries was placed, but instead of shoving his way through, Owl simply lifted his right hand and pointed straight towards the woman. As though he was Moses parting the sea, the mass of people began moving in a way that allowed us to walk straight through the crowds. No sooner had I followed him than the flow of people returned to normal behind me and threatened to take me away.

When we emerged out the other side, near to the tents, I asked, "How'd you do that?"

"I used the Repel ability."

"It can be used like that!?"

"Ah, I see you've already familiarised yourself with a bit? Maybe Holier-than-thou Harleigh isn't so terrible an instructor as I feared. But yes, all your abilities can be used in a multitude of ways. If you can imagine it, it can probably work. Repel is a spell that affects the soul of a person, and though it can be used to physically repel them, it can also be used to subtly manipulate people, like herding sheep in a way."

"You used the ability without a Focus as well, how's that possible?"

"Hm, I thought you were smarter than this. It's called a 'focus' for a reason, pipsqueak. It *focuses* your energy. With enough training you don't need any tool to use your abilities, but tools are meant to be used, because to not use them is ineffective and quite frankly moronic."

"So I don't actually need these goggles to see people's souls?"

"Certainly, although I use them because maintaining the Spirit Sight without them always gives me a thundering headache. A benefit of not using a Focus for a spell is that it becomes weaker, which is preferable to achieve a subtle result. Like a drizzle of rain rather than a monsoon, if you get what I mean."

I didn't truly, but I was sure I just needed to practice not using a Focus and then I'd internalise the truth he was speaking. Although he was irritating and mean, he was a trove of knowledge that I would do my best to learn from.

Before I could ask anything further, he strode towards the Vanguard, who, to my surprise, was staring intently at us, perhaps having sensed our gazes on her for a while.

"Howdee, sweetheart. Wanna hang out with us?"

How's that your opening pitch...?

"Exorcists, are you?" she asked. Her voice was deep but with a distinct feminine edge to it and reminded me of the voice actress Park Romi whose voice I'd always liked. "I don't think you can afford me."

"Now-now, no need to be hasty," Owl replied. "If you know enough about Exorcists, you must be aware that we're paid very handsomely by the Adventurers' Guild."

"I'm also aware that your jobs tend to get lots of people killed. Besides, you don't look like the image of affluence, wearing such hand-me-down clothes and wielding rented gear." For this latter comment, she was looking at me.

"Keen eye you have," he praised her. "But you see, we're about to embark on a Quest that pays ten gold, and for your services, we're willing to pay you ten percent of the reward."

Are you crazy!? I almost yelled at him. The reward for the quest was only one gold forty silver, and if we gave her the lion's share, then we'd only be splitting the forty silver, meaning neither of us would be that well off, while she'd be laughing all the way to the bank.

"Let me see the quest," she demanded.

Owl reached into his coat and brought out a crinkled scroll that was quite clearly not the same as the quest we had both accepted, which made alarm bells go off in my head.

As the Vanguard woman was reading through the specifics of the quest, I pulled Owl aside.

"What quest is *that*?? Did you lie to me? Where are we even going??"

"Relax, boyo. 'Tis the same as yours, just above your Rank, y'see."

"So it's also for Hamsel's Rest?"

"That's right. You didn't think I'd be satisfied just splitting the measly reward with you like that did you? Also, you'll be paying her one gold retainer out of your quest reward, but I'll let you keep the rest."

"Wait, so what's the point of me going there to figure out what kind of monster is responsible for the disappearances, if you'll be there to immediately handle it?"

"Are you unfamiliar with the concept of an apprenticeship?" he asked, looking at me as though I was potentially very stupid. "Of course I could easily do your job for you, but what exactly does that teach you? Consider it a form of supervision, what we're undertaking here. I'll leave the actual quest in your hands, but I'll make sure you don't do something profoundly stupid and get yourself killed. Of course, there are no assurances. You might still get killed. 'Tis the way of the business we're in."

"Very well," the Vanguard said. "I'll escort you, but I want my fee upfront."

"Don't be a smartass," Owl immediately replied and the sudden look on her face made me wonder if she was about to break his nose.

"Then I want a proper contract written out. I've heard enough about your lot to know you can't be trusted."

"Maybe we should pick someone else," I whispered to Master Owl.

"You've made your choice now, pipsqueak, don't run away from the consequences." He turned back to face the woman who was two heads above him. "We'll sign a proper contract, have no fear about that, but we're not paying before we know if you're actually worth what you cost."

The woman scoffed, but then said, "Fine."

This will be a terrible partnership...

We returned to the Guild Ward, with the Vanguard leading the way with here long confident strides in her metal armour. A slightly-bowed circular shield was fastened to her left forearm and had two spikes jutting out from either side of her wrist, allowing the protective tool to also become a weapon, which I thought was fitting for someone with so aggressive an aura. On her left hip hung a double-edged shortsword with a weighted pommel.

Master Owl and I struggled to keep up with her and didn't catch up until we came to two imposing metal doors of a castle-like building that was apparently the Mercenary Guild. The door was only slightly open, with enough space to move in two abreast, but far narrower than the entryway into the Adventurers' Guild, though the doors themselves also seemed so cumbersome and heavy that I doubted anyone could even shift them from their position.

The building had a completely different vibe than my Guild, as the brutal stone-and-metal structure radiated a very serious and overbearing atmosphere, with all the people within looking more like lifelong soldiers than Adventurers, even though they went through the same Role Assignment and were all Otherworlders like me. As I scanned the gathered Mercenaries within, I saw a lot of people with a similar aura hue as our hired Vanguard, but there were also a couple that had a golden hue that was identical to Harleigh's Attribute Graph, meaning they were Crusaders. The rest were a bunch of different colours that I didn't yet know what meant, though their armour and weapons gave some hints.

"See that soft-looking baby-blue spirit over there?" Owl asked.

I nodded.

"That one's a Spellhand, this world's equivalent to a magician I suppose. That group of three brown auras are Hunters, they're capable of doing specialised quests like Tracking and Investigations."

"What about the dark-green ones?"

"Those are Sharpshooters, a long-ranged archer Specialisation available to Rangers and Hunters."

"And the green ones are Rangers then?"

"That's right."

"What about the Beige one surrounded by all those people? She seems really popular."

"Pipsqueak, you cannot rely exclusively on your Spirit Sight. Take off your goggles and tell me what you think she might be, knowing what you do about Roles."

We had reached the end of a queue to a large counter staffed by three clerks in outfits of dark-blue shirts with black ties and grey dress pants, where a few groups ahead of us seemed to also be preparing to make contracts for Mercenary work with the clients next to them, though we seemed the only Adventurers in the lot, with the rest being rich-looking Lundia natives.

I took off my goggles and looked at the girl who was surrounded by three Vanguards, a Sharpshooter, and a Spellhand, and noticed her particular clothing of a stainless white robe with golden embellishments and the peculiar staff in her hand. I hadn't seen her kind of staff in the For-Rent Armoury, though I was sure I'd just missed it, but it was made of bronze and had a cross at the end, in the middle of which sat a perfectly-spherical glass orb. If it worked similarly to the lantern-type Foci, then it'd be optimised for projection spells apparently.

The way that people were crowding around her eagerly reminded me of a scene that I'd witnessed yesterday in the Adventurers' Guild Hall. She had the most popular Role out of all that I'd seen so far.

"She's a Priest," I answered.

"That's right. When it comes to Luck, they're the direct opposite of us, given that their Role requires an A-tier in the Attribute."

I frowned. That kind of instant popularity was unfair I thought.

"What do they do, since they're so popular?"

Master Owl looked at me weirdly. The Vanguard in our group was purposefully ignoring our conversation, but even she twitched slightly when she heard my question.

"You're from Earth, right?"

"Yeah?"

"And you don't know what a Priest does?"

"I mean, they pray and hold sermons, but what kind of abilities does that translate to here?"

"Hm, I thought all Earthlings knew the answer to that."

I noticed the Vanguard nod in the background. Apparently only I didn't know.

"Priests heal. They're the backbone of any competent party in this world."

"Heal? Like curing sickness and injury?"

"... Yes," he replied, then broke out in some kind of incredulous laughter.

"Huh, that's pretty cool," I replied, though I was still pretty jealous of them.

"Just like how Exorcists are the only that can deal with Exorcisms, Priests are the only who can deal with Healing. They're not quite as rare as us, when it comes to Role Assignments, but they're not a dime-a-dozen either, so they get the pick of the litter when it comes to groups. Like us, they also don't really have any offensive abilities, so they are beholden to the goodwill of others, but, you know, when you're singlehandedly capable of keeping people alive, they tend to prioritise your safety. No one gives a shit about Exorcists like that..."

The way he talks about it reminds me of how the nerds in my high school complained about the popular kids... but then, I was one of those nerds I suppose. Once again I was reminded of how special Renji was, given that he was ostensibly the King of Nerds in both our Middle School and High School, but was somehow also friends with all the popular people and admired by all the girls.

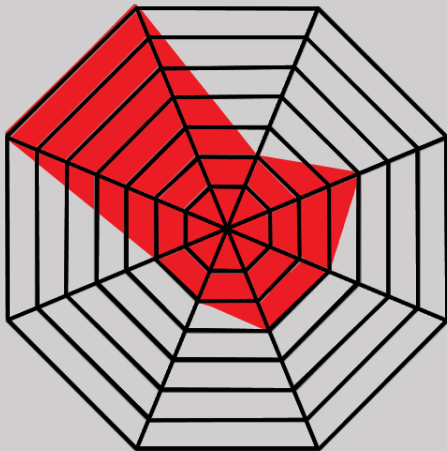
"Next!" called a clerk at the Mercenary Guild's counter and it was suddenly our turn to make a contract.

The Haunting at Hamsel's Rest I

I snapped awake as our carriage out of town hit a bump in the road. I'd been leant against the wall, while Master Owl snored to my right and the Vanguard we'd hired sat with her arms crossed opposite us. Further down the uncomfortable benches of the carriage sat other passengers who were heading in the direction of Hamsel's Rest, though would probably ride the carriage past the place, as it only lay a hundred kilometres or so outside of Lundia. Given the sort of roadwork one could expect in this world, it seemed that what would've been a forty-minute car ride took eight hours by horse-drawn carriage, but then, we were also making a few stops and detours along the way and moving no faster than twenty kilometres an hour.

"You're awake," the woman opposite me stated in her deep voice, then handed me something. I looked down and saw that it was her Guild Card. I blinked in surprise for a moment, then frantically reached into my bag and handed her mine in return.

"Thank you," she said meekly, which was very much at odds with the image I had of her up to now: stoic-but-dangerous warrior.

'RANA THORN'			
ROLE: Vanguard		RANK: Seeker	
GENDER: Female		AGE: 23	
ACUMEN: E	DEXTERITY: C	INTELLIGENCE: D	LUCK: D
PACT: E	SOUL: E	STRENGTH: S	VITALITY: S
ABILITIES 'Omniglot' 'Vanguard IV' 'Offensive Defender' 'War God'			

"Damn," I mumbled. I was surprised to see that she had two S-tier Attributes like Harleigh, although her overall layout was very unbalanced. Part of me felt a strange kinship with her, given that she also had two E-tier Attributes like me. Although I didn't think it prudent to ask, I also wondered what kind of ability 'War God' was, as it sounded pretty powerful.

I looked up and saw that Rana smiled slightly, as she read my card. "You also have two E-tiers." It suddenly struck me how beautiful her face was. She had rosy lips and reddish-brown freckles below her eyes and on her nose, as well as dark-golden irises, with her facial structure soft and charming. I'd been way too focused on her aura and menacing gear and attitude to notice, but now I couldn't help but blush when she looked up and our eyes met.

"I look f-forward to working with you," I stuttered, as I returned her Card to her.

"Smooth," Master Owl whispered from where he pretended to sleep next to me.

My blushed face became even redder.

I thought we were getting close to our destination, when suddenly Master Owl stood up from his seat, stretched his legs, and then went over and banged on the wall I was leant against.

It took a few knocks before the little sliding panel was opened and the driver asked, "What is it? Hamsel's Rest is still a ways off."

"Stop the carriage," the chubby Exorcist said calmly. "There's an ambush awaiting us around the next bend in the road."

The message seemed to take a second before it was absorbed, but then the whole carriage rocked to a sudden halt and those passengers furthest down the two benches were asking if we'd reached this-or-that destination.

"What kind of ambush?" asked the Vanguard.

"Goblins," he replied dismissively. "Go deal with them, won't ya?"

Rana nodded seriously, then rose from the bench, strapped her shield to her left arm and walked down the length of the carriage to the door at the other end, lowering her head the entire time as she was too tall to stand upright in the narrow space.

I stood up to follow her, but Owl grabbed my arm.

"Bad idea, boyo. They may just be goblins, but you've got no way to defend yourself and someone like her is best served not having to babysit a weakling while doing *her thing*."

Moments later, the driver stepped off the seat and I moved to the little sliding panel that was still open, staring out of it. I saw as Rana strode past the front of the carriage and the two horses, then, when she was some metres out she shouted a wordless challenge.

I had no idea what a goblin was supposed to look like, though was fairly confident I'd read the word in a few books. Regardless, I wasn't expecting the child-sized muscular green creatures that came charging in response to the Vanguard's taunt. They were covered in dark-green fur and the skin beneath was a lighter shade of green, while their eyes were a dirty-yellow with tiny black dots in them. They had large drooping ears like goats that were also covered in fur, as well as large hooked noses that were so big they seemed almost comical in comparison to their child-sized faces. Their hands and feet were, like their noses, also far too big in comparison to the rest of their bodies.

As they screamed bloody murder, they exposed their mouths that seemed far too wide and which were full of blocky molars like those of an herbivore. In their hands were primitive clubs and spears of wood, and they wore simple clothes of woven leaves or hide, with several sporting jewellery such as simple necklaces adorned with teeth or iron and brass piercings in their noses and ears. One of them also had a golden ring on his overlong pinkie finger.

Like a pack of rabid dogs, the five goblins leapt for Rana, but she immediately caught one mid-jump with a jab of her double-edge shortsword through its neck, before spinning around to slam her shield into another one's face, sending it on a collision course with a tree, where it crashed into the trunk with a loud *crack* and didn't stand up again.

Watching through the small panel, it was easy to pretend that I was just watching some kind of movie and that I wasn't a part of this. But as she continued to battle the crazed monsters, their overwhelming stench of filth and the coppery tang of their spilled blood washed over me. I didn't look away from the carnage she inflicted on them, nor did I flinch when she severed the arm of one or cut another clean in half along its waistline. I was frozen in place by the sight, but I realised that I felt no pity for these inhuman creatures and I almost relished every kill Rana made with her skilled movements.

The carriage floor under me creaked and rumbled as Master Owl walked down to the door and hopped out. Not knowing what else to do, I followed out after him, massaging my sore legs as I landed on the dirt road we'd been travelling along for hours.

I walked over to the pair, who were in the middle of rummaging through the dead goblins. It was a grim sight I thought, to see them looting the dead *just like that*. I pinched my nose as the stench really wafted over me as I drew close.

"Look at this one," Owl said, lifting a necklace he had taken from the one which had been cut in half. The necklace was a simple twine string that ran through six silver coins that had been hole-punched.

"The Adventurers' Guild take those at face value," Rana replied. The way she spoke with such confidence made me realise she was more than just older than me. In fact, she had the air of a hardened veteran, even though she was just twenty-three. I supposed that would be the same case for me if I lived to her age in this world as well, though by all accounts that was statistically improbable.

"It's been too long since I fought normal monsters," Owl replied.

"What are you doing?" I asked, unable to keep the question to myself.

"What does it look like, boyo? We're looting."

"Looting the dead... isn't that...?"

"What?" he asked sharply, turning to face me.

"Don't be so hard on him," Rana defended me. "You're new, right, Temaru?"

"Yeah. This is all really crazy to me."

She nodded understandingly. "That's how this world is. We have to do things we do not desire in this world in order to survive." I felt like there was more truth to that statement than just encompassing looting the dead.

"I wonder what goblins were doing so close to the city," Owl remarked. "They're usually closer to the mountains. I thought they knew better than to get too close to civilisation like this."

"I heard rumours of a Hobgoblin Lord in the area," she replied.

"Hm, maybe that's what Harleigh and his group were sent to deal with," he ventured.

"Harleigh? He's around here?" she asked and it was as though she had stars in her eyes.

No wonder she'd be head-over-heels for a guy like him.

Suddenly Owl kicked me in the shin. "What are you spacing out for? Help us out here."

"It's okay, he doesn't need to," Rana replied, once again defending me.

"Remember your place, sweetheart. This boy's my apprentice and he's going to die if he's coddled and not shown the harsh reality of this world," Owl said icily. I hated the way fear curled my insides at the way he inflected his voice. He was just a chubby old man, so why did he sound so dangerous like that?

The Vanguard lowered her head.

"I'll help," I said, trying not to put her too much on the spot.

I went over to the goblin that I'd noticed wearing the gold ring. Although it was the height of a ten-year-old child, it was still so *big* up close. Bile rose in my throat as I knelt down on the dirt road, staining the grey trousers Harleigh had bought for me. Despite trying my best to breathe through my mouth, the stench the creature gave off was so overwhelming that it seeped into my nostrils and stuck there like a malign entity.

Swallowing hard, I quickly lifted its right hand, which was somehow bigger than mine. I felt the greasy fur on its finger slide over my skin as I pulled the golden ring off its pinkie finger, then I quickly stood back up and moved over to a nearby tree where I puked my breakfast out onto the grass. Emptying my stomach like that sent a jab of hunger through my chest and up my throat, reminding me that I hadn't eaten any lunch. I puked again.

"Nicely spotted for your first time," Owl praised me with a heavy pat on my back, almost triggering another puking convulsion from me. We were back inside the carriage and would soon arrive to our destination. He was holding the dirty golden ring in the air, grinning.

"Shouldn't that belong to Rana-san?" I asked boldly.

The Vanguard had been quiet and brooding since Master Owl had scolded her, and had not argued when the man had taken all the loot from the dead goblins. Surprisingly, they had just left the corpses on the side of the road. I wondered if that was common.

"Party rules," Owl replied. "We are paying Lady Thorn for her services, so the looting rights and distribution falls to us, and, since you're my apprentice, that means I get the final say."

That seems unfair when she did all the work and we just watched...

"Isn't her last name Rana?" was all I asked in return.

Owl grinned and suddenly the Vanguard smiled as well.

"Thorn is my last name," she replied meekly. "From your reaction, I take it that your name is Ryūta and not Temaru."

I blushed a deep red. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be presumptions by calling you by your given name!"

Owl was laughing mightily at this point, finding joy in my embarrassment.

"Don't worry about it," she replied amicably. "I will call you by your first name and you may do the same."

I was too embarrassed to say anything, so I just nodded.

The three of us disembarked the carriage and watched as it took off down the dirt road that ran through the vast forest we'd been travelling through pretty much since leaving Lundia. We found ourselves at a fork in the road and a weatherworn sign pointed left, reading '*Hamsel's Rest*', while the right-pointing sign stated '*Ochre*', with one pointing back the way we'd come saying '*Lundia*'.

The road going to Hamsel's Rest looked unkempt and overgrown, as though it had not been traversed by carriages and horses in many months.

"How far is it on foot from here?" I asked.

"Twenty kilometres or so. I hope you brought proper footwear."

I looked down at my hide boots. "These are the only ones I have," I replied.

Owl nodded. "Better than those ridiculous sandals I saw you wearing on the first day."

I frowned, warmth staining my face. *Not like I had a head's-up about being transporting to this goddamn world and could pick the most appropriate outfit!*

Then his words fully seeped in and I realised that he'd been watching me from day one...

"Alright, let's head out then."

"Do you mind if I get something to eat first?"

"Do you have enough to share?" he asked in return.

What are you, a middle-schooler!?

"No," I lied, not wanting him to take the food I'd bought to last the next few days.

"A shame. I didn't bring anything," he replied.

"Nor I," Rana admitted.

I looked incredulously at them both.

"How are you planning on getting food then?"

The Vanguard shrugged. "I was thinking of hunting something for dinner."

I looked to the old man, who just shrugged. "I was counting on her doing that."

"That seems really irresponsible," I scolded them both.

"Eh, don't be so serious," Master Owl replied lackadaisical, which only irritated me. "The village ought to have some stuff we can take and there's a river and a well, so we can get water."

"Are you trying to die of dysentery?" I asked, dumbfounded.

He grinned, exposing dirty unbrushed teeth. "You're pretty funny, pipsqueak."

I was about to complain that he ought to take this seriously, considering how much he emphasised the dangers of this world, but then he put a hand on my back and pushed me forward down the left-going road. "Let's get a move on, we're wasting daylight."

I was thoroughly exhausted when we arrived to Hamsel's Rest. After dealing with the Mercenary Contract and everything yesterday, I had done a bit of practicing for my Meditation and Repel though no physical training. Prior to coming here I'd also never been much of an outdoors person. I was a slow runner and I had no stamina, though I had been okay in sports like baseball, when it came to pitching and batting, since my hand-eye coordination was okay.

Going from my lazy shut-in days, while I studied for next year's exams, to this sudden twenty-kilometre hike was a bit too tough on me, and I feared that I'd be left behind if I couldn't keep up with my 'Mentor' and Rana. Somehow, even the chubby old man had no trouble walking uninterrupted across hilly forested terrain, while I was wheezing and my vision was blurry by the end. I had been glad to at least have my staff to lean on and wondered if the design was perhaps not designed specifically to work well as a walking stick.

Master Owl had complained about the noise that the bells made, but after a couple of hours they had settled down, apparently no longer responding wildly to my errant soul energy.

The outskirts of the village were idyllic and peaceful, though tall grass grew around the quaint wooden houses and community buildings, with a few places clearly infested with animals and plants within as well. It was clear that the place had been abandoned for a while.

A bubbling river ran around and through the village, and there was even a small centre where stood a few market stalls and a large blossoming tree with off-white flowers that cast a faint spicy sweetness into the air. As I looked around and we explored the place, I struggled to fathom why such a nice place had been abandoned.

We came to a part of the village where crops had been left to grow uncontrollably and where livestock might have been tended, though their stables and pens were now empty. No one lived in Hamsel's Rest any longer, unless you counted the wild animals nesting in the houses. For some reason, there were also no monsters. We had encountered goblins so close to this place and yet none of them had taken it over, despite it seeming like a great place to settle.

"Oy, pipsqueak!" Owl called accusatorily. "Why aren't your goggles on? We're on the job here, buddy. Don't let your guard drop until we have found a safehouse!"

For our entire trip here he had worn his, but I had taken them off yesterday and just worn them around my neck since. After all, they were quite uncomfortable and the brass fitting was discolouring my skin a faint green, making me worry the metal was toxic. I wondered if his goggles were the

reason that he had seen the ambush coming, although that would mean that he had the ability to look through objects...

I frowned, wondering why he was being so strict all of a sudden, but then I pulled the goggles up from where they hung around my neck and when I secured them on the back of my head and opened my eyes, I suddenly took a step back and fell on my ass.

"W-w-what..."

All around me, covering the ground, the buildings, the grass, the stalls, the tree, everything, were glowing white-blue footprints and handprints. I had somehow forgotten that my job here was actually really dangerous.

Only one in twenty-five survive their first Exorcism Quest...

The Haunting at Hamsel's Rest II

I had finally stopped hyperventilating by the time we found shelter: a small house that'd once belonged to a seamstress, and which had only three rooms. According to Master Owl, we didn't want a place too big, since we might have to defend it. The notion of having to fight off a horde of unseen monsters only made my lungs constrict tighter as I struggled to maintain a steady breath.

"You're looking mighty scared there, boyo," he teased me. Despite his usual annoying jabs, I noticed that he was actually quite tense. Perhaps it was instinct kicking in or perhaps he was scared of what we were up against.

"You know what kind of monster this is, right?"

"Of course, but I'm not telling you. It's your task to find out, remember? You gain nothing from me giving you the answer."

"What are all those... those *things*?"

"Something like energy signatures?" he replied, sounding himself uncertain.

Rana stood near where we were sitting, arms crossed and on guard. Her shield was strapped to her arm, so she was clearly prepared for a fight, though it seemed obvious that she had no idea what it was that both Owl and I saw. Those handprints were also inside the house, as well as footprints. It was creeping me out that such things were only visible when I wore the goggles. Without them I wouldn't have known anything was wrong. I vowed to never take them off again.

"Here," Master Owl said as he handed me a small hide pouch with a string that could be pulled to close it. I opened it slightly and looked inside. Something off-white like chalk dust was within.

"Line all the windows and doors with a thin layer of *that*, but don't use too much, it's expensive."

I got up from the stool I'd been sitting on. I was still very exhausted from the hike to the village, and my legs were aching, but I doubted I'd be able to find rest in this place now.

"What is *this*?" I asked, as I started spreading a thin line in front of the doorway we'd entered through.

"Sacred Corpse Ash," he replied.

I blinked a few times, then the name properly sunk in and I felt incredibly gross for having it all over my hands.

"I think I'm gonna go wash my hands in the river after I'm done," I told him.

"Don't leave this house," he said, his serious tone brokering no argument.

We're really in it here, aren't we? How could I seriously have forgotten what I was doing here??

I scolded myself. Just because something looked peaceful, it didn't mean it was. I could now suddenly understand why the mortality rate for my Role was so high, if all hauntings and such were so unassuming at first glance.

I frowned as I dipped my hand in the pouch and began spreading a line of the ash along the windowsill. The first sentence of the quest information suddenly echoed in my head:

Eight people have gone missing from the village known as 'Hamsel's Rest' and all signs point to a Haunting, though no one knows the exact entity behind the disappearances.

I failed to suppress a shudder. Whatever creature had left all those prints everywhere somehow had the ability to make people disappear without a trace. It had taken eight disappearances before the village had been abandoned... that thought alone was terrifying.

"Hey, Owl—"

"I prefer to be called 'Master'," he interrupted.

I frowned. "Master... this creature, does it have the ability to camouflage itself?"

He grinned in response, which made me think I was close to being correct.

After lining the two doorways and three windows of the house with the Sacred Corpse Ash, Master Owl called both Rana and I over, then had us expose our collarbones which were concealed by our clothes, before painting a single line on us both with a piece of cold and oily red chalk. Then he pulled down the neck of his own black blouse and did the same.

"What'd you do that for?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Who knows."

Then he held up the chalk and said, "This here is called Blood Chalk." He handed it to me. "Keep it, along with the pouch in your hand."

I frowned. I didn't want this stuff... However, I didn't argue and put both the ash pouch and chalk in the bag on my lower back that was hidden by my travel cloak.

"How am I supposed to figure out what kind of 'entity' is haunting this place?" I asked. It seemed like something that I ought to have been educated in, rather than this haphazard way of learning by trial-and-error, with error meaning death.

Master Owl had the look of someone who remembered something suddenly, then he grinned awkwardly and reached into his heavy coat, producing a little book that looked almost like a prayer book. Surprisingly, he held it out towards me, but, when I was about to take it, he pulled it away.

“This is the most expensive thing I’m gifting you. It’s irreplaceable. You are not its first owner and you will not be its last. Major Quests have been issued *just* for its retrieval, when a holder died on duty. Do you understand me?”

I pulled my hand back. I almost didn’t want to take it now. “What is it?” I asked, but part of me didn’t want to know. It had to be something terrible, I was sure.

“There are about a handful of these in the possession of Exorcists and their apprentices all over the Hallem continent, but each is unique and shaped by the knowledge and teachings of those who possessed it, making every copy a highly-knowledgeable journal on the subject matters which we are uniquely tasked to dealing with.

“In short: it is an ‘Exorcist’s Encyclopaedia’. Its first half contains knowledge about the apparitions and entities we might encounter, including creature specifics, behaviour patterns, weaknesses, ways to exorcise them, and so forth. The second half has knowledge about the spirits that can be summoned to serve as familiars. There is a bit of overlap between the two, as many of the things we might invoke to aid us can also be found in the wild, plaguing the people of this world. The last few pages contain forbidden knowledge that, if utilised, might see you hunted down by other Exorcists or Witch-Hunters.

“This is quite literally a death sentence to carry on your person, but it is also your most useful tool. Knowledge is what sets you apart from everyone else. To know your enemy is to wield the sword that might slay them.”

Finishing his speech, he then offered the book to me. It was quite small for something of such significance.

“Is the answer to this Quest inside?”

“Of course.”

I frowned, but then reached out and accepted it reverently with both hands. The burden and responsibility it represented made it like a boulder in my hands, and as I took a closer look at it, I saw that it was stained with rust-coloured spots, which was, undoubtedly, old dried blood.

How many aspiring Exorcists like me have died in the possession of this book?

Owl turned to look at Rana, then did a zipper motion across his lips.

The Vanguard looked grim in response, but then said, “As a Mercenary, you see many things that you are obliged to forget. I do not care about your forbidden books, so don’t worry about me.”

The old man chuckled in response and looked to me, then said cheerfully, “She’s a keeper this one!”

I looked past him and out of the window. The village outside our borrowed house was quickly darkening, owing to the fact that we were surrounded by trees and no one tended the streetlamps here like they did in Lundia. Owl had brought out and lit his own little lantern, but its light was weak and only illuminated part of the main room.

As I looked at the fast-moving shadows eating away the remnants of sunlight, a pair of sparkling eyes behind the large tree in the village centre caught my attention. I thought at first that it was a fox or some other woodland animal that made its home here, but then I noticed the pale face to which the eyes belonged.

It was a kid, and she was staring right at us.

Just like a scared and hungry animal.

I ran for the door, but Owl caught me by the scruff of my travel cloak and stopped me dead.

"Seeing things already, boyo?"

"T-there's a girl out there!" I screamed, pointing to the tree.

Rana came over to the window and looked to where I indicated, then turned back to me and said, "I don't see anyone."

I wrestled myself out of Owl's grip and came over next to her and looked out, but those glinting eyes were gone.

"Make a note," the old Exorcist said. "It is active in the dark."

A cold fear ran down my body, making my arms and legs tingle. It felt like the beginnings of a panic attack. I moved away from the window, suddenly worried that it might jump through the shutters that served as the house's windows and ventilation. After all, this world seemed to have very expensive glass, so windows were basically just square holes in the wall that were either completely blocked off or covered in horizontal panels when closed. It made me feel like we weren't fully protected from the outside world in here, but glass wasn't exactly an impervious barrier, so I doubted I'd have felt any safer with normal windows instead.

"Was *that* the monster??"

"Did you see anyone when we were exploring the village earlier?" he argued back.

"What did it look like?" Rana asked.

"It was like a little girl, maybe around the age of six? She had eyes like a cat, with that strange kind of reflection in the dark."

"Make another note: It can see in the dark."

I moved to a point in main room where two walls formed a corner and I felt that I could observe the window and the outside world through its panels without anything jumping me from behind, then I sat down on the stool I'd pulled over.

Owl grinned when he looked at me. "It is only watching us for now. I recommend having a peek at the Encyclopaedia. We need to get you some familiars before we truly take on this thing."

Unlike me, the Vanguard brought a chair over to the door and window, so she could sit and keep guard. Given the fact that many of the foot and handprints were on the ceiling, I doubted she'd be able to see the creature coming. The fact that it looked like a little girl was deeply unnerving.

While keeping an eye on Rana and the window, I opened the book that Owl had given me ceremoniously. There was no foreword or intro, as the first page just immediately got into describing, with a drawing, a creature called a 'Poltergeist'. The depiction was just a bundle of reaching hands and the brief description about the entity said that it was a lingering soul known to inhabit a single place, like a house, moving objects around, and which would, if sufficiently disturbed, throw things at people to hurt and kill them. Signs of its presence could be handprints visible with Spirit Sight, objects relocating, and sounds of someone moving about in empty rooms.

Listed forms of exorcism were: finding an object closely associated with the spirit during its time as a human and which kept it tethered to the real world, then using the Sanctify ability on it; or to perform something called a Ritual of Obsequy on the possessed location, which then had a long list of bizarre requirements, such as hair from a dead relative and grave dirt. A note written later also added that, if a Priest was available, another way to exorcise it was to exhume the corpse of the dead person whose soul was haunting the place and then performing a new funeral for them.

I frowned. It seemed quite obvious that there were many different ways of dealing with spirits and their exorcisms, with each requiring a lot of investigation to even pull off. What's more, as I leafed through the pages, I saw that many did not have listed signs nor depictions, with a few having ominous phrases like: "There is no known way to exorcise this entity."

Some of the drawings were also ones that I had no doubt would revisit me in my nightmares. The worst one was something called a 'Flayed One', which had been drawn in gruesome detail as having its skin hanging around its waist, with its upper body completely flayed. It was said to be a type of Revenant that physically manifested to punish those that had tortured during its life. The recommended way of dealing with it was to contract a Crusader with a blessed weapon, or to use a sufficiently-powerful familiar to destroy it.

"Those are a pain to deal with," Owl commented, suddenly standing next to me and looking at the page.

"You've exorcised one of *these*?" I asked, incredulously.

He nodded simply.

"So, find anything yet?"

"No... there are too many apparitions who have the possible sign of leaving hand and footprints."

"It wouldn't be any fun if the answer was easy," he replied, sounding as though it was all just a game to him.

Similar to the spirit prints, there were also many in the Encyclopaedia that could be described as 'active at night' and 'can see in the dark', which meant that I still lacked something more distinct to really understand the apparition I was dealing with.

"There's a man outside," Rana suddenly said.

I looked up and saw a face pressed against the window shutters, the glinting eyes staring through. My blood froze in my veins and even Owl chuckled uncomfortably. Then it began sniffing loudly, while its reflective eyes scanned the room. The Vanguard looked to Master Owl, who nodded curtly. She got up, pulled her blade from its sheath and then stabbed it through the shutters, perfectly in-between the panels.

With a high-pitched screech, the creature pulled away and Rana withdrew her weapon. Before she could clean her blade with a stained and oily cloth, Owl stopped her and came over with an empty glass vial, which he scraped the black blood on her blade into.

"What do you need *that* for?" she asked, as he put a cork stopper into the vial and then deposited it in a coat pocket.

He just grinned infuriatingly in response.

"Is this why you had me use the ash on the windows and doors?" I asked, my body shaking from the sudden influx of adrenaline.

"Indeed," he replied, strolling over to sit next to me as though nothing had happened. "So," he started, "How about you share that food you've been hiding from us?"

After the three of us ate all my hardtack and sausage and shared a bottle of the now-lukewarm fruit tea, I had a brief epiphany and began scrolling through the book. I quickly came to the page that mentioned the 'Bloodfiend', which was characterised by hunting at night, a strong sense of smell, and looking just like any normal person. The cause behind them could be a few different things: a

Vampire had created them by feasting on humans; a powerful cursed artefact had transformed people who found it and they now searched endlessly for food; or someone had deliberately created them by feeding people Dead Man's Blood over a few weeks.

I almost showed the page to Owl as my answer to the Quest, but then I paused, suddenly uncertain. From the descriptions, the Bloodfiend sounded like a creature that was no different than a rabid animal looking for food. Given that the Haunter of Hamsel's Rest was still here after the village had been abandoned, it seemed to be territorial somehow, as though something tied it to the place.

It felt as though this was a puzzle and I was still missing a piece to explain the rest. The issue with the Encyclopaedia was that it had too many possibilities, which confused me more than it helped me.

"How many do you think there are?" I asked Owl.

He just shrugged in return.

At first I had assumed it was just one creature responsible, due to the Quest description, but, when I thought about it, we had seen two different human-like entities, and the prints that glowed on the surfaces of everywhere I looked came in at least half-a-dozen shapes and sizes.

I'm definitely not sleeping tonight... I thought to myself, imagining that the house was surrounded by angry monsters on all sides.

After some prompting from Master Owl, I looked through the second half of the book, reading about the many different types of spirits that I could turn into my familiars. There seemed to be a few categories that a familiar could be assigned to: Watcher; Protector; Tracker; & Fighter.

Some of the spirits were listed in several categories, but a few weren't categorised at all and had a strange trident mark. I pointed one out to Owl, from a spirit named, ominously, 'Abyss Serpent'.

"Those are a kind of familiar you should not try to sign a pact with. In fact, most of the ones with this mark are forbidden to invoke."

"I thought the forbidden parts were in the back of the book?" This one had been towards the middle of the second half. The inclusion in this part of the book seemed odd, if there was a second part specifically for banned familiars. The idea that such forbidden matter was listed in the first place was also quite unsettling.

"The latter part is more for things like raising the dead, curses, and such."

I noticed that Rana had a brief expression of interest on her face when she heard him, but she quickly schooled her face back into a neutral mask. It was probably best to pretend I hadn't noticed.

"You will also occasionally see that mark on some of the entries about apparitions in the first half. It usually means that you're dealing with something that another Exorcist brought into this world. The Abyss Serpent is one such creature."

I suddenly remembered the name, because it was one of the entries that'd had no listed way to exorcise it nor much information in general. I wondered what it did.

"A lot of the familiars you can contract with simply expect soul energy in return for their service or maybe a bit of your blood. Given that we Exorcists are basically a fountain of such energy, it is a simple thing for us to pay them. One of the Spellhand Specialisations also features familiars, but they are far more limited in what they can get, because they generally don't have the same tier of the Soul Attribute as we do.

"The dangerous types of familiars are the ones that expect more than just your energy or blood offering in return for their aid. We generally refer to such Pacts as having Tolls or Renumerations."

"Have you used any familiars like that?"

"Yes," he replied simply. "I don't recommend it."

"The thing that took your eye, was that one of such familiars?"

"No, that was just a mistake on my end. A Pact that you form with a familiar is a contract that is binding to both you and your summoned entity. I made the dear mistake of giving a command that lay outside my contract, so the entity was allowed to take a payment in the form that it desired..."

"I don't think I want to use a familiar," I told him. I sounded like playing with fire.

"I'm not giving you a choice."

I frowned. I felt sure that I was about to sign my soul away to the devil. "Which one should I pick? There are so many different ones..."

Master Owl took the book, flipped to a specific page and handed it back to me.

"*Eye of the Observer*," I read out loud. It was a Watcher-type of familiar, though I wasn't completely sure what exactly what a Watcher was supposed to be good for.