

18 – The Port of Ochre

Around noon on the fourth day of travel we finally arrived to the city of Ochre. As our carriage slowed to a halt in front of its large gate, we all disembarked to walk the last bit. Lukas and Rana were both full of energy as soon as they left the vehicle, but Owl and I both needed to stretch our legs first. I cast him a glance, wondering if I could expect to turn into a chubby and grumpy old man like him as I got older. He noticed me staring and grinned, as though he could read my thoughts.

“Where should we go? Do we make right for the Galleon?”

“Sure, if you feel like just diving headfirst into a Demon’s Lair... No, obviously we have preparations to make.”

“What sort?”

“First off, we need to find a good restaurant to eat at and an inn that we can stay in, preferably not too far from the Port District, but not within the splash zone of the nightly attacks either.”

Dinner first...? I contemplated, confused, although I was famished from living on travel rations, so I didn’t complain.

“I thought we’d make a sanctuary to stay at within the Galleon.”

Owl shook his head. “Generally it’s a bad idea to stay within the territory of the entity you’re trying to exorcise.”

I frowned. “You should perhaps have taught me that sooner. I did after all stay inside the haunted east wing of Lundia Castle... I thought *that* was normal.”

“With many of the weaker apparitions we come across it might be fine, and if you know what you’re doing it’s a good strategy to quickly figure out what sort of creature you’re dealing with, since they tend to show their hand when disturbed or enraged. But the best practice is to establish a point beyond the area of the Haunting where you are able to observe safely and which serves as a place to retreat to when things get dicey.”

“And we’re doing that here?”

“Oh yeah. Demons have a lot of nasty abilities and many of their ilk can trigger mind-loops that slowly fry your brain just by being close to them. So we’ll need to make a lot of wards, along with some other preparations, such as holy water baths and having our weapons blessed.”

“We’re not bringing Lukas inside with us, right?”

“No, that would be extraordinarily stupid. I’m thinking we leave Ms. Thorn outside as well, but fret not, because, as I understand it, the Church will give us a small retinue of Paladins to aid us.”

I chewed my lower lip. I wanted Rana to go with me, because her presence made me feel safe, but I also wanted to keep her out of harm’s way, especially given that this was a Calamity-rated Quest.

Just then the tall Vanguard came over and asked, “What are you talking about?”

“Strategy,” I replied.

“You wanted to try the rice in this world, right Ryūta?”

I nodded eagerly.

“Then come on, I know the perfect place to have dinner tonight.”

I looked to Owl briefly and he just shrugged. Then we both followed after Rana.

Ochre was a tremendously-beautiful city, which was perfectly accentuated by the gentle warmth of the sun and a crisp salty breeze that brushed across the city from the coast. The city itself looked like it was hewn from a single slab of marbled stone, with every street and building constructed out of the same yellow-white rock.

Compared to Lundia, Ochre seemed to be several eras of technology ahead, as brass pipes visibly pierced through the buildings and, according to Rana, the pipes carried water drawn from underground thermal reservoirs, allowing even the cheapest homes access to warm water by just turning a single valve.

She also told me that the poorest people in the city were employed to sweep the streets and maintain the façades of buildings, which were prone to erosion from the salty ocean wind. In Lundia, outright poverty hadn’t been a thing, as far as I could tell, but the general welfare was rather low, whereas Ochre seemed to have no such issue on the surface. Of course, such things were rarely visible at first glance.

“Does the Principality of Arley have a capital?” I asked her, as we crossed under a large arch that demarcated the border between the Marketplace District and the Comfort District that we were entering.

“Helmstatter is where the Prince has his castle,” she answered, “but, no, there is no clearly-defined capital in Arley. Lundia is what could be described as its centre and backbone, but Ochre is where the money is produced, and Helmstatter is where decisions are made.”

“Lacksmeiy is different,” Owl quickly added. “Where the Royal Family lives, the city of Evergreen, is also where money is produced and decisions are made.”

“How come Arley is different then?”

He shrugged and Rana didn't seem to know either.

Suddenly the Vanguard stopped, announcing, “We're here.”

In front of us was a three-storey stone slab of a building, with a rusty metal plaque above the door stating ‘*Home of the famous Fish-on-Rice dish!*’. My mouth was already watering at the promise of rice and fish.

After the four of us entered and found a table, we were quickly served stone cups of a sweet white wine or something of the sort. It was slightly alcoholic, but no one complained when Lukas began chugging it with glee. I wished to just have normal water someday, but it seemed that most water-sources were contaminated somehow, since everyone drank only alcoholic beverages or tea. Apparently no one had discovered that you could just boil water and let it cool down...

When we were served the only dish that the restaurant served: ‘fish-on-rice’, I was surprised to see something akin to nigiri but with grilled fish. The taste was pretty good, though I felt it lacked soy sauce. No sooner had the thought entered my mind than Rana pushed a stone vessel towards me and said, “Try it with *this*.”

I lifted the vessel up to sniff the contents and was greeted by a pungent fishy aroma. I poured a bit of the sauce inside onto one of my not-quite-nigiri fish-on-rice pieces and saw, to my surprise, that its colour was similar to soy sauce.

As I put the sauced-up piece into my mouth, the flavour that hit me was overwhelmingly fishy, though with a sort of umami that perfectly accompanied the rice and the grilled fish.

“Wow, that's delicious,” I commented. “It's not quite like soy sauce, but I might become addicted to *this*.”

“They sell it everywhere in Ochre,” Rana told me. “It's called Garum.”

After our meal, Rana suggested that the four of us could stay in the rooms that lay above the restaurant, but Owl protested, saying that he wanted a place closer to the Port District, and given that the Comfort District was in the opposite end of the city, Rana didn't protest.

We left the restaurant and Comfort District with our bellies full, while the sun set and the street sweepers switched to lighting the lanterns that lined all the streets. We retraced our steps to the Marketplace District, where the main thoroughfare led us to the Guild District.

Master Owl stopped me and told Rana and Lukas to go ahead to the Crafting District and find us a place to stay there, while he and I would visit the Adventurers' Guild and announce that we were taking on the Exorcism Quest.

The Ochre Adventurers' Guild building was similar in many ways to the one in Lundia, though it was made of the same stone as the rest of the city's buildings and the large door was made of brass rather than red-painted wood, which was spotted green all over from the metal oxidising.

As we entered, I saw that the place was mostly empty, with the exception of a group of Adventurers huddled around a table in the tavern-section and deep in some important discussion. There were also a few loners who looked to be sleeping off their drunken stupors. From the appearances of the auras belonging to group, I noticed that one was a Crusader, another a Priest, the third was possibly a Spellhand although the colour was slightly wrong, and the last one was the same auburn hue as the Boxer, who had knocked me out and later been torn in two by Owl's protector.

We handed our Guild Cards to the Guild Representative, who, unlike the few I'd interacted with in Lundia, had dark hair and pale skin, meaning she was native to Lacksmey. Her eyes widened as she saw the quest we were accepting.

"What does an Auburn aura mean?" I asked Owl, while we were waiting for the lady to register the quest for us.

"That'd be a Brawler," he replied. "They're focused on hand-to-hand, but are similar to Vanguard in a lot of ways. They usually utilise claws, daggers, axes, or special gauntlets."

"Like the one who attacked me," I muttered. "He seemed to be able to avoid my Protector's defences."

"Yeah, they have a kind of precognition for that sort of thing, but it's hard to master..." he trailed off as he realised that I'd been looking at the group of adventurers in the tavern. "*That one* with the Aquamarine aura is an Elementalist. Quite a tough party that one, with two Advanced Roles in it..." he trailed off again, and I realised why, because the Crusader had stood up and I immediately recognised the man.

"Harleigh? What's he doing here?"

Master Owl huffed as the tall and handsome man began to make his way to us.

"We are very pleased you have decided to take this Emergency Quest, Master Owl," the Guild Representative said, making us turn back to face her. As she handed our Cards back, my Mentor mumbled some kind of answer that I didn't catch, and then a moment later the Crusader's shadow was looming over us.

"I didn't expect to see you here, Ryūta."

"Nor I," I told him.

"I'm sorry that I just suddenly vanished without a word. I wanted to tell you, but my party suddenly received an urgent bounty we needed to take care of."

"It's okay," I replied.

"I hear from my Apprentice here that you grew a consciousness, Harleigh," Master Owl remarked bitingly.

Harleigh nodded, as though agreeing with the characterisation Owl was painting of him. "I have certainly not taken my duty as a Guild Veteran seriously before and, although it was brief, I was glad to be able to aid your Apprentice slightly, but I am glad to find that Ryūta is in your capable hands now."

Owl grinned. "You know that I can tell when you're lying, right?"

Harleigh's amiable façade faltered slightly, then he turned to me and asked, "Why are you in Ochre?"

"We're going to Exorcise the Galleon," I told him, puffing my chest up slightly.

"Don't attempt it," he warned. "You'll die."

"He won't if he follows my teachings," Owl answered before I had a chance to defend my own competency.

"I've already completed two Exorcisms," I told Harleigh. "I'm a Seeker now."

"Impressive," he commented, though I noticed how there was a tiny tremor in his golden aura. "But it won't be enough. The last two Exorcists to attempt dealing with the Demon Galleon both perished and they had more than a decade of experience each."

"Your warning has been heard," Owl said, "But we already accepted the Quest and Pipsqueak here is more capable than you believe."

I blinked in surprise at Owl's praise, then he grabbed me by the arm and we left the Guild Hall before Harleigh could say anything else.

As soon as the brass doors were behind us, Owl began grumbling, "Two-faced piece of shit!"

"Why do you hate Harleigh so much?" I asked.

"You're not my first apprentice," he revealed. "Guess what happened to the last one?"

"Eaten by a Banshee?" I guessed.

"Your idol, Holier-than-thou Harleigh, killed him along with his Witcher Hunter friends..."

I swallowed hard, unable to say anything.

Why would he do something like that?

Lukas and Rana had found us a comfortable inn that lay just a few minutes from the tall arch that separated the Crafting District from the Port wherein lay the Haunted Galleon. Because Rana had been in charge of the rooms we were given, Lukas and Owl shared a room and we had one for ourselves. No sooner had we said goodnight to my Mentor and the Rogue than she pulled me into the room and closed door behind us.

She pulled me in for a kiss and I could scarcely object to it, though the revelation about Harleigh's past was weighing heavy on me and I felt unable to fully reciprocate her embrace.

After pulling away, she looked at me with concern. Her normally-thorny aura was hazy and wavering, but I wasn't sure how to interpret *that*. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," I told her. "Master Owl told me something bad about Harleigh."

For just a split-second, I saw how her aura flickered at the mention of the Crusader. "Why were you talking about him?"

"We ran into him at the Guild Hall when we were accepting the quest and there was this really weird—"

"Harleigh is in Ochre?" she interrupted me.

I blinked. "Yes."

"...Why do you have that look on your face?"

She didn't reply so I pulled myself out of her grasp.

"You're in love with Harleigh, aren't you?" I asked, my chest tightening at the expectation of her answer.

"It's not like that," she replied. "It's... complicated."

I let out a sigh. "Of course." The way her aura was shifting around made it clear that she was hiding something from me or maybe even lying. I could now guess who had gifted her the expensive mirror in her apartment.

Gritting my teeth, I put my robe, which she'd tossed on the floor, back on and left the room. She tried to stop me, but I didn't listen and went into Owl and Lukas' room, where I told the boy to switch beds with me.

"Okay!" he said cheerfully, though I could tell he was a bit curious as to why. Fortunately, he wasn't the type the pry, which I appreciated.

After Lukas left the room, I crashed down on the bed with an annoyed sigh.

—Patreon-Exclusive Copy—
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka "Dosei")—

“Miss me already?” Owl teased.

“Shut up,” I told him.