

## 8 - My First Exorcism

I pretended to sleep in the leaning chair, while the door to the house stood slightly ajar, with the line of Sacred Corpse Dust broken half-way through. I discovered that, even with my eyes closed, I could still utilise Sumi's sight, and I used this to observe the entrance to the house.

The Skinstealer was already active as soon as the shadows had begun creeping across the forest, but it seemed hesitant to approach the front door of our house. Wearing the guise of a woman with long dark-brown hair and a simple threadbare robe, it crawled around the house and looked through the window in the back and the one for the bedroom.

Master Owl and Rana were hiding in the bedroom behind a tall dresser and were hopefully hidden from the creature's sight and smell, while I alone sat in the main room, pretending to sleep. On the floor Owl had drawn a large two-metre-diameter circle with a bunch of bizarre symbols within and a lit stick of incense in its centre, which cast a dense vanilla smell into the air.

Though it was hard to trust him, Owl had said that the Skinstealer would be locked in place when it stepped into the large ritual circle on the floor and I was conveniently placed directly opposite it from the door. It would have to cross the trap to reach me, unless...

*Unless it crawls on the walls...*

As soon as the thought had entered my mind, I saw through Sumi's eye that the Skinstealer was coming back around to the front of the house. It seemed to peek through the window shutters, before sniffing around the partly-open door.

My heart skipped a beat as it rose to its full height and used an arm to carefully open the door the entire way, before stepping right through the broken like of Sacred Ash on the floor. I tried to manipulate Sumi to follow behind it as it moved further into the house and closer to me and the trap on the floor, but my heart was beating so fast that I struggled to maintain concentration, then suddenly my connection to the familiar broke.

A moment later, a horrific shriek sounded from right next to me.

I carefully opened my eyes, my body like stone. In front of me hovered Armen with his blurry plated arms flung wide to shield me and a metre away stood the Skinstealer, frozen in place and half-way through opening the terrible maw that ran down the length of its face and torso.

From the other room, Owl and Rana came running.

"Wow, it's uglier than I thought," he commented.

I got up from the chair and sidled along the wall at my back until I was over next to them.

"Let's exorcise it!" I said, wanting the monster to go away as fast as possible. Even though it was frozen in place, there was no assurances that it would stay that way for long.

"Do you remember the verses of the ritual?"

"Yes, let's do it, quickly, before it breaks loose!"

"Relax," he said nonchalantly. "We have at least two minutes of free time."

I almost yelled at him for not taking it seriously, but then he flipped his heavy coat back and drew a folded-up staff from his lower back where it had been hidden away until now. It was made from some type of black metal and was folded into three equally-long pieces that snapped together to become a two-metre staff. It had no adornment at its tip, but then he pulled something from a pocket and slipped it over the end of his staff, such that a strange flat triangle broken into three parts with increasingly-smaller triangles within became the equivalent to the ring of bells on my staff-tip.

With our staves in hand, we stood on the edge of the ritual circle and then half-sang the verses of the Ritual of Obsequy. The verses consisted of a bunch of repeated mentions of the soul passing on to the afterlife and releasing all earthly ties, and to embrace peace and find comfort in letting go.

We continued the verses for over a minute, until it started to take effect on the Skinstealer who had nowhere to run from our ritual, locked in stasis by the trap. A strange glowing smoke, which I was pretty sure was only visible thanks to our Spirit Goggles, started billowing from the monster, while it began slowly cycling through the various guises of the people it had devoured. Its horrific screeching was like a damned orchestra to our song-verse, but, with every new repetition, it was almost like the monster's voice became more human.

As I repeated the verses with Master Owl and Rana watched in dumbstruck fascination, I counted the number of forms that the Skinstealer cycled through, until, at the end, it came to the little girl that I'd first seen by the tree. It was the very last of its guises, though this one seemed to be its real form, meaning that it was a revenant caused by this young girl's death, a thought which made my chest hurt.

As we finished another repetition, all that remained was a lifeless body. A corpse into which a vengeful spirit had taken hold.

I didn't know what to do as Master Owl brought the ritual to its end, so I just stood there, as he leant down and picked up the body, before leaving the house with it in his arms.

A couple hours later, Master Owl returned, his hands covered in dirt. He nodded bleakly, then said, "It's done. Good work, Ryūta."

After closing the front door and correcting the line of ash, he walked past us and into the bedroom, where a *creak* from the bed made it obvious that he'd gone to sleep.

I looked at Rana and she looked at me, then we both picked a leaning chair and tried to find some rest as well. It wasn't until that moment that I realised that I hadn't eaten in over a day.

The next day, Master Owl woke me up and told me to gather as much of the Sacred Corpse Ash back into the pouch as I could, repeating several times how expensive the stuff was.

Rana went out to hunt for food, although she didn't leave until after getting Master Owl to assure her that we were no longer in danger and that I didn't need to be protected.

When she returned, she carried two pheasant-looking birds that she had chopped the heads off of, which reminded me of how dangerous she actually was when facing something that didn't require an elaborate ritual to kill.

"What did you think of your first time?" Master Owl asked with a filthy smile, as he bit into a piece of cooked meat.

We were sitting out in front of the house we'd stayed in for two days, grilling the skinned pheasants over a campfire. It was almost cozy.

"I somehow felt bad for the Skinstealer at the end," I said, certain that he would mock my answer.

"That's a normal feeling," he replied in a serious tone. "As you work this job, you will learn that most of the evils in this world are wrought by human hands. So many of the monsters we deal with are the direct result of human brutality and cruelty."

"What happens when there are wars?" I asked, assuming that this world also had its fair share of fighting between nations and petty squabbles, despite all the very real monsters that existed.

"I've only been unlucky to witness the aftermath of two battlefields, but it's not pretty. The cleanup takes years for us Exorcists, as there are countless apparitions spawned from such a mass scale loss of life and expression of misery and pain. War between humans is a fecund and virulent seedbed for monsters to grow out of."

"I haven't seen any wars yet," Rana said. I could tell she didn't look forward to such an event either, but why would she? As a Vanguard and a Mercenary, she was no doubt one of the first people who would be put on the field, while someone like an Exorcist was probably sufficiently-useless and not called upon unless all hope was already lost.

"The last one was twelve years ago," Owl replied. "I don't remember what the cause was, but thousands died because of it, and I don't even think that any borders shifted or any wrongs were

righted. It's a pointless game of bored power-hungry aristocrats and royalty," he said bleakly, before using his teeth to pull another chunk of meat from the piece in his hands.

I couldn't help but look at the palm of my hand in fascination, while the monotony of the journey back made me constantly replay the events of last night over-and-over.

"You keep looking at your hand," Rana remarked as we were following the road back to where the carriage had dropped us off. Master Owl had left us behind, eager to get back to Lundia, though if we had to walk the entire way, it would take several days... I hoped it wouldn't come to that

"I had to cut open my hand to summon my last familiar," I told her truthfully. "For some reason, the moment I formed a Pact with it, my wound healed."

I'd expected her to look put off, but instead she just asked, "Does it hurt?"

"No. There isn't even a scar."

"Maybe your familiar healed your injuries?"

"I don't know if they're supposed to be able to do that," I replied and looked around nervously.

**"We are being watched, but your Master cannot hear what is said."**

*Thank you Armen.* I probably shouldn't have been surprised that the Guardian Wraith was so in tune with my thoughts, but it was quite unnerving. Everything still felt like some absurd fever dream that I'd one day wake up from and return to my normal life in Japan.

I moved a bit closer to Rana, then whispered, "I'm afraid I summoned something forbidden."

"You didn't mean to, right?"

"I just followed Owl's instructions."

"Then what's the harm?"

"It seems like Exorcists who break the rules are hunted down..."

"Oh."

"Yeah... and Owl is very suspicious of me."

"If he tries anything, I'll protect you."

Suddenly I became very conscious of how close she was to me. Part of me felt like she was an overprotective sister that I'd never had in the real world, but another part of me hoped that she could become something else...

*No, that's wrong. Think of Inoue-chan! What if she's waiting to reciprocate your feelings!?*

*But I won't ever be able to go back! What's wrong with letting go of my feelings and trying to move on!?*

*You're just being lonely and responding too strongly to someone with no such intentions!*

"Are you okay, Ryūta?" Rana asked. "You have a really weird look on your face."

"Erm... I was just arguing with myself about something," I blurted out, before realising how weird that was.

She smiled in return, which was not what I had expected. *That* response made me bold, so I said, without thinking:

"You're a lot nicer than you looked the first time I saw you."

My heart stopped and the blood drained from my face as it sunk in that I'd actually said that out loud.

Rana simply laughed in response.

"It's hard being a capable-looking warrior," she replied. "I moved on from Adventuring work to become a Mercenary, but I quickly discovered that no one would hire me if I looked friendly. When people pay someone to guard them, they want someone capable and strong."

"Is that why those guys next to you were busy showing off their oily muscles and polished armour?"

"Everyone has their own strategy," she said, not denigrating her fellow mercenaries. "I'm really a very shy person in reality. Before I came here I was the type of girl who was always in the background."

*Then why does your aura radiate such danger?*

"Didn't you stand out being *that* tall?" I asked, this time managing to keep my true words hidden.

"Oh, I wasn't *this* tall before I came here," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked, super confused.

"You *do* know that people's appearances change when they come here, right?"

"Erm..."

"Oh my god," she whispered. "Have you not had a look at yourself in a mirror since you came here?"

"Now that you mention it... no. There aren't many mirrors around to look at. Worse yet, I haven't taken a bath since I got here either..."

"The hygiene levels in Lundia are pretty low," she commented. "But your appearance must not have changed much if you haven't felt the change. For me it was quite obvious. I grew half a metre, you know!"

I pulled on a bit of my hair. "My hair-colour is the same and height-wise seems no different. I was the same height before I came here too. What kind of impression do I give off when you look at me though?"

She paused on the road and seem to think about it really hard for a while. Then she said, straight-faced, "Like an adorable younger brother, I guess?"

Words could not describe how much that sentence hurt me emotionally. I had by no means been an outstandingly-handsome guy before I came here, but *that* was certainly not how I would have described myself. It was possible that nothing had changed since I came here and that I'd just been delusional about my appearance, but if I gave off a little-brother vibe, then it was goodbye to any aspirations of building more than platonic relationships with women in this world...

*Maybe that's okay?* I considered. *Am I really focused on finding a girlfriend in this world, when my Role is like a massive red flag to anyone who meets me? Perhaps I should just aim to find a good friend like Renji. Maybe someone like Harleigh?*

"But," Rana added, giving me sudden hope, "Your eyes are really intense."

*Oh...*

"That's just the Goggles, I think."

"I noticed it even when you took them off. They give off the impression that you can see right through all pretence."

"Isn't it the same with Owl?" I asked. It was probably just an Exorcist thing.

"I don't like the way he looks at people. His eyes are really cold. Whenever he laughs or smiles, it never reaches his eyes."

I hadn't realised until now, but I had in fact noticed this subconsciously. Maybe it was why I also found him so off-putting. Certainly his vacillating moods weren't helping either.

*Maybe I should try and distance myself from him when we return to Lundia.*

After about an hour, we caught up to Master Owl, who was standing by the sign pointing back to Lundia. Although I was still as exhausted as the hike to Hamsel's Rest, this time had been a bit easier thanks to Rana keeping pace with me.

"You two lovebirds done flirting?" he asked jokingly. The Vanguard shot him a dangerous glare, which only made him smile more.

"Are we going to wait here for a carriage to take us back?" I asked.

“We could walk all the way to Lundia,” he teased, “But yes, that was the idea. There are plenty of carriages travelling back-and-forth on this road every day, so, bar a goblin ambush like what we experienced, we should see one heading our direction within a few hours.”

“Fine by me,” I replied. I didn’t mind waiting on the side of the road. The weather was nice and I was still kind of tired from lack of sleep, not to mention the long hike had taken its toll on my body. It felt as though I was still recovering from the first hike.

*Man, I’m really out of shape...*

“While we wait, I’ll teach you how to use your ‘Soul Barrier’ ability, since you’ll need it for our next job. Also,” he stepped closer and handed me a pouch identical to the one holding the Sacred Corpse Ash, “Take *this*.”

“What’s it for?”

“It’s called ‘Sinner’s Ash’ and is used to reveal unseen things. It can be used to break illusions or to reveal things like the spectral handprints we saw in the village. Your Spirit Sight makes it obsolete in a lot of situations, but there are times where you need to show something to another person, and that’s when this comes in handy.”

“What’s with all this ash and blood-based stuff?” I asked. “Why is it all so grim?”

“Just be glad you’re not a summoner,” he replied as if that was supposed to make me feel any better. “Anyway, prepare yourself.”

Master Owl took a step back and, before I could ask “What for?”, he flung the palm of his right hand towards me. I had no idea what was happening until it hit me. A sudden fear and unease overtook me and I took an involuntary step back and fell to my ass on the dirt.

“Did you just use Repel on me!”

*Why didn’t you guard me?* I scolded Armen.

“**You said not to protect you from him,**” I replied.

*Okay, forget that, help me as much as you can here!*

“**My forte is in defending against physical attacks. I can offer you no aid with attacks that target your mind and spirit.**”

“Now you know how the spell feels in its weakest form,” he said, as though I’d been taught a meaningful lesson. “You have the means to defend yourself from its effects however.”

I frowned. I didn’t like this form of teaching. It was unnecessarily cruel I thought.

“Don’t look at me like that. Stand up and prepare to defend yourself.”

Rising from the ground and dusting myself off, I reach out a hand to stop him, but he immediately took up a stance and did the same palm-strike into the air in front of him.

I tried to imagine my energy, *that* light inside my body, pooling in my chest and then moving out in front of my body like a barrier, but then his Repel hit me again and this time my legs just straight-up collapsed underneath me.

Rana took a step towards me, but he stopped her. "He won't learn from being coddled! Don't interfere with this!"

"But he's shaking! Look at him!"

I got up from the ground again, not wanting to be pitied by her. I realised that the bell staff in my hand wasn't doing anything to help me, so I pulled the Wire Orb Focus from its hook on my belt and squeezed it tightly.

Owl grinned and repeated the palm-strike motion again. I tried to focus on the mental image of projecting my soul out in front of me like a shield again and, this time, I felt the impact through the Focus in my hand like a sudden vibration.

"Much better," he praised me, then he reached to his belt and pulled a black dagger-like talisman from it, holding it in his right hand in the same way I held my Focus. I had not noticed it before, but it also blended in with his dark attire quite well. My immediate guess was that something with so aggressive a shape had to be offensive in the nature of its speciality, like how the bell-shaped Foci was best suited for summoning and lantern-shapes worked best for projection spells.

"Prepare yourself," Master Owl said seriously.

A Repel with his full strength might do some serious damage. I thought back to the target dummy that I'd obliterated on my first attempt while Harleigh oversaw my training.

**"The more precise the image in your mind's eye, the stronger the barrier,"** Armen suddenly said.

Owl took up a stance and then slashed the air in front of him.

In my mind's eye I thought of the only thing I could fully picture: Armen in his plated armour, arms spread wide like a true Protector. I channelled all my spirit into this mental image.

Then everything went dark.

I came to sometime later with Rana shaking me awake. As I opened my eyes, she looked very relieved.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You just suddenly passed out." Her expression was very worried, though there was also something like *fear* beneath it.

She helped me sit up and I felt something sticky on my lips. Rana quickly put a handkerchief up to my nose.

"You've got a pretty serious nosebleed," she told me.

I looked over to where Owl was sitting nearby, holding his wrist with a pained expression.

"What happened to him?"

"You broke my wrist, you little shit!" he yelled back.

*How?*

Without turning to look at the Old Exorcist, Rana said, clearly furious at the man, "He tried to reach into your bag while you were unconscious and it was as though some floating knight appeared out of thin air and grabbed him by the wrist, then threw him four metres across the road."

Now that I looked closer at the old man, there was a clear scrape on the side of his face from where he had no doubt hit the rough dirt.

*Armen, you can protect me even when I'm unconscious?*

**"Of course. My duty does not end, just because you are asleep."**

*I suppose that's good to know...*

I felt incredibly conflicted. On one hand it was a clear violation of my privacy that Owl had tried to search my bag, but, on the other hand, my familiar had broken his wrist and the old man seemed like someone who could hold a grudge...

"You were trying to look at my Guild Card, weren't you?"

"You ungrateful cretin!" he yelled back. "You owe me for taking you under my wing, but you're keeping secrets from me!"

Rana got up from where she knelt and walked over to the sitting Exorcist, then she pulled her blade from her sheath and levelled it at his throat. According to Armen, Owl had a powerful Protector himself, but I wondered if it was a match for Rana's blade. After all, she had S-tier in Strength.

"If you try anything like *that* again, I will cut your head off."

"You wouldn't dare!" he yelled back at her, thinking he had the upper hand.

Rana didn't flinch. "Do you really think anyone would care if an Exorcist like you died!?"

Although I knew she was saying it to protect me, her words also hurt me. No one would care if I died either...