

30 – The Cursed Princess II

My hands were drenched in blood and it dripped in viscous globules from between my fingers like crimson honey. I lifted my hands up while watching the fat droplets fall steadily. When I moved them away, I saw a blood-soaked man staring right at me, coming closer-and-closer, while his jaw kept opening and splitting his body in half—

I spasmed awake in Rana’s loose embrace, feeling a sudden sense of vertigo that was quickly replaced by rapid heart palpitations and a knot of anxiety in my chest.

“Bad dream?” she asked me. Next to her, the servant Karl was snoring loudly.

The world around us was dark and the two lanterns next to our front seat cast the nearby trees in an ominous glow, making the shadows of their branches twist and curl like reaching tendrils. The sight reminded me of Rana’s aura when she’d fought the ambushers earlier.

“How are you okay after killing that many people?” I asked.

The look on her face made me think that she interpreted my words as though I’d called her a monster. Truthfully, a part of me did feel that way. Someone that could kill other humans with such ease and feel nothing afterwards was obviously not right. The sight of her fighting the goblins had not stirred the same emotions in me, surprisingly.

“Of course I’m not peachy,” she replied. “No matter how many times you kill someone, it never gets easier. The first few years I didn’t have a single night where I didn’t have nightmares of the people and monsters I’d fought and killed.”

Her answer helped me feel a bit at ease. She was human after all.

“What is your War God ability?”

Her aura wavered slightly. It seemed a touchy subject.

“After my party disbanded, I ended up getting involved in the Arena. It started out as repaying a favour for someone, but before I knew it I was headlining fights and getting into life-or-death battles every week.”

“So, you were a gladiator?”

“I guess so. After some months, the War God ability appeared. I haven’t heard of anyone else with the ability and when I ask the Guild Geniuses about it, they never know anything. It seemed to

be awarded to me for overcoming countless fights against many other Otherworlders who were equal to me in strength and skill, as well as some that I honestly should’ve lost to.”

“Are all abilities not part of your Role awarded in the same way?” I asked. It was something I’d been wondering about a bit.

“I don’t think so. The two I have were gained by overcoming something traumatic and life-threatening, but some people have abilities that they were born with and others attain them from training.”

I showed her my Guild Card and said, “My familiars appear on here like abilities.”

“Odd.”

“I saw Owl’s Guild Card,” I then revealed.

“Really? What was it like?” she asked, seeming very interested.

“Disturbing. He has some cultish-seeming Role called Adherent, as well as some curses and something called Observer’s Chosen. He also had a lot of familiars, one of which is forbidden.”

“How can you tell if it’s forbidden?”

“See how mine say ‘Watcher’, ‘Protector’, and ‘Fighter’? If it’s forbidden it shows up as four question-marks.”

Rana frowned. Perhaps my revelation about Owl had confirmed some of her suspicions. “I’ve never heard of the Adherent Role, but the Observer is one of the Old Gods that the people of this world pray to. It is similar in function to one that was worshipped in Midrealm, called ‘Zhmera’.”

“The Observer is the one that I summoned my Watcher from,” I told her. “Also, besides the Adherent Role, he had two more, the Exorcist one that I have, and an advanced kind called Spirit Caller.”

“I’ve heard of Spirit Caller,” she replied. “Spellhands have access to that one as well. But I didn’t know that you could have more than two Roles.”

“I don’t think you normally can...”

“I’m glad we’re no longer with your mentor,” Rana admitted. “I never felt comfortable around him. And if he’s part of some cult, then we definitely don’t want anything to do with him.”

I have a bad feeling that Master Owl isn’t completely out of the picture yet, I thought but didn’t say. There was no reason to scare her, plus, if I told her about everything Owl had said, she might begin suspecting me too and that was the last thing I wanted. It was a selfish impulse, but right now she was the only thing in this world that I truly cared about and I’d do anything to not lose her.

“You made a lot of crowns from the Arena, right?” I asked, changing the subject. “I noticed that you have a lot of disposable money, despite only being Seeker Rank.” After all, she’d easily bet one gold on the gamble of Lukas’ ability to be Role-assigned.

“I guess there’s no point hiding it, but yes, I don’t really have to take on quests or contracts. I could comfortably retire if I wanted.”

“Then why don’t you?”

“There are downsides to attributes that few people acknowledge,” she replied. “When you have a high tier of an attribute, especially an S-tier, it makes you feel restless if you don’t utilise it. For something like Strength it manifests as a strong desire to fight.”

“What about Vitality?” I wondered.

Rana blushed slightly and avoided my gaze.

“What?”

“Vitality manifests as a desire to... you know...”

“Oh.”

“Yep.”

“Is that why you invited me to your apartment that first time?”

“Yeah... but you were so frustratingly-passive that I had to take the lead!”

“Sorry. I guess it’s because my Vitality is F-tier.”

“Didn’t seem like an F-tier Vitality to me,” she teased with a lascivious grin.

Now it was my turn to be embarrassed.

“I wonder what side-effect my S-tier in Soul will have?” I then said to break the awkward silence.

Rana shrugged.

“**I often found that it made me inclined to pray,**” Armen remarked.

“Armen says it made him want to pray,” I told Rana. Part of me felt scared of uttering his name out loud, but it was also comforting to say it outside my mind. Somehow it made him more real. He had also not complained to it, so I figured it was okay.

“That’s kind of lame,” she joked.

“I haven’t really experienced *that*,” I commented. “Do you know about the other attributes?”

She thought about it for a moment, then said, “High Dexterity usually causes someone to be very active. Like running around or climbing stuff.”

I immediately thought of Lukas.

“High Intelligence tends to make you more prone to introspection and problem-solving, although some, like the Geniuses, seem to manifest the uncontrollable desire to obtain knowledge. Almost like a sickness.”

“I’m suddenly not so upset about my poor attributes,” I remarked.

“It just goes to show that even a gift like superhuman strength comes with downsides. Besides, attributes are not fixed powers, they’re more like potentials. I think the ‘side-effects’ are just our bodies naturally guiding us towards the best way to fulfil our potential.”

“That sounds like a pretty solid theory,” I replied. “Are you sure your Intelligence is only D-tier?”

“Ha ha, very funny.”

“Is there a way to increase attributes by the way?”

“Only temporary ones, as far as I know,” she replied, “like potions and such.”

“Wait, so I could get a potion to increase my Vitality?” I asked.

Rana snorted a laugh in surprise, then grinned at me and said, “Why, do you have something you want to try?”

“I was thinking for long hikes or outrunning monsters, so I don’t get so tired...”

“Oh...” she replied, sounding disappointed.

Sometime in the middle of the second day, as I was scouting the road and forest with my Watcher, I noticed that the landscape was changing in the horizon, transitioning from the flatlands that seemed iconic of Lundia’s environs and into hills with actual mountains visible in the far distance when I utilised Sumi’s zoom vision. What’s more, a town was nestled into a pass that it seemed we had no choice but to pass through.

“We’ll come up on a town within the next day of travel,” I remarked to Rana.

She nodded. “It’s one of the Gate Towns to southern Arley. We should be passing through one called Brig. There are similar towns on the border between Arley and Lacksmey.”

“What are they for?”

“Collecting tolls, mostly,” Karl commented gruffly. He seemed pretty jaded about it.

“Really?”

“Yarp. Ten silvers for every cart and carriage that passes through.”

“The Gate Towns have other purposes,” Rana added.

“Pray tell,” the servant replied sceptically.

“They’re important checkpoints to ensure there aren’t major disruptions to trade routes, and they provide a useful place for the smaller farmsteads and villages to post Quests and Contracts for the Guilds.”

Karl scoffed. “They’re glorified tax collectors that bleed travellers and merchants of their hard-earned coin.”

I detected no hint of deception in his vague nearly-colourless aura, but as far as I could tell, a person’s aura only showed signs of lying when they knew they were intentionally misrepresenting the truth. If someone truly believed a falsehood, I wouldn’t be able to tell.

“Don’t listen to him,” Rana said. “Without the Gate Towns, whole swathes of the countryside would be overrun with monsters.”

“We should make a stop there,” I said.

“Milady won’t be pleased.”

“Tell her that since she lied to us about the specifics of the contract, we expect some leeway,” Rana told him.

Karl grimaced, but didn’t argue the point.

I was glad Rana was here. Without her, I was sure that I’d have let myself be pushed around by Lady Myrabelle.

We arrived to Brig on the eve of the third day. The Gate Town lay in the centre of a pass that was so narrow at points that only two carriages could travel side-by-side through it. Fortunately, the traffic was pretty subdued, though I had no doubts that things would pick up when it became widely-known that Ochre was once again safe. A testament to the potential back-and-forth of carts was visible from the many stables that sat at the foot of the flat hill that Brig itself lay atop of. Although, when we arrived and left our carriage, we were but one of four that were being serviced there. It seemed that Brig might be able to house a hundred carriages or carts in its stables at its peak.

While Karl and Lady Myrabelle set out to find an eatery, Rana, Lukas, and I sought out the local branch of the Adventurers’ Guild.

We ended up in a small repurposed inn, which had only a small bar for Adventurers to sit along, as well as a small desk for accepting and turning-in quests, and just one quest board in the back. Surprisingly, there were two other parties within: one with two Vanguards, a Ranger, and a Spellhand; and the other with a Paladin, a Priest, and someone with a Purple aura.

As I looked at him intently, Rana whispered, “That’s a Summoner. Surprising company he has. They all look like Initiate Ranks, going by their equipment and age.”

I nodded as I absorbed the information. If a Summoner was a familiar- and curse-focused Role, then it could benefit a Paladin and Priest quite well I thought, although I suppose that such a party composition was rarely considered due to Summoners’ bad reputation.

While we walked across the room to the quest board, the two parties observed us coolly while muttering amongst themselves. Rana got the most attention, perhaps due to her dark platemail and crimson hair. Lukas also attracted a lot of stares, probably due to his youthful face, while the people seemed to actively avoid making eye-contact with me.

“There are more quests here than I’d expected,” Rana commented as we look at the board. “Normally you can only expect a few, but perhaps the trouble in Ochre sent people fleeing for the hills.”

As I studied the over-a-dozen quest fliers, I remarked, “This seems a good place to go for Initiates and Seekers.”

“It is. My Party used to get a lot of quests through the Gate Towns,” she answered. “The pay is often better than the big cities like Lundia and Ochre, although the people here are more wary of Otherworlders.”

I blinked in surprise when I laid my eyes on the bottom-most flier. It was for an Exorcism Quest:

<i>‘Endless Winter in the Hearthshire’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Complex</i>	RANK: <i>Seeker</i>
<i>The village of Hearthshire to the southeast of Brig is known for being one of the best producers of many of the vegetables that are sold in Lundia and Ochre, such as cabbage, carrots, spinach, broccoli, and so forth. However, their crops have in recent times been affected by an unnatural winter that is localised to the village and as a result they are unable to harvest the food that thousands depend upon.</i>		
<i>Two villagers have been reported missing since around the same time that the winter began to envelop Hearthshire, but it is unknown if it is related to this suspected Haunting or not.</i>		

You are to ascertain what Haunter is responsible for causing this unnatural weather phenomenon and then Exorcise the entity, such that Hearthshire may resume its normal function as an integral part of northern Arley’s food supply.

REWARD: *1 Gold Crown for the correct identification of the Haunter*

REWARD: *5 Gold Crowns for the complete Exorcism of the Haunter*

“We need to take this,” I told Rana.

She read through it, then nodded. “I’ll go find the Lady and tell her.”