

21 – Some Truth and Rest

After the energy was expelled out of my hand it absorbed into the steel ball of the Barrier Ring, letting the small bell within the Focus reverberate with my power, before seeming to condense the power I'd fed it and lighting up the glass torus around the ball. All of this happened in half a second but was acutely obvious to me, somehow.

Then the Focus released the energy within as my Repel spell, shooting what to my eyes looked like a whirling sphere of air straight into the torso of the menacing Brawler. Following the impact, the Adventurer froze for a moment, a bizarre expression overtaking his face: somewhere between discomfort and dread. But then he revealed his gritted teeth and leapt for me.

A loud *claaang* of metal-on-metal sounded as Rana was suddenly in front of me, intercepting his descending axes with her forearm-mounted shield. Before Gilliam could strike again, she had lanced into his solar plexus with her right gauntleted fist, keeling him over.

Rana was about to pull her blade from her scabbard, when Harleigh and his two teammates came over. The Elementalist looked on the verge of invoking a spell, while the Priest gripped his glass-tipped white-and-gold staff fiercely.

"What the hell is going on!?" Harleigh demanded to know, while I was preparing to manifest Kabanenoki by running a small knife across my palm.

"I don't believe escalating the situation is advisable."

I may not have a choice... I told Armen.

A moment later Lukas was by my side, looking between me and the unconscious Brawler.

"Ryūta, what happened?" Rana asked softly, her right hand still on her pommel and her shield-arm lifted in front of her.

"This Brawler snuck up on me when I entered the courtyard. I was just looking for you."

While the Priest used some sort of spell on the downed Brawler, Harleigh looked past Rana and into my eyes with a gaze sharp as flint. "Is that *all* that happened?"

"He tried to put his hands on me for some reason, and my familiar tried to protect me."

At the mention of my familiar, the Elementalist's face curled in disgust and he took a step towards me, but was halted by the Crusader's armoured palm on his torso.

"You should teach your familiar to not be actively looking for trouble inside a city," Harleigh scolded me.

“Last time I thought I was safe inside a city,” I started, raising my voice almost into a snarl, “I was beaten to a pulp by four Mercenaries, so when I’m approached *like that* I will take all the precautions I believe necessary! Besides, what cause did your *friend* have to apprehend me for just wanting to see my party members!?”

Rana turned to look at me with a worried expression.

Oh, right, I never told her that I was beaten up...

Harleigh relaxed his posture somewhat, but I could tell by the way his aura was moving that it was a faux gesture to deescalate the situation.

“I think we should leave,” Rana said.

“Listen to your babysitter, *Exorcist!*” yelled the Elementalist, no longer capable of holding his tongue. “Get the fuck out of here!”

I took a deep breath, before letting it out of my nostrils slowly.

“I’m sorry,” I said to Harleigh. “I thought you were better than *this*.”

Then I turned around and left. Rana and Lukas followed behind me shortly after. I wondered what sort of expression Harleigh was making, though I didn’t truly want to know.

“Slow down, Ryūta!” Rana called, while Lukas trailed behind her. “Where are you even going?”

I came to a sudden halt and she nearly bumped into me.

“Why were you training with them!?” I demanded of her.

Rana frowned. “They were already there when Lukas and I showed up earlier to practice some of his skills, and Harleigh just took over.”

“He was very strong,” Lukas just remarked, apparently not wanting to comment on the mess I’d brought into their practice session.

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you!?” I said to Rana, my face flushed red with frustration and the embarrassment of the scene I was causing in the middle of the Marketplace District.

“It’s not like that. I told you it’s complicated,” she repeated.

“Then explain it to me! Because the way you were looking at him suggests something else!”

Rana folded her arms and looked down at me.

“Why are you acting *this way*, all of a sudden?” she asked, her expression hard to read, but her red aura vacillating between dangerously-spiky and hazy uncertainty.

I gritted my teeth and looked down at my feet. “I thought that after... *that night*, we were something special.”

Rana let out a sigh of relief, then put a hand on my head, which didn't make me feel better, but instead only exacerbated my embarrassment.

"Come on, I'll take us to a nice bathhouse, then we can talk about this in private."

We returned to the Comfort District, with Rana leading the fore, walking past the places we'd seen yesterday, such as the fish-on-rice restaurant. Further into the district the street opened up and became like something very nostalgic to me: an onsen town.

The centre of the wide street had a stream with stone benches on either side of it. The water that ran along this stream was fed from five pipes at one end, before running down a very slight decline and letting a cascade of fragrant steam rise into the air. I noticed that this part of the city was especially crowded with the Street Sweepers, though they seemed mostly focused on wiping down the façades of the stone shops and houses, while also sweeping any errant water back into the central stream using specialised sweepers. Without their diligent work, the stones underfoot would've been very treacherous.

"I've been to a place slightly similar to this back in my world," I told Rana and Lukas. The nostalgia alone caused me to calm down a bit, though there was also a sense of melancholy I couldn't avoid feeling.

I wonder if mom is sad about my disappearance? She'd been the one to take me to Arima Onsen, as a reward for getting into High School. And when I thought back, she was responsible for a lot of my best memories, as well as giving me a happy childhood, even after my dad had passed away.

The Vanguard seemed to be in a hurry to get to our destination, so she did not reply. Lukas was staring longingly at the stream, no doubt wanting to dip his feet in.

I wish I could have shown mom this place... The overwhelming nostalgia was making me almost teary-eyed at this point. *I really miss her*, I realised, even though the last few years of living with her had been extremely difficult, particularly when I didn't pass my entrance exam to uni.

Towards the end of the wide street, Rana came to a halt in front of a small building, the roof of which seemed to have a hole in the middle, as steam was rising from within. Without letting us ask any questions, she simply took us both by the hands and led us inside.

"Is there anyone else in?" she asked the proprietor, who shook his head. She let go of Lukas' hand to toss the guy five silver crowns that she pulled from a belt pouch. "We'll reserve it for two hours then."

"Erm... is this a good idea?" I asked, as I used a very small towel to cover my body, while I slowly lowered myself into the steaming waters of the large open-air pool. It was perhaps half-a-metre deep on our side and a metre deep at the other end.

"Don't be so hesitant," she replied and I could tell she was smiling, though I dared not look directly at her. "There's nothing I haven't already seen."

"Didn't realise you were such a pervert," I replied sarcastically.

Lukas was already swimming around near the deep end, not the slightest bit concerned with the fact that Rana was in here with us. She was sitting in the shallow end with her head and arm leaned over the lip of the pool, staring as I slowly sank into the water's warm embrace. The water itself was opaque, perhaps because of the temperature or some underground minerals, but I could still see *everything* when I glanced her way.

"I shall keep guard by the entrance," Armen decided, unprompted.

That's not what this is! I tried to tell him, but the Wraith floated away nonetheless. I had a brief thought that perhaps he was put off by nudity, which would be somewhat odd, given that he was... well... dead. But then again, he yet retained his personality, so maybe it was a quirk from his real life as a human that'd carried over?

"I am not a prude."

I couldn't help but let out a chuckle, which seemed to surprise Rana. With a smile, she tapped the water near her with the palm of her right hand, indicating that I should move closer, but I stayed put.

"Did you tell the truth back in the courtyard?" she wondered. There was no accusation to her words.

"That Brawler tried to put his hands on me. And you heard how their Elementalist spoke to me. Those guys despise Exorcists. It like they wanted to fight me, even though I've done nothing to them!"

"They've had a bad experience in the past," Rana told me, her expression turning grim. "Harleigh's party used to have five members. Their current Priest, Mayhew, is a recent acquisition. In the past, they had a woman named Isadorre as their Priest and a Huntress called Bella, but both of them were killed by an Exorcist."

My heart skipped a beat at her words. "...How?" was all I could manage to ask.

Rana scooted a bit closer to me, before letting herself sink down to just below her jaw. I tried very hard to just focus on her face, but I could tell that heat was rising to my head very quickly, so I instead averted my gaze upward to look at the cloudless sky above the bathhouse.

“It was a bit over four years ago, shortly after I came to this world. A string of unexplainable murders across the city of Helmstatter had led to a very unique Investigation & Tracking Quest being posted, which Harleigh’s party were able to take on, given that they had a Huntress with those two unique abilities.”

I could technically do a quest like that too, if I had a Tracker familiar, I considered, since Exorcists also had access to the Investigation ability, opening up that type of unique quest for me as well, although I hadn’t seen any on Lundia’s Quest Boards. From how I understood Investigation Quests, they were basically like solving a crime, whether it was theft, murder, or disappearance.

“I don’t know many of the specifics, other than the fact that the psycho, who was murdering people in the city, was a very powerful Exorcist with a thing for killing women and forcing his familiars’ spirits into their bodies, in order to reanimate them. The way I understand it, he ambushed and killed their Priest when she was alone one day, then used her reanimated body to lure their party into a trap, where their Huntress was then killed.

“They managed to take him down, but their party was irreparably destroyed. The Brawler Gilliam and Elementalist Zelser, though he was a Spellhand back then, ended up joining different parties for a couple years, while Harleigh ended up joining a group of Witch Hunters.

“In the end, however, Harleigh decided to take the Crusader specialisation over the Witch Hunter one. They only came back together last year and then found Mayhew, who was the sole survivor of his party after taking on a really terrible quest.”

I frowned. “They’ve all been through a lot.”

“Anyone in this world faces a lot of setbacks, yeah, but theirs have been an especially arduous path. To be honest, because of the tales I heard of the ‘Puppet Master’ Exorcist they faced, I’ve always been really apprehensive around Exorcists as well.”

“Exorcists can hardly be the only ones that turn to evil,” I said, then realised I was inadvertently defending the monster who had killed Harleigh’s friends, so I quickly added, “I mean, there must’ve been bad Crusaders, Spellhands, and whatnot too, right?”

“Sure, though it seems that the experiences faced by Exorcists and Summoners are especially conducive to creating monsters.”

My frown deepened, though I couldn’t really argue with her. After all, I’d been moments away from invoking my Corpse Tree to fight back against Harleigh’s teammates, an act that would surely have confirmed all their worst suspicions about me.

"We do have to contend with the control of malevolent spirits," I replied, "But my Guardian Wraith is a good guy."

Rana looked confused by this answer, but I quickly waved my hand in front of me.

"Forget it, it's too complicated to explain right now."

"Isn't that why we're here, to talk about complicated things?"

"This is something I don't feel comfortable talking about here."

"I see," she replied.

For a few minutes we just lounged the warm pool without saying anything. Meanwhile, Lukas had gotten out of the pool to drench himself in some cold water, before hopping back in. He seemed to be having fun. It struck me then that this might be his first visit to a place like this. After all, he had grown up an orphan and had to work for Lundia's Margrave since an early age...

A small smile settled on my lips. I was glad I'd taken a chance on him.

Rana seemed to notice my expression and scooted closer to me. We were almost rubbing shoulders at this point.

I let out a sigh, then turned to look into her dark-golden eyes, before asking, "What exactly is the deal between you and Harleigh?"

My chest tightened in dread of what her answer would be.

"He saved my life once, when my party took on a quest that turned out to be way harder than advertised. This was back when he was still with the Witch Hunters. I guess since then I began to really admire him and the way he fights."

"Isn't that just another way of saying you fell in love?"

"It wasn't like that. Back then I was in a relationship with the Rogue in my party."

"...Oh. The guy who..."

"Yeah. He died... But, anyway, even if I was in love with Harleigh, it would never work, cause, y'know, he's..."

"He's what?" I asked.

Just then Lukas swam close, emerging head-first from the water like a sealion scouting for land. "The Crusader is into other men," he answered, having apparently followed our conversation while swimming around. The way he was so unassuming and yet so clued-in was really unnerving, especially given his age.

"Really?"

"Yeah. The way he was looking at me while we were practicing was very intense."

"I guess you're his type," Rana teased with a smile.

"He's old enough to be my dad," Lukas replied with disgusted expression, then flipped around in the water, kicked off the side of the pool and returned to the deeper end. I watched him frolic for a moment, then turned back to Rana.

"So Harleigh didn't give you the mirror?"

"What? No. I got that from Hesh." "

"Your Rogue boyfriend?"

"Yeah..."

I put my hands over my face to hide my embarrassment. "I'm such an idiot," I whispered.

When we left the bathhouse, my hair was all puffy, but I finally felt clean again, although now the next thing on my to-do list was finding a way to wash my clothes, especially my robe-coat, as it absorbed a lot of my sweat and odour, practically making bathing meaningless.

"What should we do now?" Rana asked me.

"I need to get back to Master Owl," I told her. "We're venturing back into the Galleon."

"I see... be careful, okay?"

I nodded. "Thanks for bringing me here," I told her. "Let's return again tomorrow."

"Are you some kind of bathing freak?" she teased.

I frowned. "No wonder hygiene here is *this bad* when bathing daily makes you a 'freak'..."