

85 – Preparations

After some poor sleep, I had breakfast that Renji slapped together and we ate it by the lounge table, while Elye slowly started to wake up from where she lay on the couch, which she had claimed from day one. The food was just some bread, omelettes, salami, and cheese. It was far from the worst thing I’d eaten in this world, but it just tasted *wrong*. Or maybe it was my tastebuds that were twisted by the sense of loss that permeated my body.

I gritted my teeth, pushing down the food despite feeling the urge to throw up.

I wish Armen was here to comfort me... he always knew what to say.

“**What about me!?**” screeched the Ifrit.

I almost jumped off the stool I was seated on.

My friends cast me some curious glances, which I promptly tried to ignore.

Have you never heard of using your ‘indoor’ voice?

The Demon was floating upside down, her feet touching the ceiling, as though gravity was inverted for her. Her flaming hair and dress played around in an unfelt wind.

“**Your ghost friend is still here,**” she said and I thought she was just trying to console me, until she added, “**I can feel him. He is trapped in the in-between, but he is here.**”

When do you think he’ll come back?

Seramosa walked along the ceiling until her face was directly in front of mine, still upside-down.

“**He was injured. Injuries take time to heal.**”

Even for a spirit?

She didn’t deign me with an answer, and instead hopped off the ceiling and floated over to where Elye was starting to get up. Renji had already prepared her some breakfast, which was heavy on eggs and salami, since the Elfin was a healthy eater that favoured meat.

I hope he returns soon.

After packing our stuff, which, for Elye and I, wasn’t much, we headed for the Market Quarter. Renji was carrying a travel trunk full of stuff, like clothes, weapons, and bits of armour, but we made do with the pouches and belt bags we had. Granted, once I arrived to a bigger city in Lacksmey, the plan was to buy some clothes.

Given that I had close to forty gold on me, I was considering getting my own apartment. Renji had told me that for five gold I could rent a place in Evergreen for a full season, which would come out to fifteen gold for a full year. It was certainly a lot of money, but having my ‘own’ place was very appealing to me, especially since I’d thus far just been staying in inns and taverns, which lacked the sense of ‘home’ that Renji’s apartment had sort of provided in Helmstatter. He and Rana both had more than one place, apparently, which they could afford to pay the rent for, even when they didn’t use them. I suppose that it was one of the benefits of making a lot of money from Quests, but part of me couldn’t help but think further ahead. After all, there would come a time, if I lived long enough, that I might wish to retire. It’d be a good idea to invest my reward money, rather than blow them on rent, at least I thought so.

After a quick stop by the Adventurers’ Guild, where Renji said farewell to some of the friends he’d made and I got to talk to Holm for a bit, we entered into the Market Quarter, where things were almost back to normal. Though there was an underlying tension in the people here, as though they expected another attack to come out of nowhere. Vendors shouted themselves hoarse, trying to peddle their wares, like fresh produce or odd trinkets and baubles. I distantly wondered if the owner of the stall I’d taken the ring from was still alive.

“I’ll meet you by the caravans,” I told Renji and Elye, as I veered off towards the Necromancy Guild. As always, Seramosa clung to the Elfin. Anyone that could see incorporeal spirits like her would assume she belonged to Elye and not me.

They still had to procure foodstuffs and water for the long trip north, so I had enough time to swing by the Guild and have a look at the tiny shop that Mortimer ran. Mortl had told me the day before that I could refill some of my items with them for cheaper than they’d normally cost, and, though the Guild unsettled me, I wouldn’t blink twice at getting some good deals.

I avoided looking at the destitutes who thronged the rundown building above the porous rock stairwell into the depths below, but left one of Karasumany’s clones outside to watch if anyone followed me in.

When I reached the long hallway and saw the ominous door in the distance, I sped up slightly, feeling as though the face carved into its façade was staring at me.

I pulled my necklace’s finger pendant out from under my shirt, and then displayed it to the door, as I repeated the phrase, “Open sesame!”

Like the day before, the door melted into a puddle of liquid metal and I hurried across the threshold, where I was greeted by the warm light of the candle conglomerates that sat on the various shelves.

“Eminent Ryūta,” greeted Mortimer as he came around the corner and into the entrance. *“What matter can I aid thee with today?”*

I regarded the metal skeleton, as the door behind me returned to its original form. “Hello Mortimer. I was hoping I could purchase some items from your shop.”

He clapped his hands together and seemed to smile, as much as it was capable for a being like him to do so. *“Oh, how delightful! I rarely ever get customers. Follow me.”*

I followed the Chaplain into the main room where Mortl and I had sat yesterday, then continued through an arch that led past the kitchen and out into a winding hallway, where closed doors seemed to hide bedrooms for Members who had nowhere else to stay. At the end of the dormitory was another open room with a kitchen adjoined to it, and after going through another arch we came out into a modest shop with neatly-arranged items that ranged from preserved food and snacks, curious drinks, ritualistic ingredients, weapons, armour, trinkets, and so forth.

“Quite the selection,” I said, admiring the shelves and raised podiums that showed off the many wares.

“It pleases me to hear thee say so. I try to curate the items that our members would most benefit from.”

While I looked through the ritual components, I asked, “What kind of entity are you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Not at all, Eminent Ryūta! A curious mind is highly valued in our Guild! I am a sub-type of Demon, named ‘The Mother’s Thousand Spawn’.”

I hadn’t heard of that entity before nor read about it in the Encyclopaedia. “Are you a sort of Hivemind? You mentioned your brethren operate the other Guild Halls.”

“An astute observation, though not quite exact. We have a shared link through our soul, which enables us to have conversations and share experiences within our dreams, but we retain our individual personalities and names.”

“Dreams? You sleep?”

“Not quite. But we do dream.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It is perhaps closer to the word ‘reverie’ or ‘daydreaming’.”

I nodded. I could see why Mortimer and his brethren made for good caretakers of the Guild, if they were able to converse and share information across continents.

“Who summoned you?”

“Savant Ludwig. Though he is an honorary member such as yourself, he is responsible for the efficiency with which our Guild may operate. Most of the Possessed Items and Weapons in mine humble store were of his creation.”

I’d already picked up a Black Tallow Candle and placed it on Mortimer’s shop counter, but at his words, I started looking at the singletons placed on various pedestals. They all had short descriptions next to them, describing their function.

One, ‘The Spark-Maker’, was essentially a lighter. Another was like a microwave, at least that’s what the description seemed to imply. There was also a hairdryer...

“Ludwig made all of these?”

“Indeed, are they not quite brilliant?”

I frowned slightly. “Is he from Earth? These are just basic appliances that might be found in any store in my world...”

“I believe he refers to his world as Terra Nova.”

That just means ‘New Earth’ doesn’t it? Perhaps it is Earth, but in the future?

“Where is he right now?”

“His last visit to one of our branches was in Lundia. I believe he is heading for Altar next. Do you wish for me to ask him to wait for you there.”

I nodded. “Yes please, I’d like to meet him.”

“Understood, I will inform him once he arrives.”

I looked at the Black Tallow Candle I’d put on the counter, then to the Chaplain. “Do you have Gravebloom Incense and Sinner’s Ash? I can’t seem to find any.”

The metal skeleton walked past me and over to one of the corners that held dried jerky and other desiccated food items. *“Right here is where we keep them.”*

“Amongst the food?”

“Savant Ludwig insisted. He says that thematically, ash and incense is dried food.”

“That’s pretty dark.”

“I believe it is meant to be a ‘joke’, although I have not seen anyone besides Savant Ludwig laugh because of it.”

“I’ll take a stack of the incense sticks, a pouch of the Ash, and the Candle.”

“Excellent. That will be four gold and ten silver crowns.”

It certainly wasn’t cheap, but I knew I was saving a lot of money. No doubt the Ash was the lion’s share of the cost.

After handing the Chaplain the coins and putting the stuff in my belt bags, I started heading back towards the entrance.

“Would thou like to enjoy a cup of tea and some biscuits?”

“No thank you, I am in a bit of a hurry, actually. My Party and I are leaving Helmstatter today.”

“I see. I will appraise mine brethren in Altar of thou imminent arrival.”

As I came out into the first of the larger rooms, the one connected to the entrance, I froze in place as I saw who awaited me there.

“Howdy Pipsqueak,” said Master Owl.