

## 107 – A Tough Decision

I handed everyone their share of the Quests we had completed, before putting a heavy pouch onto the table. Ludwig was busy discussing the matter of Fortress Major with the Altar Branch Master and the resident Librarian. It was clear that time was of the essence, but a proper response would require coordination, thus the three of them were hashing it out.

“What’s this?” Renji asked, looking at the pouch I’d put before them. The four of us were seated around a table on rickety stools. He had a frothing cup of mead in front of him, Elye was busy devouring a meat-skewer that the Guild Hall cook had made, while Emily was fiddling with her wand.

“Open it,” I told him, and he obliged, emptying thirty gold coins out onto the table.

“Where’d you get this??” he asked.

“This is what the Vanguard sold the Dullahan’s head for. Seeing as the man who this belonged to died at the Dullahan’s hand, the money has no owner, thus I thought we should split it.”

Elye seemed disinterested, though still quickly grabbed five gold, pocketing it before Renji could protest. Of the remaining twenty-five, I took ten, Renji took five, and Emily, reluctantly, took ten as well.

“That’s not an even split,” she said, sounding put off by the reward for something she hadn’t even done.

“Out of all of us, you need it most,” Renji said. “Besides, Elye and I weren’t even there when the Dullahan showed up.”

“...But I received a portion of the earnings from the quest *you* completed.”

“Emily,” I said, trying not to be overbearing. “Just take the money. You’ll definitely need it if we find you a Spell Tome, plus, Renji and I already have a lot.”

“...But I ran away and left you for dead. If not for Saoirse, you would’ve died.”

*She’s not wrong*, the Dullahan said in my mind, making me frown.

*That’s not funny.*

*It’s a little funny.*

She was sitting by the bar, pretending to enjoy a cup of mead, though I could tell through our bond that she didn’t like the taste. I guessed she was more of a wine person, or perhaps she didn’t even like alcohol, though the thought of a Demon holding back from vice was ironic.

“The first time I was faced with a life-or-death situation, I froze. If not for Rana, I would’ve died. So I don’t think it’s bad to run away. It’s better to live and learn, than to sacrifice your life in vain.”

“Agree,” Renji said.

“I won’t do it again,” she promised.

“It’s okay if you do,” I said. “When you ran, you know what I thought?”

“What?”

“I was glad that you were getting away safely. If you had sacrificed yourself to protect me, when it was my fault you were dragged into a confrontation with the Dullahan, I would’ve never forgiven myself.”

*“Yuuta, when can we leave this place?”*

“Probably sooner than you think,” I answered, as I spotted Ludwig coming down the stairs in the back of the hall, followed by a short dull-looking man and a chubby spectacle-wearing woman. From their auras, it was clear that the man was the Librarian, while the woman was the Branch Master. Despite her diminutive stature next to the brawny Ludwig, she had an air of authority about her, while the Librarian looked as though he’d rather be reading a book than socialise.

Instead of coming over to our table, Ludwig hopped up onto the nearest chair and addressed everyone in the Hall. There were four other parties present, which was more than last time we’d been here.

“Those of you who feel up for the task, we require your strength to prevent a repeat of the Helmstatter Calamity from taking place in Evergreen! All who choose to participate will be rewarded greatly!”

“What is the task?” asked a man, a confident-looking Ranger.

“The Demonologist behind the Calamity in Arley has sent his lackeys to Fortress Major, and we seek to take them down before they can unleash whatever devastation they are planning!”

“Isn’t this a job for the Mercenary Guild and the Witch Hunters?” asked a female Priest from another party.

“They will also be joining us in this endeavour,” Ludwig promised.

The spectacled woman walked forwards so she stood next to him, then she said, “Every person who decides to participate will be paid four gold crowns and there will be promotions considered based on contribution.”

*That* seemed to get a few people talking, and quickly two of the parties had declared their interest. Before I could ask my Party what they thought, Ludwig came over and said, “You guys are joining, aren’t you?”

“We don’t know what we’re walking into,” I remarked.

“Isn’t it overkill to have the Mercenaries and Witch Hunters with us?”

“In total it is about twenty extra people, which, yes, is a lot, but King Egil already sent out an edict a week back that the Guilds should show overwhelming force in any instance where Seditious might be involved.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I think it would be a bad idea to bring Emily along. She’s still just a Novitiate.”

Ludwig could see her aura same as me, so he clearly knew that she was not excited about the prospect of going after traitors.

The Incarnate seemed to mull this over. “There *is* another matter that needs to be dealt with.”

Instead of saying what it was outright, he pulled a crinkled paper from a pocket and put it on the table.

<i>‘Forest Thieves’</i>		
<b>INVESTIGATION QUEST</b>	<b>TYPE:</b> <i>Complex</i>	<b>RANK:</b> <i>Seeker</i>
<p><i>Camp Dusk Hill to the northwest of Altar city is where many of the Crown’s soldiers in the region go to train and prepare for war, internal as well as external.</i></p> <p><i>As of late, however, their training has been disrupted by repeated thefts of weapons, armour, and valuables, such as jewellery and coin. An army without weapons nor armour can hardly perform its duties properly, thus it is paramount that the cause is quickly ascertained and dealt with.</i></p> <p><i>Though there have been no witnessed thefts, it is believed by many of the soldiers that the thieves have absconded into the nearby Mossbloom Woods, though all search parties have come up empty-handed.</i></p> <p><i>It is advised that the Investigator should first visit Camp Dusk Hill to search for clues and find leads. There is no need for the Investigator to deal with the cause, once</i></p>		

<i>discovered, thus no additional reward is offered for this, though retrieving the stolen weapons and armour will be compensated generously.</i>
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<b>REWARD:</b> <i>8 Gold Crowns for discovering the cause of the thefts</i>
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<b>REWARD:</b> <i>20 Gold Crowns for retrieving the stolen items</i>
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“An Investigation Quest?” I asked.

“The Branch Master insisted that this be dealt with, as Altar is the nearest Guild hub and the King’s men are breathing down his neck to have this resolved. They want to send their soldiers to deal with the Demonologist and his lackeys, as well as secure Evergreen, but this is making it difficult for them. This string of thefts is perhaps the exact reason why the Seditonists have chosen now to strike the city, as its army’s capacity is diminished.”

“You want me to deal with this and bring Emily along?” I asked, trying to guess at his thoughts.

“Exactly. There’s no need for fighting, and it pays very well if you can solve it. What do you think? If you don’t go, I’ll be forced to, but I can bring your friend along, or she can stay here.”

“We never said we’d help with Fortress Major,” I pointed out to him.

“I think we should,” Renji answered.

“*Me too!*” Elye chimed in.

“Likewise, I believe dealing with Carmine’s men is an urgent matter,” Saoirse said, smiling at me, while standing behind where Emily sat.

All eyes turned to look at her.

“I don’t believe we’ve met before,” Ludwig said slowly, his eyes running along Saoirse’s black armour and ginger hair. “I’m surprised to meet a Blademaster I have not heard about.”

*He actually thinks you’re a Blademaster!* I said internally, surprised that she was fooling even him.

*Of course.*

“Nor have I heard of you, Incarnate,” she replied. “Mondus is vast and full of secrets.”

He nodded. “That it is.”

Renji’s eyes were stuck to Saoirse and I knew that his mind was working in overdrive to put scattered puzzle pieces together to undo our hastily-constructed deception.

“What do you say, Emily?” I asked.

“Three of five already agreed,” she answered, as though it was obvious.

“I thought the people of Oblus believed in a meritocracy, not democracy,” Ludwig teased her.

“We also believe in the best outcome,” she replied seriously. “The outcome that makes most people happy is the justified one.”

I shook my head. “Our party doesn’t work that way,” I told her. “If you have an issue with a decision, your vote matters as much as everyone else’s.”

“It’s okay Ryūta. It sounds important, so I do not wish to hold you back from pursuing these bad people. I can stay in Altar and train perhaps.”

As she said it, I saw the dread that overtook her aura. She clearly feared being alone. But it was also dangerous to bring her with us to Fortress Major. I could leave her in the hands of Ludwig, but I could tell he didn’t want to have to deal with the Investigation Quest.

“I’ll do the Investigation and bring Emily with me.”

“Excellent,” Ludwig said.

“Saoirse will come with us, just in case,” I added.

The Incarnate frowned. “A Blademaster would be invaluable in a fight.”

“Neither Emily nor I possess martial prowess. If we brought Renji, that would mean Elye would have to come too, so, no, this is the best outcome.”

I looked around at my friends. “Don’t you think?”

Each of them seemed to mull it over, aside from Elye, but from their auras I could tell they’d immediately decided.

It was a unanimous ‘yes’.