

## 83 – Necromancy Guild

Renji, Rana, Elye, and I stood before the little shoebox-sized crypt that we had pooled our money together to afford. Next to the small shelf it was placed on, within the large white marble wall full of such shelves, was a plaque etched with his name, as well as his assumed year of birth, and the date of his death. Even though the Priest had advised it was bad luck to write the exact date of death, we all insisted on it.

I hadn't realised that he'd turned fourteen recently, for which I felt an immense sense of regret, particularly since he had helped celebrate my eighteenth birthday. I let out a deep sigh as I reread the plaque for the nth time.

*Lukas of Lundia.*

*Beloved companion and mischievous Rogue.*

*A Native boy who became an Adventurer despite the odds.*

*A brave defender, who died in the Helmstatter Calamity.*

*He gave his life to protect those he cared about.*

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*27th year of Harald — 32nd of Seed, 13th year of Egil*

We had followed the Priest, who came to take Lukas' body from the Guild Hall where Holm and Elye had brought him. His body had been veiled in a pure-white translucent sheet after being washed with holy water, and then he had been placed on a cart that moved through the city to reach the Church Cathedral in Noble Quarter, where an extensive rebuilding project was already underway.

Once we'd reached the Cathedral, Lukas' veiled body was burnt inside their crematorium by a Holy Flame, which the Priest told us had burnt continuously for five-hundred years. Before he was cremated, I had been allowed to Sanctify his body. I doubted it made much difference in the end, but it just felt *right*.

Behind the porcelain door of the crypt, which was opened with a small handle, stood an urn that held his ashes, as well as a single seed from the Great Spire Tree of Skovslot, which Elye had carried on her since leaving.

Apparently, all Elfin were given a seed of their Mother Tree when they left their Enclave, such that they could always be buried within its embrace, even if they perished hundreds of kilometres from it. She had carried the seed for herself to be buried with someday, but had chosen to give it to Lukas. I didn't ask too much about it, because I could tell it was very personal to her.

While Rana stared distantly at the Crypt, Elye left on her own, going who knew where. The amethyst necklace that Lukas had given her was displayed proudly on her neck, and she had purposefully kept the hood of her Spidersilk cloak down, showing off her horns and ears. Part of me wondered if I'd ever see her again.

“I hope you don't blame yourself,” Renji said to me, after we'd gone off to a corner of the graveyard, leaving Rana with her grief in private.

“I do,” I replied. “It's my fault he became an Adventurer. If not for me, he wouldn't have died.”

“Ryūta... everyone dies. What matters more is how you die. Few get to go out on their own terms, but Lukas did. That's something to be proud of. I've seen a lot of deaths, you know? People I was close to, even someone I really admired. They didn't get to have good deaths. They didn't get to decide.”

I frowned.

“I had hoped he would survive, somehow. He had *that* ‘Guardian Angel’ ability and I thought it meant he'd come back to life.”

“This world is never *that* merciful,” Renji answered. “Guardian Angel is a slight boost to Luck and a one-time avoidance of a fatal blow. That's *all* it does.”

I sighed. I'd already cried enough that it felt impossible to shed any more tears, but I hadn't seen Rana cry once, which worried me, especially when even the perpetually-jovial Renji had bawled his eyes out at the funeral speech the Priest gave.

Looking around, the graveyard was full of people in the same situation as us. Some of them were people I'd met by the Barracks, while others were people who had defended the Guild Quarter or helped civilians escape. The death toll would probably take weeks to be fully counted, but over a hundred Otherworlders had lost their lives, and thousands of Natives were dead as well.

Alongside the reconstruction of many parts of the city was the construction of a new Church and accompanying graveyard, which were to be placed on the border of the Guild and Market Quarters. The cynical part of my mind assumed that this was because there were too many lowborn people amongst the dead, and the rich and powerful didn't want *their* Church filled with their ashes.

“Have you heard from Armen?” Renji asked.

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think he’s gone for good, but he’s probably recouping after the stunt he pulled. I doubt that being forcefully severed from the object he was bound to was healthy for his spirit either, but our Pact is still holding, so I think he’ll come back. Eventually.”

“And what about your Ifrit?”

“She’s following Elye around, so I don’t see much of her except when I need her powers.”

Renji grinned. “You have some peculiar familiars,” he then said.

“I know.”

“Do you know what you want to do next?”

“Everyone is talking about Lacksmey, so I may go there.”

“That’s where I’m heading too. Hopefully Rana and Elye want to go with us.”

I didn’t say anything, because I had a suspicion that they probably wouldn’t.

After a sombre dinner near Renji’s apartment in Artisan Quarter, I decided to visit the Adventurers’ Guild. Rana headed back to his place, while he went out looking for Elye.

It had dawned on me that she was the kind who preferred to grieve alone, so I did my best to keep my distance until she sought me out. It was pretty tough, but I knew I’d only make things worse if I tried to get her to open up to me when she wasn’t ready. It had, after all, taken some time to get her to speak about her previous boyfriend’s death, and though neither of us had known Lukas for *that* long, we’d been together almost non-stop since we met. He’d been a constant by our sides, particularly for her during the stressful time when I was stolen away by Leopold.

As I entered the Guild Hall, it was almost completely silent, despite the many people seated within. Most were in various states of shock and mourning, and I doubted there was even a single person in here whose party had gone through the last few days unscathed. The sight that hurt me most was that of Harleigh, sitting by a table on his own, staring blankly into the air.

Part of me wanted to seek him out and attempt to comfort him, but another part of me knew that it was a bad idea. If he had found his friends’ bodies after Renji had told him about how they died, then he no doubt knew that my Party was the one responsible for their deaths. I wondered where his Priest companion, Mayhew, was at, since he hadn’t been one of the casualties. Hopefully he wasn’t involved with the Illusionist and Demonologist who seemed to serve the Flayed Lord.

“What can I help you with?” asked the Guild Clerk by way of greeting, as I came up to the counter. There were no one else lining up to take quests nor even perusing the boards for that matter, so I had the whole area more-or-less to myself, since those in mourning sat in the tavern side of the Hall.

“I’m here to pick up my reward for dealing with the Larder Keeper that haunted the Barracks.”

“Do you have the Quest flier with you?”

I frowned, hoping I wasn’t about to realise I’d been scammed. “I never got one. It was an emergency request by the Branch Master. He promised me a reward of twenty gold Crowns.”

Her eyes widened and she looked to her Manager for guidance. Fortunately, as soon as the manager saw me, the very same one who had introduced me to the Branch Master in the first place, she came over and resolved the issue.

“Ser Ryūta,” said the Manager lady, giving me an honorific for some reason. It didn’t feel truly deserved, though I couldn’t argue with being treated respectfully at least. The lady’s face was a perpetual scowl, but she did seem to ease up her expression slightly as she regarded me. “Branch Master Shain has already advised me of the agreement you made and I have your reward money ready right away. Further, he said that for your aid in helping liberate the hostages, as well as contributing with the defence of the city at large and aiding the Prince, you are deserving of a Rank promotion.”

*This* was certainly a surprise, but a welcome one for sure.

Without a word, I handed her my Guild Card, while the Clerk from before went into a back area behind the counter to fetch my reward.

The Manager pulled out a disc-shaped soul-stone tablet and placed my Card on it, face down. It glowed with runes along the edge for a moment and then she returned it to me.

“Congratulations, you have ranked up to Eminent and can now take quests of this rank,” she said, repeating the same script as the Clerks who had performed my promotion the last two times.

It struck me that I’d now reached the same rank as Harleigh, Renji, and the missing Charlatan Charles. Owl had told me that Exorcists could expect to rank up a lot faster than other Roles, but even then it seemed quite a rapid progression for essentially only a handful of quests. But then again, I supposed that my newest promotion wasn’t based on experience, but rather the Branch Master’s indulgence after his Guild had ingratiated itself with the Royal Prince, not to mention the sudden vacuum left by so many Adventurers perishing all at once. After all, there had been quite a lot of Seeker- and Eminent-ranked people amongst the dead, perhaps even a couple Savants.

“Thank you,” I said as I stowed my Card away.

Another bit of knowledge came unbidden to the front of my mind: “...*There’s a sudden spike in mortality rate, when Adventurers reach the ‘Eminent’ Guild Rank...*” It was information that Æmos had given me on my very first day in Mondus. His reasoning had been that Eminent was the rank

where Quests tended to spike in difficulty, which was little wonder, given the fact that those with the rank, like Harleigh, seemed to fight very dangerous monsters on a near weekly basis.

*Dance with death long enough and sooner-or-later you’re bound to misstep.*

*But perhaps I have an advantage from already been subjected to highly-dangerous quests?*

The Clerk returned with a hefty pouch of chinking coins that she set on the countertop and pushed towards me with both hands. I nodded my thanks and then put it in my belt bag along with the rest of my money.

*I think I need to find a place to store my valuables. Walking around with almost thirty gold Crowns on me seems tremendously stupid.*

As I left the counter, I almost veered over to where the Quest Boards displayed dozens of fliers, but quickly decided that getting involved in another life-threatening situation was a bad idea, especially when Armen was MIA and my Party situation unstable.

No sooner had I begun heading for the gate to the street outside than someone hailed me.

“Ryūta,” came the muffled voice of Mortl.

I turned and saw him approach from the tavern where he had apparently been sitting, though I hadn’t noticed him. Then again, he was hard to spot when not surrounded by his guard of undead knights. Even his lantern was gone. I’d personally never leave such a powerful tool anywhere I couldn’t see it.

“Are you alone?” I asked him.

Though I couldn’t see his face for the ominous porcelain mask, I heard the smile in his rasping voice, “When are people like us ever truly ‘alone’?”

He wasn’t wrong. Even though Armen was temporarily missing and Seramosa was off following Elye, I still had Kōtama within the ring on my left hand and Karasumany floating about in the sky above, while producing clones nonstop. Still, it felt rather lonely without Armen’s reassuring voice or Sera’s insanity.

“How’s Ms. Thorn doing?”

“Not great, I think.”

“I see. She is quite fragile, despite the front she puts up.”

“How do you know her?”

Mortl walked closer and then linked his left arm with my right, practically dragging me towards the door. “Let’s talk on the way.”

“On the way to *where*?” I asked.

“You’ll see.”

*If I didn’t trust this man already, I’d begin to worry...*

It was a bit awkward walking with his arm around mine, but I just assumed it was because his legs weren’t as good as they used to be, so I didn’t say anything.

“I met her soon after the party she was in experienced the loss of their Rogue.”

I nodded. “Hesher. Her former boyfriend.”

“As I understand it, you have now taken up that mantle.”

“You make it sound like it’s an arduous task,” I replied, disliking the way he’d phrased it. “But it isn’t, because I love her.”

“Have you told her *that*?”

“...Not in those exact words.”

“Better you do it sooner than later.”

“I doubt now is a good time.”

“Perhaps not, but take this from someone with their own fair share of regrets and whose long life has given them a unique insight into these matters: do not tarry. Life is so very brief, you know.”

He coughed a bit, then made a sound of clearing his throat. We were already near the border leading to the Market Quarter.

Then he continued his original story, “I met her near Helmstatter, shortly after the funeral, and though I am somewhat regretful of it now, I was the reason she ended up in the Arena, where she spent a long time fighting other Otherworlders, foreign warriors, retired guardsmen, and slaves.”

I grimaced at the revelation. “Why would you do *that*?”

“I owed a favour to the man running the show. She was ideal for the missing spot in his lineup.”

With a sudden yank, I pulled my arm out of Mortl’s embrace. “So you used her, in a time when she was vulnerable, to repay a debt!?”

The Necromancer nodded. “Indeed.”

“I want to know where you’re taking me.”

“Understandable, but please calm down. I have apologised to Ms. Thorn countless times already, but she has told me that it helped her move on and grow stronger.”

“She could’ve died! Those are fights to the deaths you sent her into!”

“It is not as if I tricked her,” he argued. “But yes, it was a bad call. Sad that someone of my age still makes such blunders, wouldn’t you say?”

“Maybe living a long time made you callous.”

“Oh, most certainly,” Mortl agreed eagerly.

I shook my head. “I can’t say I like what I’m hearing.”

“I believe it is important that we are honest with each other, so I thought you ought to hear it from me now, rather than when we’ve gotten to know each other better.”

I took a deep breath. “Fine. But, I would still like to know where you are taking me.”

“Why, to the Necromancy Guild, of course.”

We walked the rest of the way to the Market Quarter in silence, as I digested the revelation, and once we crossed the boundary, Mortl pointed me down an alley, which led to some shops that had a permanent home here and which had, somehow, avoided most of the devastation the larger marketplaces and plazas had suffered. The streets here were narrow and only allowed two people to travel abreast, which, coupled with the sparse natural lighting created by the sloping and overlapping rooftops, made for a seedy and unwelcoming environment.

Plenty of homeless people and shady characters thronged these dark passages, and the streetsweepers seemed to wilfully avoid the place, leaving the stones and dirt underfoot a filthy and disgusting mess.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, we stopped in front of a place that looked and stank like a drug den.

“*This* is your Guild Hall?” I asked, only sort of joking.

“Welcome to my humble abode!” Mortl said and I actually believed he was telling the truth, until he started chuckling at my horrified expression.

“I’m just pulling your leg. We’re going downstairs.”

The answer didn’t assuage my worries in the slightest, as the underbelly of a drug den seemed like the worst place to hide a Guild. But, then again, the denizens here were likely to croak from the euphorics they imbibed, as well as the diseases they carried and couldn’t afford to have treated, so maybe it was a veritable treasure trove for a Necromancer? There were certainly many people in the den above the stairs who displayed open sores, weeping scars, blisters, and pustules, and who seemed to be in such a stupor that they might not even have noticed the city-encompassing fog and hordes of monsters three days ago.

The staircase that led down below the seedy building was built of black porous stone, like the kind following the eruption of a volcano. The walls were of the same material as well and seemed to almost swallow the sounds of our footsteps.

*It feels as if I’m descending into the underworld...*

At the foot of the long windy staircase, which might have gone twenty metres underground, given how many steps it had, was a long hallway that ended in a black metal door, with some sort of brass sculpture adorning it, alongside fanciful embellishments and protrusions.

I walked behind Mortl and was starting to wonder if I’d made a mistake coming here. Ominously, the people from above avoided this place, despite the staircase being below the building they squatted in. That alone told me more than enough.

As we stopped before the metal door, which had something like a face sculpted into its façade, the Necromancer reached into his black silk robe and produced a small masterfully-carved skeletal finger that hung from an intricate necklace chain.

Lifting the necklace in front of the door, he said, in his gravelly and phlegmy voice, “Open sesame.”

Something like an annoyed grumble came from the metal door, and then it just started melting apart, as though the metal became like hot wax, dripping down to the ground to form a puddle in the threshold.

I followed close behind Mortl as he walked through, and a moment later the pool began reassembling itself back into a door. The face was also sculpted into the side of the door that looked into the reception area where we now found ourselves.

“What kind of door is *that*?” I asked, as I looked around. Warm light came from clusters of candles that sat on various shelves carved into the porous volcanic rock walls, and the melted wax of many decades had formed huge conglomerated masses, onto which it seemed new candles were constantly added. The off-white and yellowish tallow stood in stark contrast to the black walls, but I was glad to see that the light was at the very least welcoming, insofar as a secret chamber underground had any right to be.

“*Pawn* made it,” Mortl answered. “He’s kind of a genius when it comes to binding spirits to objects. I believe a lesser Demon is trapped inside that door.”

I blinked. “A Demon??”

“He’s kind of grumpy, but obedient nonetheless, just don’t linger around in the entrance for too long without an access pendant visible.”

“A *what*?”

Mortl handed me the necklace with the masterfully-carved skeletal finger pendant. “One of these,” he answered. “You can keep *this one* by the way, I have more.”

“And you use this to get through the door?”



“Not just *this one*. Any of the Necromancy Guild doors.”

“There are more than one?”

Mortl chuckle. “Oh yeah.”

Suddenly a suit of slender armour, almost like a metal skeleton, came walking into the reception.

*“Master Mortl, welcome home. I see thou hath brought a fresh face to our abode.”*

“...Is that also a bound spirit?”

*“Salutations, Novitiate, I am Mortimer, Chaplain of the Helmstatter Necromancy Guild. Thou may find mine brethren within our other establishments spread about the Realm of Mondus.”*

“Eh, Mortimer, Ryūta here is actually Eminent-ranked, as of today.”

*“I see, apologies for mine carelessness. It is uncommon that new faces join our order.”*

“I’m not joining until I understand what the hell is going on,” I said.

“Follow me.”

*“I will bring out the biscuits and tea,”* said the metal Chaplain cheerfully.

“Good idea, Mortimer,” praised Mortl.

*What have I gotten myself into...?*