

47 – The Runaway Bride

I was thinking about all the things Leopold had told me, since I finally felt safe enough to try and absorb the nuggets of knowledge he had unwittingly handed me. The thing I couldn't avoid thinking about the most, however, was that there were more Encyclopaedias out there. I desperately wanted to get my hands on them and the knowledge within. Perhaps I could find a lead on such tomes if I sought out a Librarian or Genius in Helmstatter, although from what Rana had told me, I didn't expect the greatest of welcomes from the city.

The horseback riding was uncomfortable, and I constantly had to steady myself with my left hand, since I felt like I was gonna fall off. But at least it was fast, though Armen had said it might still take several days to reach Helmstatter.

I hoped Rana and Lukas were safe. If they had found the meagre clues I left behind, they might have seen the Mercenary Contract to its end in Helmstatter and tried to find me there. At least, that was the scenario I figured would be the most likely. After all, Rana was level-headed even in a tough situation, and I felt I knew her well enough to predict that *that* would be the move she'd made.

“They may have sought out a Hunter to track you down,” Armen added. **“They specialise in such quests.”**

I nodded as I thought about it. If they had indeed taken this route, then they would stay in one place until we were reunited or the Hunter returned empty-handed.

Wishful thinking perhaps, but it's important to stay positive.

I desperately wanted to spiral into a self-pitying spiral and feel bad for myself and the torment I'd gone through, but I knew it was counter-productive. I had survived Leopold and I ought to be proud of myself.

“When last I was swept away by Nirvah's Banishing Gaze, I had a realisation,” Armen said. **“Your Soul Barrier ought to prevent such direct interference.”**

Really?? I'd completely forgotten about that ability...

“Unfortunately, when I had the realisation, it was too late for me to communicate it to you.”

Do you think it would work against the magic those Witch Hunters used to constrain you?

“Quite possibly. I am afraid that it is taking me some time to understand the true scope of your abilities.”

You do not have to fret about it, I said. Blame my Mentor and my own short-sightedness.

“I wish for you to live and prosper, Ryūta, and thus my duty as Protector is more than a bulwark between you and your foes. I must also teach you how best to defend yourself, just like my own mentor once tutored me.”

Thank you, Armen. I feel as if I do not deserve you.

“I have not talked about my previous ‘Masters’, but know that you are leagues above them in integrity. It is refreshing to be treated as the person I once was.”

I smiled to myself. His kindness and sincerity suddenly reminded me of Renji. I felt bad that I hadn’t thought about my best friend in such a long time. While held in Leopold’s leash, my thoughts had been consumed entirely by my own survival. A guilty feeling washed over me, but I shoved it down, knowing that it was unfair to chastise myself for so human a thing.

“It is few people who are able to help others while they themselves are struggling,” Armen commented.

With a loud whinny, the horse suddenly came to a stop, rearing so high up that I slid off the back and fell to the gravel road with a hard *thump*.

“Ow,” I complained, getting up to see what had caused the commotion.

The Messenger was yelling at someone in front of him.

“Get out of the road, you madman!”

I walked out from behind the horse to see a figure that’d burst from the treeline nearby and who wore a large hood that obscured most of their face. In their right hand they held a bow and it was tensed and ready to send an arrow straight into the Messenger’s neck.

Their aura was prominent if compared to a Native’s, but I couldn’t tell if it was strong enough to belong to an Otherworlder or not, since it was somewhere in-between the two. Nonetheless, their aura was a greenish-brown and spiked erratically. They were *not* bluffing.

Armen, protect the rider and horse!

The Wraith floated forward, putting himself between the cloaked figure and us, such that he’d be able to intercept any arrow as soon as it was fired.

If only I had made his bond less restrictive, then he could’ve simply taken them down...

“You live and learn,” Armen remarked.

“*Get off the horse or I’ll shoot!*” the person yelled, clearly a woman from the sound of her voice. Its cadence sparked a cord of familiarity in my mind. It took me a second to pinpoint it, but by the time I realised what it reminded me of, the Messenger brazenly drove his mount forward, making the woman to release the arrow, before diving out of the way of the horse’s path.

Armen easily intercepted the arrow, but the Messenger just thundered down the road without looking back.

“Come back here!” I yelled at the same time as the woman.

She turned to look at me and then pulled another arrow from a narrow quiver and knocked it, before aiming right at me.

“*Don’t move!*” she demanded.

I pushed energy into my Ifrit Claw, but in the same moment that heat flared from its charred palm, Seramosa appeared next to me in her incorporeal form and put her hands on my Claw.

“***We do not burn Elfin,***” she said and then vanished, taking the blossoming heat in my hand with her.

What the hell was that!?

But now it was clear to me why the cloaked woman’s voice was familiar to me: it reminded me of Seramosa’s, except with a stronger sing-song lilt to it. There was also an element of Lyssalynne the Siren’s cadence in there.

With the heat vanished from my right hand, I used it to take my Focus out of its bag on my belt. The woman saw the movement and fired an arrow at me, but it was snatched out of the air by Armen.

Then I lifted my Focus up and aimed my hand at the woman, who was looking at the arrow that had just randomly stopped midair and clattered to the ground, at least from her point-of-view.

“Repel,” I said and released a weakly-charged shot at her.

To my surprise, she dodged out of the way of the whirling ball of pressure, even though I knew she would barely be able to see it.

Before I could try again, she lifted her bow above her head, along with her empty hand.

“*Truce!?*” she yelled.

If she tried anything, try to constrain her, I told Armen.

“Fine!” I yelled back at her.

After a moment of neither of us moving, I awkwardly started walking towards her, while she kept her arms in the air. Once I was a bit closer, she lowered them slowly, trying to seem non-threatening, though her greenish-brown aura was still full of violent spikes and something else.

Fear, I realised. She was scared of something.

“*I needed that horse,*” she said, frustrated, pushing her hood back to reveal her face.

“I paid a gold crown for that damn horse,” I shot back. Then paused as I took in her appearance.

I’d never before seen someone like her. Her ears were large pointed and droopy, not too dissimilar to the Goblins I’d encountered, though not hairy and gross. Her eyes were large and almond-shaped and seemed to glow slightly, and had a slit iris like that of a serpent. The nose was tiny, but her mouth was wide and almost lipless, and when she spoke, her prominent carnivore teeth were revealed. Most fascinatingly, two short horns sprouted from the top of her forehead, and from her scalp ran silky hair that was beige at the roots and progressively turned red towards the ends of the hair, creating a gradient.

“Why are you afraid?” I asked her.

She narrowed her eyes and sneered, then said, almost with a snarl, *“I am on the run from my Enclave. They wish to strip me of my freedom, but I wish to see the world. That is why I am on the run!”*

Enclave? What’s that?

“She is an Elfin. All Elfin live in a type of micro-nation within large forests inside larger nations, thus they are Enclaves. Their Enclaves are no bigger than most large cities, but may house thousands of their kind. They are not viewed favourably by the Native populace of the countries they exist in, but they are tolerated because of their trading goods, which Aristocracy seem to adore.”

“You sing to the spirits,” she said. It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

“I’m an Exorcist,” I answered, expecting the familiar scowl of recognition.

Her eyes widened and her stance changed significantly, her demeanour changing to something less hostile.

“I am honoured to meet you, Andasangare. Please lend me your aid, I do not wish to be married to some dullard! I wish to soar like the birds!”

“She must be young and naïve,” Armen said. There was a hint of something *new* in his voice. I couldn’t exactly tell what it was. Perhaps nostalgia or melancholy?

What did she just call me?

“It is their word for those who sing to spirits. As I recall from my time, the Elfin revere those who can commune with the dead and their spirits. They are the only people that actively tolerate Necromancers, or rather, I should say, they adore them.”

That sounds... strange.

“It is. I do not recommend getting involved with her.”

I looked to the forest she had emerged from. *I don’t think I have a choice anymore.*

“*Elye!*” roared a tall musclebound man with similar features and a long sword strapped up-side-down to his back with the handle poking out by his waist, providing a very strange drawing method for unsheathing it.

“*Father no!*” she screamed at the man and hid behind me.

Focus on keeping me safe.

“**What about the girl?**” Armen asked.

Seramosa suddenly manifested before me in her incorporeal form, and snarled, “***I will protect the child!***”

Flames sprouted from her body, just like it had the first time I’d summoned her.

Sera, no!

“***Do not bastardise my name!***”

Let us try and at least talk to these people before we potentially burn down their forest with them inside it!

Another snarl, but she stilled her flames. “***I will protect the child!***”

You do that... just don’t, you know, kill anyone. Not yet, anyway.

“*Why are you suddenly so warm?*” the woman whispered, her hand on my neck.

I pulled away, unable to keep myself from blushing at the sudden touch.

“Stop that!” I chided her.

“*Elye! You run away and already found yourself a replacement for the man I chose for you!?*
Your ancestors cry at the sight!”

I looked at the man, who now stood only a few metres away, his figure towering over me. He had hair just like his daughter ‘Elye’, or at least I assumed that was her name, but it was braided and slung over his shoulder, such that its fiery-red tips were fully visible to me. His aura was, like her, prominent for a Native’s, but weaker than an Otherworlders’.

“I can explain what’s going on here!” I told him.

“*Outsiders do not have a say in the matters of our Enclave!*”

Behind him were eight other Elfin, six of which had bows, all of which were knocked but not aimed at us. Yet. The others had swords like the man before me.

“*Father, he is an Andasangare! He said that he has been called by our ancestors! He says that I am not meant to marry! I am meant to be free! He said so!*”

I glanced over my shoulder at her as she spoke and knew she was bluffing her ass off, using my apparent authority within these people’s culture to wriggle out of a forced marriage.

Armen let out a sigh, while Seramosa chuckled, sounding like a log crackling in a bonfire.

What on earth have I gotten myself into? I wondered.

“*Is this the truth?*” he asked me, a piercing glare in his eyes.

Then I made a decision, and looked Elye’s father directly in the eyes and said, “That’s right! I was sent here by the call of your ancestors!”

At the same time, I nudged Armen and Sera to become corporeal.

The congregation of Elfin all gasped in surprise and awe as my Wraith and unhinged Ifrit became visible to their eyes.

Seramosa leaned towards Elye, whom she was floating next to, and said, “***I like your hair.***”

Armen sighed again, but lifted his arms out, at least playing along with the show I was putting on.

Not how I imagined my day would go, I commented.

“Last time I was summoned, my ‘Master’ paraded me around in front of these Elfin for weeks. If you aim to do the same, I will be very upset.”

I suppressed a laugh, then looked at the Elfin before me.

What am I supposed to do now?

“You ought to think further ahead.”