

55 – The Tracker

In the end, I spent nineteen days in total, counting the days I was in a coma-like state, within the Mender Ward on the sixth floor of the central spire in Skovslot Enclave. I was technically recovered from the injuries that ought to have killed me, but Armen warned that the body did not so easily overcome such damage and thus I had to take it slowly for a while. He did put a positive spin on it however, by claiming that I could finally relax like I wanted to, but I told him that would come after I reunited with my party.

As luck would have it, a Hunter from Helmstatter had tracked me to Skovslot, somehow avoiding the Welin monstrosities that patrolled the largest forest that the Elfin Enclave hid within. Part of me wondered if this wasn't perhaps a misfortune in disguise, given that I worried I might have a bounty on my head, following the Hearthshire disaster. But, as soon as he told me that he'd been hired by Rana Thorn to track me down, I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Can I see your Guild Card to know that you're telling the truth?” I asked him.

I had not recovered my glasses, which had been lost among the ruins of the tower I had fallen from, but I strained my eyes and saw that his aura was close to that of a Hunter's, albeit darker. He had said he was a Tracker, and my intuition said it had to be some kind of Advanced Role. Still, it was best to play it safe.

I'd gone back to the burnt-down ruins not only to search for my Spirit Glasses and missing Staff, but also to speak the Ritual of Obsequy over the rubble and ash, just to make sure that the Phantasm stayed quietly dead. Elye had told me that her father had spoken the ritual words over the corpse of the last root vessel, just like I'd taught him, but I shared Armen's scepticism in whether or not a person without the Ritual ability could in fact. Regardless, the lack of a new emergence of the entity seemed to indicate that it had worked.

The Tracker eyed me with hooded eyes. He was a wizened sort, perhaps in his last fifties, and he chewed on a wooden stick, since the Elfin had apparently banned him from smoking in their Enclave. His hair was dark-grey with errant sparks of pale white tufts here-and-there. He wore a battle-worn and aged leather-and-cloth outfit that was dyed in various earthen hues, providing great camouflage in the wilderness.

Next to him sat a black fox the size of a Great Dane, with legs that seemed overly long compared to its body and a white trident mark in the fur below its neck. Its eyes were yellow and never blinked,

and it seemed to constantly stare at me. Elye had told me that this fox had eaten several of Karasumany’s clones, and now my Observer familiar was refusing to land within the Enclave as long as the fox was here.

“If you show me yours,” he then said. His voice was gruff and his tone was clipped. After spending a while in the company of the sing-song lilting speech of the Elfin, his brutally-simple pronunciation was like a brick slapped directly in my face. I was fairly sure my voice probably sounded a lot more like Elye’s now, given that one’s dialect and manner of speech adapted to the surroundings you were in.

I nodded simply and handed him a blank soul-stone Card.

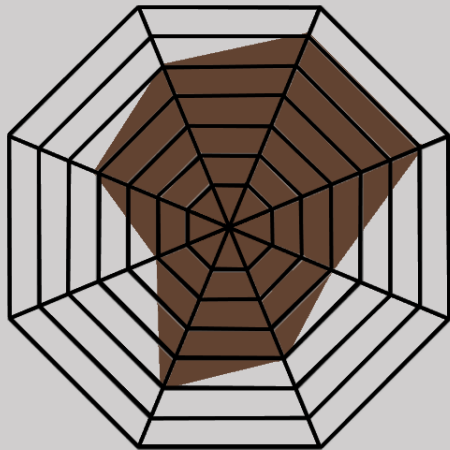
He looked at it and then at me, “What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s my Guild Card,” I lied. “It’s been like that ever since I nearly died.”

The Tracker narrowed his eyes further, but didn’t renege on our deal, and thus handed me his Guild Card.

I doubted the trick with showing people Leopold’s blank Guild Card would work for long, but there was no way I was showing my real information to anyone I didn’t trust implicitly.

Accepting his card with both hands, I ascertained if what he had told me was true or not:

<i>‘CHARLATAN CHARLES’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Tracker</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>46</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>A</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>A</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>D</i>	LUCK: <i>C</i>
PACT: <i>B</i>	SOUL: <i>E</i>	STRENGTH: <i>C</i>	VITALITY: <i>B</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Hunter V’</i> <i>‘Tracker II’</i> <i>‘Chameleon’</i> <i>‘Bond (Black Fox)’</i>			

Despite his age, he was only of Eminent Rank, which seemed low, but then I realised he probably mostly worked for the Mercenary Guild where such ranks were secondary to reputation. It wasn't as if his Role wasn't one that could work in a normal Adventurer party, but he had probably realised that it was safer to stick to Mercenary Contracts and make use of his unique Tracking ability.

“Charlatan Charles?” I asked quizzically.

Charles sighed, then said in his gruff voice, “Did you know that you can't change the name you apply to the Guilds with? I try to tell young folks this when I see them, but do they listen? Hardly.”

I chuckled politely.

An idea hit me and I touched my finger to the ‘Hunter V’ ability, which brought up a long list of the abilities and their ranks:

ABILITIES	
<i>‘Omniglot’</i>	
<i>‘Hunter V’:</i>	
<i>- Alchemy III</i>	<i>- Eavesdrop III</i>
<i>- Ambush IV</i>	<i>- Elusive V</i>
<i>- Animal Bond V</i>	<i>- Heart-Seeker Arrow II</i>
<i>- Animal Senses V</i>	<i>- Investigation V</i>
<i>- Animal Speech V</i>	<i>- Knife Wielder V</i>
<i>- Become Beast II</i>	<i>- Lurk V</i>
<i>- Bestial Roar II</i>	<i>- Survival Instinct V</i>
<i>- Bow Wielder V</i>	<i>- Sword Wielder III</i>
<i>- Call Animal V</i>	<i>- Throwable Wielder I</i>
<i>- Cat-Eyes V</i>	<i>- Tracking V</i>
<i>- Dagger Wielder V</i>	<i>- Trap-maker III</i>
<i>- Danger Sense IV</i>	<i>- Triple-Shot II</i>
<i>- Dismiss Animal V</i>	<i>- Wilderness Crafting IV</i>

“Hey!” the Charles said and immediately took his Card back, looking very offended. I suppose it was an invasion of his privacy and not part of what he had agreed to.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just curious.”

He watched me with narrowed eyes. His black fox had stood up and its fur was bristling on its back as though awaiting the order to attack me.

“You can make it up to me by describing the familiars you possess.” He was looking at my charcoal hand as he said it.

“I have a fire-based Fighter, a wraith Protector, and a crow Observer.” It was mostly true.

“What sort of Fighter?” he asked, revealing that he definitely knew more about Exorcists than most.

“It’s a Revenant. It’s pretty gross,” I lied. As I spoke, I kept watching his dark-brown aura to gauge whether or not he saw through my falsehoods. His aura was soft around its edges and kind of ‘fluffy’, which I took as a good sign.

It was draining to manually use my Spirit Sight, but I had no choice when my glasses had been lost. I hoped the Scouts that Imir had tasked with looking for my belongings actually found them. I didn’t like the idea of Spirit Glasses containing the spirit of a Prideling ending up in the hands of someone else.

After I finished talking with the Tracker, I would go to the Spire and talk to Aef, then seek out the ruins of the tower to see if the Scouts had found any of my things.

Charles nodded after a moment. “Will any of them be an issue when we travel to Helmstatter?”

My right eye twitched at the question, but I quickly answered, “You want to bring me back to Helmstatter?”

“It’s what I was hired for...” he replied dully. He hadn’t picked up on my unintended eye twitch, fortunately. “Do you think I just go find missing people and then return empty-handed?”

“How much were you paid to find me?” I asked.

“That’s not something I’ll share with you.”

“Also, why did your eye twitch just then?” he continued.

Damn this guy doesn’t skip a beat, huh?

“I am unfamiliar with Trackers,” Armen said, “but the Roles with the Investigation ability, such as Hunter, often pick up on minor things like that.”

“Well... my crow familiar does seem to duplicate itself a lot.” While it was something I *was* worried about, it was really just a red herring to avoid him asking about my Ifrit Claw and my ‘Fighter’. If he actually knew stuff about Exorcists’ familiars, he might be able to see through my lie pretty quickly. After all, there were no Revenants in my Encyclopaedia that possessed a control over fire, I was quite sure such a thing didn’t even exist, since from my understanding, elemental types

were often a result of the circumstances of someone’s death, and a Revenant required a remaining body most of the time. Fiery death and a remaining corpse were obviously conflicting elements.

Charles was about to open his mouth, then his eyes widened and he shared a glance with his fox companion. “I see... it seems my partner has been a bit overzealous in hunting them down. After all, crows are not endemic to Elfin Enclaves, given their penchant for shooting down anything that flies through the sky...”

The black fox let out a warbling mewl.

“He is complaining that there was no flesh in them.”

I nodded slowly. *I guess he really can speak with animals, huh?*

“And you converse with spirits. You are not so different.”

Fair point...

“My crow familiar is a type that can make copies of itself, which is beneficial for its role as an Observer on my behalf.”

“I have used birds to the same effect,” he replied. “Say, is it of the type known as ‘The Many’?”

I must’ve given away my surprise because he smiled to himself victoriously at having gotten it right.

“How did you know?”

“It’s a long story,” he said.

“I’d like to hear it,” I told him, “But if you don’t mind, I need to return to the Spire and speak with the Elders there.”

Charles got up from his seat. I had met him in a tiny, newly-formed house on the fringe of the Enclave, where the Elfin had given him temporary housing. Unfortunately this meant that we had quite a long walk to the Heart of Skovslot.

“Are you well-known to these Elfin?” I asked him, when we’d been walking for some minutes. Elye was currently helping the Scouts to try and find my things, but I was fairly sure she’d leave the Enclave with me, whether I wanted it or not.

“I have dealt with them on occasion,” the Tracker replied nonchalantly. As I had understood it, the Elfin were quite insular in their dealings with outsiders, except when it came to Exorcists, Summoners, or anyone else that dealt with spirits, i.e. ‘Andasangare’ in their language. “I believe I am tolerated for my profession. Even Elfin have use of my talents sometimes, whether that be

communing with the animals of their forests to solidify agreements about territory or tracking down run-away brides.”

“Run-away brides?” I asked, thinking of how I’d first met Elye. “Is that a common thing?”

He nodded. “Oh yeah.”

“Don’t you feel bad about it? Bringing back people against their will?”

“I did at first, but then I saw what happened to those Elfin women that tried to make a living outside their Enclaves. It changed my mind.”

“...I see.” If Elye was truly going to follow me around, then I had to be vigilant I realised.

“Yeah... let me put it this way: if you thought Otherworlders have it bad, you’ve seen nothing.”

Is that true?

“I am uncertain, as I only dealt with them after becoming a wraith. When I lived in Lacksmey, they were confined to their Enclaves.”

I half expected Seramosa to appear out of thin air to enlighten me on the struggle of Elfin in a human world, but she had yet to reappear since her explosive outburst that had nearly killed me. I wondered if she felt guilty.

The Elfin nearby, who were going about their day as normal now that the threat of the Rotmaker was gone, were watching us pass by with undisguised interest. It kind of reminded me of when I’d gone with my mom to visit my grandparents, in a small town west of Kyoto, and seen how an American foreigner was treated like a total outsider, despite trying his best to fit in and having a rudimentary grasp of Japanese.

With a look into the sky above, I saw Karasumany hovering directly overhead, though it was further up in the air than I’d ever seen it.

Charles must’ve looked up as well, because he said, “The crows confused me at first. Normally I speak to them to hear what they have seen, but though they look real, they are deaf to my voice.”

“For what it’s worth, I can’t really speak to them either, although they do follow my commands.”

As though to mock me, or maybe because Karasu was happy to see me, it let out a loud *CAW!*

“Anyway, I’d like to hear how you knew what type of entity it was.”

Charles looked at me, then started, “It was a couple years back. At that time I was still doing some minor Adventure Guild quests. I found one that paid decently for just getting rid of some blackbirds that were going out of control.

“Well, after shooting down over three hundred of the damn things, and spending a fortune on arrows, I told someone else about it and one thing led to another, and suddenly an Exorcist came to get rid of the damn things, after determining that it was an apparition.”

I blinked.

“Is that it?”

“Yup.”

“You said it was a long story.”

Charles grunted something and his fox echoed the sound.

“It may be the moment to mention that many Hunters tend to be bad at socialising, given their proclivity for speaking with animals.”

I could’ve figured that out myself, I’m sure.

The rest of the trek to the Spire in the Heart of Skovslot was awkward and silent.

Aef was speaking to some Elfin wearing the silken robes of the Menders when I found him on the third floor, as well as some dressed in peculiar outfits that seemed to have grown from the ground itself, as they were made of thin roots and woven moss, with pretty flowers here-and-there.

When the Elder saw me, he made a gesture of a flat hand, palm-down, and the congregated Elfin left to find a seat in the nearby comfortable lounge-chairs and sofas.

“I see that you are well, Exorcist Ryūta. I did not expect to see you recovered so soon.”

“Thank you, I believe I owe it a lot to your Menders.”

He shook his head, a mannerism I had not seen from an Elfin. “Our Menders are not to thank for your recovery, you must know this.”

I didn’t say anything, since I felt it was rude, but I knew from Elye that they had tried their best and prepared for the worst.

I cleared my throat and changed subject. “I am here to report that the Rotmaker has been completely vanquished. Without your help, it would not have happened.”

Aef patted me on my upper arm. “You take the greatest share of the credit in this, young man.”

“Thank you for saying so. There was something else I also wanted to report,” I started, looking back at the Tracker, who cast me a suspicious gaze in return. “I lost my glasses in the ruins when I was flung from its fourth floor. If they are found in my absence, please take care that they do not fall in the wrong hands.”

Aef glanced at me and then the Tracker behind me. I could see the realisation in his aura, which I was straining my essence to observe, then he said, “Of course, Exorcist Ryūta. We understand well that the tools of your profession are not to be wielded by mundane hands.”

“Thank you,” I said, with a sigh of relief. He seemed to have caught on to the fact that they were no ordinary spectacles.

“Before you go,” he then said. “The Trakys sare brought a gift for you. We are aware that Otherworlders prefer a reward of currency, but we deemed this a better gift for you.”

With a waving gesture, he called one of the men in the strange root-and-moss-dotted-with-flowers clothes. This was one of the Trakys sare, the people who worked on growing and maintaining the buildings in the Enclave, and whom Elye had said were boring and smelled of beeswax. I couldn’t help but try to scent the air as he came close, but the man mostly just smelled sweetly-floral.

“Andasangare. We made this for you, plants willing.”

The strangely-clad Elfin, whose puffy face and facial structure reminded me of Owl a bit, handed me something like a staff. I looked at it as it lay in his outstretched hands, offering it to me.

“This is quite the gift,” Armen commented. **“It is quite possibly worth over a hundred gold crowns.”**

I swallowed hard at the estimation.

It was impossible not to see the amazing craftsmanship that’d gone into its creation. The staff had a very organic shape and was formed of what looked like three separate thin roots. Half of it was straight and tapered to a flat point, but the other half formed a shape like a coiled serpent, with a translucent-grey stone held at the very tip as though in the mouth of the serpent. Along the roots that formed the grip and lower-half was multi-coloured moss, and, as I gripped it, it felt just right.

“Try to push your essence into the staff.”

“This is a heart-wood staff,” Aef said before I could try what Armen had suggested. “They continue to grow and change shape according to their wielder, and if fed with the energy of your soul, it may become a tool to utilise your magical powers, as well as those of your familiars.”

Holy shit.

“I don’t know what to say,” I replied.

“It is my hope that Skovslot Enclave has found an ally in you, Exorcist Ryūta.”

I nodded eagerly. “Of course! If you find yourself in trouble again, I will grant my aid once more.”

With the staff in my hand and its flat tip against the floor, I carefully put a bit of my essence into it, imagining it flowing from the pool of light in my chest, down my arm, and out through my palm.

Immediately, the translucent-grey stone lit up with a violet glow and I saw the lit-up auras of all the people around me.

“This is amazing,” I said.