

## 99 – The Whispering Wilds

Renji had found us an inn, where he and I shared a room, while Elye and Emily shared the neighbouring one. Ludwig apparently slept at the Adventurers’ Guild, which was a perk of being Savant-ranked like him. Before we’d gone our separate ways, we’d eaten a hearty dinner together, and then promptly gone to bed.

The following morning we awoke before dawn, roused by Renji’s energetic and eager spirit, though it was clear the rest of us weren’t morning people by choice. After a breakfast of bread, butter, and honey, I went with Elye to fetch the horses, while Renji and Emily went to the For-Rent Armoury at the Guild to gear her out a little bit. After all, she was the least prepared out of all of us. I was contemplating sending her back to Lundia, where she’d have a, hopefully, easier time of it, but I didn’t think it was a good idea for her to go alone.

If she managed to practice with her Affinity a lot, she had the potential to be a great addition to our Party, but it was clearly reckless to drag her with me on any Exorcism Quests before she could handle her own. And, honestly, like how I’d approached the Larder Keeper in Helmstatter, I was starting to wonder if perhaps it wasn’t best if it was just me and my familiars, such that none of my friends were put in danger. I was very cognisant of the fact that my vocation was, in most cases, impossible for almost any other Role to handle. Even in the cases where the foe was a corporeal entity, they couldn’t be defeated easily, so it was crazy of me to ask anyone to join me, despite the fact that I didn’t want to do it alone.

Elye and I waited with the horses out in front of the Guild Hall for about fifteen minutes, before Emily and Renji came out. The Spellhand now had a gnarled bleached-white wooden wand, a light rucksack, a tunic that would do well to blunt any slashing strikes or projectiles, some proper brown travel boots, and comfortable-looking woollen pants. Despite the fact that the colours of her new attire were muted and a bit mismatch, she wore it well.

“The tunic is just for now,” Renji promised her, as though having had to persuade her the entire time after she put it on. “Once you become more comfortable with your magic and learn some incantations, you can go back to wearing a dress or robes or whatever you want.”

“It looks good on you,” I commented, before realising I’d said it out loud.

“Thank you,” she replied. “I’m not used to boots like these. I’ve always just been barefooted back home and I’ve never worn trousers before. It feels strange.”

I smiled. It was hard for me to imagine someone growing up like *that*, but even though she almost sounded like she was from some strange medieval period, it was clear that it wasn't quite like that. Perhaps Oblus was just freer in certain ways.

“Did you see Ludwig in there?” I asked, turning to look at Renji.

“Samael said he likes to sleep until noon when he can. Apparently he was explicitly told not to wake him up.”

“Weird, considering he made it sound like he would see us off.”

Renji shrugged, then asked, “Are we ready to leave?”

“I'd like to stop by the market stalls.”

“We've got rations already,” he replied.

“It's for something else.”

“Gotcha.”

As we were riding west of Altar, following the main road that ran along the ‘floor’ of the valley the city was situated in, I sat behind Renji on our mare, fiddling with some string that I was tying around a rolled-up letter and a little trinket I'd found.

*Karasumany, send this clone to the shore west of Helmstatter, where towns are built along the beaches.*

**CAW!** it answered and I released my grip on the clone I'd tied the string to. It immediately took to the air, following a current that lifted it high above us, as it headed in a straight line for the area I'd indicated. I would need to manually connect to it later to search the western shores, but I had heeded Renji's words and decided to write a brief letter to Rana. The trinket that I'd included was a tiny hand-made ceramic rendition of a Baneclaw, which I thought she might like.

Renji pulled our horse closer to the one Emily was controlling, while an erratic Elye looked like she was moments from leaping from the back in some acrobatic somersault. “As you're riding, try to ever-so-slightly manoeuvre the wind around the horse on either side, as though there is an invisible wedge that redirects its flow. Once you accomplish it, the horse should be able to go faster. When you become proficient enough, you should be able to include our horse as well.”

“I'll try,” she answered and I saw how her shoulders released a bit of tension, while her aura evened out. She was already quite adept at entering a meditative state, which I thought was very impressive, since it had taken me so much longer to master.

For the next few hours we rode across the hilly terrain, passing small forests and villages on the way to our destination, while the sloping sides of the valley came closer-and-closer to the road we followed, before we eventually started riding up the slope itself. We followed a slaloming path that made the incline more bearable for our mounts, but when we reached the top of the slope we let our horses rest for a bit, lest we tire them out completely and be forced to take an even longer break.

Where we stopped was a small village next to a grove of Troll Spires and, from our vantage point, we could look back at the road we had travelled and see all the way to the white dot of Altar, with the large blue gem of Altar Lake behind it. It was somehow an even more impressive sight than my first view of the valley.

“A view like this makes me wish I had a canvas and paint,” Emily sighed contentedly.

“You’re a painter?” I asked.

“Not in any serious manner, but I often did it to relax and enjoy my surroundings and the little often overseen details.”

“I wish I could draw,” Renji said. “My fingers betray my imagination.”

I knew he had always wanted to be able to draw his own manga, and though I’d tried to read the ones he’d shown me, it was clear that it was one of the few areas where he wasn’t exceptionally gifted.

“Maybe you could make some illustrations for my Encyclopaedias,” I suggested.

“She said she likes to paint to relax, and you want her to make renditions of monsters?” Renji joked.

“You’re right, that was a foolish suggestion.”

“I’d love to try!” Emily quickly said.

I smiled at her sincerity. “Since you can see spirits, I won’t have as hard a time describing them. You should look at some of the drawings already in the tomes though. The ones my mentor made are horrible, but there are others that are almost life-like. The entry for my newest familiar, the Moonlight Dancer, has no depiction, so I’d love if you would try and make one for it.”

Emily turned to look at where the silken robe twirled around not too far away, while imperceptibly orbiting me. “I think I could do that.”

“*Draw me something too, Emy!*” Elye requested.

“Of course.”

“Emy?” Renji wondered.

“She’s been calling me that a lot,” Emily said.

“*It is a better name,*” she insisted. “*Short names are best!*”

“It’s already rather short,” Renji replied.

“I like it, it sounds cute,” ‘Emy’ said.

“Are we ready to continue?” I asked.

“I think so. We still have a few more hours left before the Whispering Wilds come into view. The forest is in a valley of its own.”

“Are there a lot of valleys in Lacksmey?”

“A few, yea. I heard some Natives talk about a story that a Dragon took a big bite out of the nation, forming the valleys but leaving behind some of its teeth which became mountains.”

“Sounds like a creation myth almost,” I said, as we were walking back to where we’d left our horses. The two women were following us a few paces back, the Elfin excitedly describing with gestures how she’d like to be painted, and Emily laughing.

“Would have to be quite an enormous Dragon,” he said with a grin.

***“The Enclave I lived near before my death worshipped a Dragon,”*** Seramosa suddenly said.

*Really?*

***“I do not lie, Exorcist!”***

*Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that. It just sounds so alien to me.*

***“The Elfin would bathe its body in their vast thermal lake and slake its thirst with Blood Wine. They would sing and dance around its slumbering body, and celebrate when it awoke to guide them.”***

*That sounds just like a real God,* I replied, surprised.

***“Dragons are powerful and wise. They are viewed as Gods by many Elfin and sub-human species like Goblins.”***

It struck me that I’d never really given the beliefs of Elfin or Goblins much thought, but it seemed an inevitable thing that anything sentient would create their own religions or belief systems around observable things that greatly impacted their lives. For ancient Japanese people, that was in the form of the Sun, later earning the name Amaterasu. Almost all religions of the past worshipped the Sun in some regard, which made sense. If Earth had had living Dragons, they would surely have been worshipped as well.

Given this revelation, I then considered the troublesome fact that the Crown wore regalia formed from the corpses of hunted-down Dragons. No doubt much of the Goblins’ and Elfin’s disagreement with humans stemmed from this. After all, to slay another’s God is like waging war on their culture and very essence.

“You okay Ryūta?” Renji asked. “You’re spacing out a bit.”

I looked down at my hands where he’d lain the reins of our horse. I had no idea how long they’d lain in my palms, while I’d been lost in my own thoughts. Emily was already pulling her horse away from the tree where we’d leashed them both.

“Sorry, I was just talking to Sera. She mentioned that Elfin and Goblins worship Dragons, and it just got me thinking.”

“I’ve only ever seen the aftermath of one Dragon Hunt,” Renji said. “It still gives me chills. I get why someone would worship *that*. They’re proper endgame material in this world.”

I gave him a puzzled look.

“A Dragon is like the Final Boss, after you’ve reached max level,” he explained.

“The Royal Family must be quite strong if they are able to make their regalia from such monsters.”

“Did you see how Torvalder fought?” Renji asked. “He was amazing. Even single-handedly against the Flayed Noble, he held his own. If he’d possessed the powers of a Crusader, he would definitely have won, but from how he fought, he strikes me more as a Vanguard Specialisation, like Sentinel or Blademaster. Of course, if anyone asks, I never suggested that the Prince might be comparable to an Otherworlder.”

I grinned at his gesture of running his thumb along his throat, to signify that such an utterance in front of the wrong ears would be a death sentence. He’d already said as much in the past.

“I honestly assumed that he’d be able to do anything, since that’s the feeling I got from his white rainbow-edged aura.”

Renji clapped our horse on the back, gesturing for me to get on and I awkwardly struggled up onto it, after which he jumped on himself. Then we rode over to where Emily and Elye were already waiting atop theirs.

“I think you probably should let sleeping Dragons sleep,” he then said, before urging the mare into a trot.

We ran across hilly terrain, taking paths that veered around tall solitary mountains, which were dotted at random intervals across the landscape. The sun was at its zenith by the time we broke through a forest and found ourselves at the top of a steep incline that led to a bowl-shaped valley, wherein dark trees took up most of the space, and a small colour settlement was crammed into the far corner, only accessible by travelling through the woods.

As we slowly manoeuvred down the incline towards the dark forest, I sent one of Karasumany’s clones ahead to scout out our path. Through its eyes I saw the woods from just above its canopy and heard how the wind moving through the branches, bushes, and leaves produced a susurrating whisper that was deeply unnerving. The name given to this place was quite literal it seemed.

As our horses neared the treeline and the sparsely-travelled road through it, I took my time studying the plants, looking for the Buzzing Rocks, and watching for any beasts lurking in our path.

The trees themselves had dark-grey bark that was spotted with some fuzzy parasitic plants lodged firmly in-between the deep furrows, which ran vertically through the bark, like wrinkles in an old person’s skin. The branches were thin and covered with dark-green leaves that had serrated edges, and there were so many of them that scarcely any light pierced the canopies. This led to an understory that was mostly home to fungi, like toadstools as wide as wagon wheels, and bushes that had gnarly thorns and seemed to parasitise on the trees as well, given how they all had their literal hooks in the dark-grey bark.

Though I didn’t spot any Buzzing Rocks, I saw quite a few creatures, like horrid-looking squirrels, skittish grey rabbits that seemed to live off the large toadstools, Black Hounds, thick-bodied snakes, and even a few birds like sparrows. I suppose that, to a Native of this world, so many potentially-dangerous beasts in one place was a powerful deterrent, but to any competent Adventurer, it didn’t seem much of a challenge.

To prove this, Renji urged Emily to push her horse into a gallop, as he did the same, while yelling at Elye to shoot anything that got in front of our horses or followed after us.

No sooner had we entered the oppressive gloom of the Whispering Wilds than it seemed that we pierced through the other side, only a few minutes later, the sunlight welcoming us back. It hadn’t even been necessary for Elye to fire a single arrow, much to her disappointment.

As we started up a small incline to where the first of Sacrament’s houses lay, Renji and Emily slowed our horses to a trot.

“*That* wasn’t as bad as I thought,” I commented.

“It’s worse at night,” Renji replied over his shoulder. “Don’t know if you saw any, but Black Hounds often build their nests in the forest and they’re not afraid of sneaking out when it gets dark to nab some cattle or unsupervised children. And once we go in there for the Buzzing Rocks, we’ll have to constantly be on guard. They have these squirrel-looking things and they’re very territorial and mean, plus there are a lot of brambles and basically everything that grows there is poisonous.”

“I wonder how such a place comes about naturally,” I said, as we passed by the first of many houses. Like Altar, the buildings here were coated in wax, though there were a variety of colours, making the village almost quaint with its artful appearance.

“It’s not natural, I’m almost certain that it was man-made through magic or ritual. I think the people of Sacrament wanted a suitable bulwark to keep outsiders away.”

The thought of a place where people with such a mindset existed suddenly recontextualised their colourful houses, and made me wonder where some of the colours were sourced from, such as the deep crimson that many of the buildings’ wax layer exhibited.

“Let’s get the deliveries over with so we can get out of here,” I commented.