

93 – City of Piety

We took a rest by a creek to let the horses recoup some energy, while Renji scolded Elye in a very ‘disappointed dad’ sort of way. Emily and I had both managed to find the humour in the terrifying encounter with the Baneclaw at that point, and it wasn’t long before we were all laughing about it together. Although, Renji was adamant that we could never go back this route so long as the Baneclaw was alive, since they had a lifespan of more than thirty years.

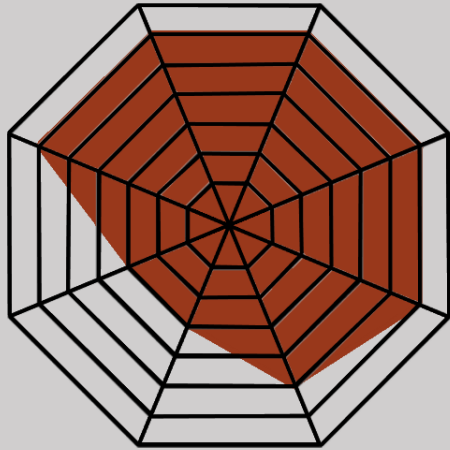
Eventually we settled down around a fire I lit using my Ifrit Claw. As Emily stared at my cursed hand with a curious-yet-wary expression. As I noticed her expression, I thought about how, if I’d been able to experience Backlash from the spells of my familiars, then surely Seramosa’s repeated conflagrations and explosions would’ve killed or severely crippled me.

I brought out the foodstuffs I’d been given by the villagers, as well as some of the rations that Mortimer had given me from the Necromancy Guild. We shared some small-talk while eating, but it was still a bit awkward, since Emily had her guard up, which was understandable.

Renji eventually started telling her about the Adventurers’ Guild and the world of Mondus. I mostly just listened, while secretly wishing I’d had a font of knowledge like him back when I’d arrived.

When the conversation got to the Role Assignment and my educated guess that she would end up as a Spellhand, Renji pulled out his Guild Card to show her. He also showed how his skills worked and how they were different ranks.

<i>‘SKRALD’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Brawler</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>20</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>A</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>A</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>A</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>D</i>	SOUL: <i>D</i>	STRENGTH: <i>A</i>	VITALITY: <i>A</i>

<p>ABILITIES</p> <p><i>‘Omniglot’</i></p> <p><i>‘Brawler IV’</i></p> <p><i>‘Argonaut’</i></p> <p><i>‘Guiding Star’</i></p> <p><i>‘Thunder-fist’</i></p>	
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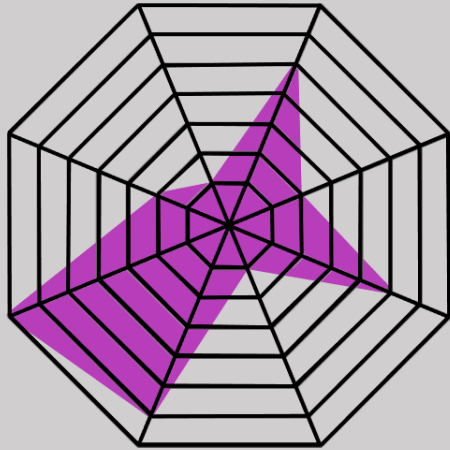
“What’s Thunder Fist, Argonaut, and Guiding Star,” Emily asked, seeing his unique abilities.

“I had Guiding Star when I came to this world,” Renji said. “I don’t really know what it does, but I think it might help me rank up quickly. Argonaut I unlocked after doing a hundred quests, but I also don’t really know what it does. One of my friends said it means I always have the wind in my back when I’m running, riding, and sailing, but I haven’t been able to verify that.

“As for Thunder-fist, that’s an active ability, whereas the other two are passive. It allows me to imbue a punch with an electrifying pulse that causes disorientation and spasming. I acquired it after a lot of training, but I wouldn’t know how to replicate the unlock conditions.”

I ended up showing her my Card as well, explaining a bit about Possessed Weapons and Pacts.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>18</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>

<p>ABILITIES</p> <p><i>‘Omniglot’</i></p> <p><i>‘Exorcist II’</i></p> <p><i>‘Curse of the Excruciating Bond’</i></p> <p><i>‘Ifrit Claw Wielder’</i></p> <p><i>‘Gravelight Ring Wielder’</i></p> <p><i>‘Pact (????)’</i></p> <p><i>‘Pact (????)’</i></p> <p><i>‘Pact (Observer)’</i></p>	
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“What does the Curse mean?” she asked, looking horrified.

I shared a glance with Renji, mentally asking, “Should I show her?”

He shrugged in reply, so I pulled out the voodoo doll made from my own hand.

“A cruel bastard cut off my hand and put a curse on it. Apparently it’s very difficult to break the curse, perhaps because it was made from my own flesh and blood.”

Emily looked like she was on the verge of throwing up, so I stowed the foul doll away again, and also took back my Card, looking briefly at the abilities that were part of my Exorcist set:

<p>ABILITIES</p> <p><i>‘Omniglot’</i></p> <p><i>‘Exorcist II’:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- <i>Banish I</i>- <i>Contain Spirit II</i>- <i>Drain Spirit II</i>- <i>Focus Wielder I</i>- <i>Hymnal I</i>- <i>Investigation III</i>- <i>Invoke Ritual III</i>- <i>Meditation III</i>- <i>Offering I</i>- <i>Pact of the Familiar III</i>- <i>Possessed Weapon Wielder III</i>
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- *Repel II*
- *Sanctify II*
- *Soul Barrier II*
- *Spirit Sight III*
- *Staff Wielder II*
- *Summon III*
- *Unleash II*
- *Ward Crafter II*
- *Worship I*

I just need three more Rank III abilities to unlock Exorcist III and gain two new abilities, I realised in surprise. I considered which would be worth focusing on advancing, but quickly decided I'd train more with Unleash, Repel, and Contain Spirit, since those seemed to be most in line with the path my advancement was taking already. Hopefully I'd be awarded more offensive abilities if I continued in this direction.

I stowed my card away, then looked back at Emily, seeing how she was watching Seramosa try to play with Elye's hair. “You should have a unique ability as well,” I remarked to Emily. “After all, you can see Sera in her incorporeal form, even though that shouldn't be possible without a Watcher familiar or special tools.”

Renji looked surprised by this revelation. “I've never heard of an ability like that,” he said. “Can you describe what you're seeing?”

I put a hand on his shoulder, pulling him a bit away from the girl whom he was overwhelming with his enthusiasm.

“She looks like a see-through woman with a body of coal and flaming hair and eyes.”

“Is that true?” Renji asked, turning to me for confirmation.

“Why don't you see for yourself?”

Sera, I'll allow you to manifest briefly, but no shenanigans.

“**Finally!**”

The Condemned Ifrit, who had been seated next to Elye, became fully corporeal, making Renji shift back a bit from the sudden buffet of heat that radiated off her.

“*Hello!*” said Elye to the Demon that had appeared next to her, treating it as an everyday occurrence. “*You are very warm and pretty.*”

“I will die for you,” Sera pledged to the Elfin in a whisper.

Elye reached out to touch her hair and I quickly warned her, “Be careful.”

“It is not hot at all, Yuuta!”

“Really?” asked Emily, then scooted over so she could touch Seramosa’s hair as well. “Oh! You’re right!”

The Ifrit looked like she was in heaven, totally loving the attention of the two women, whom she had pledged to defend with her life.

I shook my head with a grin.

“Think I can try touching her hair as well?” Renji whispered.

“I wouldn’t risk it,” I told him, then couldn’t help but laugh at his childish-jealous expression.

The following morning, just after dawn, we continued down the northbound road. After only two hours, we broke from the large forest full of Troll Spires, finding ourselves on an incline that led down to a gleaming-white city in the distance. It lay next to a vast lake that mirrored the blue sky and clouds above. Behind the city and lake were great jagged mountains, part of the long range we’d seen from afar, called the ‘Dragon Tooth’ mountains.

“That’s Altar,” Renji told us.

The vista from where we stopped was the most impressive thing I’d ever seen in this world. The valley that the city lay in was full of fertile fields and forests. From our vantage we could see many small settlements and villages dotting the sloping side down towards the city.

While we made our way down the slope, I tried to look through the time-worn Encyclopaedia. Given everything that’d happened, I still hadn’t fully looked through the tome and absorbed all the new knowledge within. The page I was on, was one in the very back called, rather banally, ‘List of Names’. It was a name, the ritualistic way of writing it, and the specific entity it was tied to. A brief explanation showed how such a name could be used in a ritual to summon forth that exact entity, and there was even a guide on how to transcribe a name I’d come up with myself into the strange ritualistic alphabet.

It was good knowledge to have, in case I lost the Pact with Armen or Sera and needed to get them back, though, from looking at the list, the majority of the names were tied to Demons. Some of the names also had descriptions of the specific Demon’s personality. I suppose that if you were set on forming a Pact with a Demon, it was no doubt very useful information to have.

I was still searching for the right entity to make into a Protector, as well as another to become a Fighter. For the Protector, I had considered a Corpse Warden like what Owl had used, but the summoning ritual for it required some truly macabre ingredients, such as a sealed casket with a corpse inside, a widow’s tears, a dying man’s breath, and some plants I’d never heard of before, but which were listed as ‘rare’ on the entry in my original Encyclopaedia.

I also strongly considered forming Servant or Concierge Pacts, when I eventually got my own house, since it seemed like a good idea.

I had three options I was vacillating between for the Fighter I wanted: ‘Forlorn Duellist’, a Revenant of someone who had died in the pursuit of mastering a martial art; ‘The Petrified Hero’, a peculiar Elemental-type entity created from a warrior who had died by being turned to stone, though I had the feeling that the ‘hero’ part of its title was supposed to be a joke; and lastly, ‘Harald’s Woe’, a type of Visitor entity that was, strangely, bound to a sword and which had earned its name for being known as a monster that the old King Harald, father of Egil and Torvalder Gyldenrose, was incapable of defeating.

The drawing for the first two were pretty straight-forward and humanoid, but the Harald’s Woe was depicted as a large hand holding a sword planted in the ground and connected with a jointless arm to a four-legged headless triangular body.

Though it was said the Woe was unbeatable in combat, it could be Banished with a high-pitched sound, such as that from a whistle, which was a pretty devastating weakness. Its summoning requirements were fairly simple however, requiring a Used Sword, Water from a Spring, Eleven Candles, and Two Silver Coins. I eventually brushed it from my mind though, when I noticed the note in the bottom corner of the page: *‘I don’t know how to control it and it keeps talking to me in my dreams!’*

Yeah, probably best not to mess with a Visitor entity... they seem too alien, even by this world’s logic.

The Forlorn Duellist and Petrified Hero both required more extensive summoning rituals, with both needing a corpse, though in the case of the Duellist, it had to be from a warrior, while, strangely, the Hero was unspecified in what type of body, so long as it was turned to stone.

How the hell would I go about turning a corpse into stone??

Alternatively, the Hero could also use a Human-like Statue in place of a Petrified Corpse, but that added two additional requirements: a Veil of Spidersilk and Grave Moss. The other ingredients were:

a Site of Defeat, as in a literal place where a defeat had taken place, so possibly a battlefield; a Sword Broken in Battle; and a Silver Necklace.

I can't tell which is worse... I complained internally, as I looked back at the requirements to summon the Duellist. Besides the Warrior's Corpse, it needed: a Time-worn Weapon; Blood-stained Armour; Misty Reminiscence, which was listed as rare; and The Name of a Forgotten Warrior.

I guess I'll wait until I get to Altar. Hopefully I can meet Ludwig Pawn there and get some advice.

As we neared the white-painted stone walls of Altar, a man driving a wagon with two passengers and some goods in the back passed by us, and Renji told him to watch out for the Baneclaw we'd seen.

The man called back, “That old ball of fluff usually lets us pass if we feed him fish, but thanks for the warning!”

“Maybe I should return to the forest with fish as a peace-offering,” Renji mumbled to himself.

“Couldn't we just have killed it?” I wondered in hindsight.

“The King has forbidden it, but, yes, we *could*, though it would be off to the gallows as soon as anyone found out.”

I wonder why the King would put that into law.

As we continued down the road, which had widened to allow three carriages to move side-by-side along it, I saw the opened gate of the White City. Guards clad in silver mail over white robes were watching the influx of newcomers, though there was no proper checkpoint or security, which probably meant they didn't fear smugglers or people with bounties on their head. Or, more likely, they had alternate ways of ascertaining the danger of the people who entered their city.

“If you look up on the walls, you should be able to catch glimpses of some of the Elite Marksmen of Altar,” Renji told me, as we began moving into the queue for the main gate. Emily and Elye were next to us on their horse, and they both looked around, the soon-to-be Spellhand utterly awed by what she saw.

The stone walls of the city were painted with a thick layer of white, which, from the lack of tarnish, was probably touched-up once every week. As we followed the queue of people on horses and in carriages, as well as on foot, we came close enough to the wall that I could see that it wasn't paint on the walls, but wax, like that from a candle.

“How'd they manage to coat the walls in wax??” I asked, surprised by what must have been a colossal undertaking, considering the size of the wall that wrapped around the city, except for the port on the lake-facing side.

“I actually don’t know,” my friend admitted, “But Altar is well-known for their high-quality candles, and they have an army of streetsweepers and pious people who maintain the city.”

I wish Armen was here, he’d probably have a trove of information about this place. Perhaps I can bring him back if I find where his grave is, after all, he should be buried here if he was a Bishop.

Once we passed under the wall and through the gate, the stream of people we’d been following began to spread out in every direction. As with all the cities I’d been to thus far, the ‘entrance’ was lined with merchants, vendors, stalls, and animals for sale. However, perhaps due to this ‘army’ of civil servants, everything was neat and clean, and all the shops and stalls were uniform in theme, with white clothes draped over everything and most people wearing untainted white robes. Most of the Natives here were also of the dark-haired pale-skinned kind, similar to the Jeweller in Lundia.

Though it was nice to see a city that took cleanliness *this* seriously, I did also have a sneaking suspicion that the inhabitants of Altar had no choice in the matter. No doubt cleanliness was a law.

“We should head straight for the Adventurers’ Guild,” I said.

Renji nodded, then gestured to Emily and Elye, whose horse had fallen behind a bit. “Follow me,” he told them, and Emily deftly manoeuvred their horse around some pedestrians who had stopped in the middle of the main thoroughfare.

As we passed by the market stalls and shops, I realised that it wasn’t just the outer wall that was covered in the thick layer of white wax, but it was in fact almost every major landmark in the city: the small churches near the gate, the domed stone buildings housing the Guilds, the barracks, the Cathedral towards the port at the eastern end of the city, and even a few ordinary homes.

“This is insane,” I remarked.

“*I dislike the people here,*” Elye blurted out and I was glad that most people couldn’t understand her, since we were still in a very crowded place.

“How come?” Renji asked, while our mares continued trotting down the white stones that lined the entire ‘floor’ of the city, though these were painted with actual paint and not covered in wax.

“*None of them are happy, none of them are smiling.*”

I looked around and saw that she was right. There were no laughing children running around and being a headache to their parents, and even the newcomers who had entered the city alongside us were all stone-cold expressions and serious glares. I also realised that the thrum of the crowds weren’t as intense as other cities, since even the markets were relatively subdued. Normally, the vendors would be shouting themselves hoarse to announce their wares, but there wasn’t any of that here.

It’s almost as if they aren’t allowed to express their emotions, I thought to myself.

We followed the main road for a few more minutes, before veering off towards the southern part of the city where domed buildings housed the Guilds. As my eyes wandered over the people here, I saw auras that indicated they belonged to Otherworlders and breathed a sigh of relief. There were also some taverns and inns that had cheerful people outside and within.

Just like with Helmstatter, it felt as if the Guilds, and Otherworlders by extension, were relegated to a corner of the city, but it seemed that, even if people like us didn't conform to their strange culture in Altar, we were at least far more welcome here than in parts of Arley. But it was still a bit unsettling to feel like the Guild sector of the city was the only place where people didn't put a lid on their emotions.

After finding a stable next to the Mercenary Guild, which was a box-shaped fortress with two bulbous towers attached to it, we walked down the street and entered the Adventurers' Guild. Inside the Hall were a few groups of people seated around tables in the ever-present tavern section that all branches of the Guild seemed to have. There was a young eager-looking Clerk manning the counter, who welcomed us as we entered.

His eager expression quickly turned to confused panic when Renji pushed Emily forward and said, “This girl needs a Role Assignment done.”

“One moment, please!” the Clerk announced, before running off to find a superior.

We got to see him go through all the backrooms and staff areas, looking for a Manager or someone who knew how to operate the soul-stone tablet required for the Assignment. When he was about to go upstairs to where the Branch Master and resident Genius no doubt resided, one of the people in the tavern reached out and grabbed him.

“Fucking hell, kid, you know you can just ask if you need help, right?”

I didn't hear the Clerk's response, but he started shuffling back towards us, as the man who had stopped him followed behind. He had been sitting by himself, nursing a tall glass of something and I hadn't noticed him at first, because of the two groups seated in front of him. However, as he walked across the floor towards us, I saw that he was a boulder of a man, standing nearly two metres tall, which was shorter than Renji, but he made up for that by being a broad-shouldered musclebound specimen. What's more, his right arm, leg, eye, as well as the visible part of his neck, were all made of metal. He looked less like a human and more like some futuristic cyborg, and there was a silver horn right above his metallic eye, which didn't help. His long time-worn and patch-work trench coat, coupled with his grey stubble and ponytail gave him the air of a grizzled detective, though the whole package combined screamed: Cyborg-Demon Detective.

—Patreon-exclusive Copy—
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka “Dosei”)—

But, the main thing that stood out to me, besides all of this, was his aura.
Because it was jet black.