

"Sorry, can you repeat that?" I asked Welf, when he gave me the news. "How *many* people want to have a chat with me?"

It was the day after the defeat of Goliath and the celebration, with the unexpected –but not unwelcome– appearance of Fenrir. And now, Welf said there were people who wanted to see me.

"Lady Hephaestus and my Guild Advisor." Repeated Welf, grinning uncomfortably and scratching his head. "Don't worry, it's nothing serious..."

"Oh, really? And you're sure, why?" I asked, a little more venomous than I should have... but I had hoped that defeating the Goliath would let me Level Up. It was a stupid hope, of course, I was too strong to get a Level from a beefed up giant, and I got some impressive amount of points in my Abilities, especially in Strength and Endurance... but I hoped to get something better.

"Ah, well..." Hesitated Welf. "It's because I Leveled Up and got a Skill out of the fight with the Goliath..."

Oh, well, *someone* got something from that fight at least. "Really? Congratulations. Something useful?"

Welf chuckled. "Well, you can say that. Apparently, I got something called 'Runesmith', which gives me the Mystery Skill if I use the glyphs to give power to the item... and it scales with my Smith Skill to boot."

Hmmm.... That was interesting...

"Congratulations." Said Lili. "Seems like Mister Welf doesn't need to come with us in the dungeon anymore."

Uh... right. Welf didn't need to go into the Dungeon anymore. He had everything he needed to make his dream come true.

"Ahah, well, technically yeah, but there is a lot more that Rexen didn't teach me. He still has to teach me how to infuse magic into an object without runes."

"I don't think you need it anymore." I admitted. "I know very little of the Mystery Skill, but it should be able to replicate the enchantments I know. Maybe not exactly the same thing, but I doubt you'll have trouble creating a method close enough."

"Ah, yes... but Lil'e would still need a bodyguard, no? I'm not comfortable letting her down with just you. No offense, boss, but you're just one man and the Dungeon under Riviria get even worse."

I nodded. "Yes, that's true. And the higher your Level, the better your equipment will be." I grinned when Welf sighed in relief. "Although, if you want to come just because you like it, you should just say it. It's not like I'm going to send you away."

Welf blushed, embarrassed. "Ah, well, thank you. I'll remain in your care then."

Lili mumbled something under her breath that I didn't catch, but I decided to ignore it. If she wants to be tsundere, I'll let her.

"So, who should I see first?"

"Ah, well, my Advisor told me that seeing goddess Hephaestus came first. She can see you later."

I nodded. "Alright. Let's go then." I said, standing up.

"Like, right now?" Asked Welf.

"Sure. Let's not make a lady wait."

Lili bit her lower lip. "Lili doesn't think she should come. It's a private matter between Mister and Lady Hephaestus..."

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind." Said Welf. "You're part of the team, after all."

Lili shook her head. "No, it's better if Lili doesn't come. Lagy Hephaestus might not mind, but the Familia might not be so open. I'll just go and buy more supplies for the next expedition in the Dungeon."

Well, someone had to do it after all. "Alright. See you at the Guild?"

Lili nodded. "Yes. You'll need Lili advice to work with the Guild. I doubt Mister Welf knows how it works."

"Hey, I know something." Argued the smith. "But it's probably better if you're there for us. Misha told me she wanted to see all my partiy if possible..."

Misha... the name was familiar, but it didn't light any bulb.

"Then Lili will be there for sure. We cannot let the Advisor think you level up because of a third powerful teammate."

Welf nodded, and I... didn't get what they were saying, not really. Why wouldn't they let her think that? Well, whatever.

"Then it's decided. Let's go now. Better finish this before the night. I have a spar tomorrow and I don't want to be late."

Welf and Lili exchanged a glance at that, and I continued to feel like they were hiding something. But honestly, I didn't care much. I doubted it was something serious.

The visit at Hephaestus Familia started very smoothly. We arrived at the mansion –more a giant smithy, but close enough-, Welf said I was the one Hephaestus was waiting for, and after someone told her we were there, she received us immediately.

I had to admit, Hephaestus was extremely beautiful... but since I was raised with stories of Hephaestus being a ugly, lame god –in the sense that one of his legs didn't work well, not him being underwhelming, because myth Hephaestus was badass- so I couldn't really appreciate the looks of this one. And no, having an eyepatch didn't really subtract anything to her general look.

"So you are the one that helped Welf to Level Up." She said, looking at me. "I have to say, I expected someone with better equipment."

I shrugged. I still had the armor I got in the first days here. Maybe it was time to change it. "Equipment isn't anything. I'm mostly a mage."

"Is that so?" Asked Hephaestus, smiling. "You have a powerful build for being a mage, and more equipment that one usually wears. Mages prefer to stay light, since being hit is disrupt their spell and cause Ignuus Fatus." She paused, and her eyes lowered. "Can I see your weapon?"

I gave her my sword without saying anything, with sheath and all. The God Smith took the weapon and examined it. "Hmm... a good steel sword, surely, but you cannot possibly have fell the Goliath with this. And the Skill Welf got is surely something you taught him... who are you?"

"A traveler." I replied, without missing a beat. "You can call me Rexen."

Hephaestus' eye narrowed. "That's not your real name."

I shrugged. "No, it's not. To tell the truth, I'm not sure what my name is supposed to be anymore." The name on the Falna on my back could be my real one, but I was not sure, and the failure to reach home could be a simple lack of power, or something deeper. I would find out only by continuing forward.

Welf was giving me a strange, worried look, and Hephaestus had more or less the same look. "You're not lying." She said, before leaning on her chair and sighing. "What a troublesome party member you have found, Welf."

"Ahah... yeah. He's strange and mysterious and a little crazy sometimes... but he's good." Laughed the smith, clearly uncomfortable.

"Strange and crazy, uh?" I said, giving him a stinky eye. "Is that what you think of me?"

"I mean, can you really say you're not? You dueled the Goliath after little more than a month and half in the Dungeon."

I sighed. "Yeah, and I didn't even Level Up from that. I would be more upset if I didn't have that arrangement with the Loki Familia..."

“That’s the first time I’ve heard that.” Interrupted the God Smith. “I thought you were the only member of your Familia.”

I sighed and summed up the problem I had right now. Hephaestus didn’t seem willing to inquire further... until I spoke about my project.

“Oh, so you’re an artisan too.” She said. “What kind of project would require you to get so many magic stones?”

I saw Welf sent me a curious glance... so I decided to answer.

“This one.” I said, generating an illusion of the magical circle I used to come here.

Hephaestus squinted her eye at the thing, trying to understand it. Welf just stared with confusion.

“It’s a magic circle.” Finally said Hephastus. “What’s supposed to do? Magic circles only work for the users.”

“This magic circle is not like the others. It’s not a personal circle.” I made the illusion act, simulating what happened inside it when magicka was poured inside it, until it disappeared and a sphere of light was launched in the sky. “It’s a teleportation circle. With it, I can travel amazing distances. Unfortunately, the amount of magical power I can put inside it right now is insufficient. So, I need another power source... and magic stones are exactly why I need them.”

The Smith God looked at the entire thing like she wasn’t sure she heard it right.

“You’re serious.” She finally said, after a second. “You’re either completely crazy, or the greatest mage to ever exist.”

“Ah, I’m not that good. It’s just that magic here is far behind.” I replied, making the illusion disappear.

“There is no way I can convince you to join my Familia, right?” Asked Hephaestus, completely out of the blue.

I blinked, surprised, but replied instantly. “Afraid not.”

“I suppose so.” Sighed the God Smith. “Then take care of Welf while you’re here in Orario. And... good luck.”

That sounded like a dismissal. I bowed a little and stood. “Thank you, Lady Hephaestus.”

“Stay here for a second, Welf.” She continued, as the redhead smith made to stand up too. He sent a glance to me, but of course he couldn’t refuse his goddess.

“See you at the Guild, Welf.” I said, getting out. I’m sure she’s just going to roast him a bit. Nothing too serious.

As expected, Welf reached the Guild a couple of minutes after me, so he didn't talk with his goddess too long. Lili came right after him, and so we entered to see Welf Advisor... how was the short, pink-haired friend of the much more present in the story Eina Tulle. She took us into a room so we could talk in peace... and the interrogation started.

"So, you're the party who defeated the Goliath?" She asked, with a block note ready.

"Yeah..." I said, eyeing the thing. "Why are you taking notes?"

"The Guild is always interested in High Class Adventurers, and taking down the Goliath with just three people is the work of a High Class Adventurer." She replied, her eyes scanning us. "The girl can't be one, because she's registered as a Level 1 supporter of the Soma Familia... so you must be the one who defeated the Goliath. Unless there was someone else during the fight."

"Well, there were three members of the Loki Familia, but they mostly watched." I replied.

Misha nodded, taking notes. "Can I have the names, so we can ask them to confirm the kill?"

"Sure. They were the Sword Princess Ais Wallenstein, Thousand Elf Lefiya Viridis, and... what's Tiona alias?"

"Amazon." Replied Lili.

I blinked. "Really? The gods called the Amazon warrior 'Amazon'? I thought they had more imagination. Isn't her sister Jormungand?"

"Yeah, maybe they thought it suited her well?" Questioned Welf. "She seems pretty enthusiastic about fighting."

I snorted. "Bah."

"We'll ask them to confirm your story." Interrupted Misha, looking a little more unsure. "Let us continue. Mister, you're not a registered Adventurer. In fact, I'm pretty sure nobody has ever seen you here. Can you explain why?"

"I don't have a Familia here in Orario. My god is very far away. I thought that it wasn't worth trying to register as an Adventurer without a Familia."

Misha nodded. "I see. It's something that happens commonly enough. But why didn't you join another Familia? Your Falna cannot grow without a god to update it."

I almost smirked, but I contained myself. No sense telling her that I had my own ways to update my Falna. "Unfortunately, the forbiddance on the change of Familia between the first year of receiving a Falna has not been lifted yet. I'm unable to change my Familia as for now."

Misha stopped writing. "You're telling me you have just recently received a Falna?"

"Yes."

“But... that’s impossible. If that was the truth, you should be Level 1!”

I nodded. “Correct. I can prove it, of course. You want to see my Falna?”

The young woman suddenly looked bashful. “I... I mean, it would help dissipate the doubts, but a Falna is something deeply personal. You shouldn’t show it to others...”

“You just have to confirm I’m Level 1.” I pointed out. “You don’t need to read the rest. If you can even read the divine language, of course. I thought it was pretty difficult to understand.”

Misha nodded. “Yes, it is difficult and I can’t read it very well. But... it’s just common sense! Even if very few people can read it, they can still see your Abilities.”

“Well, you’re an Advisor. I doubt you’re going to tell someone else.” I smiled, and she blushed. “I think I can trust you to look at it.”

“Ah... alright.” She said.

I took my armor off and raised my shirt so she could see my back. She remained silent for a second... then she spoke.

“You really are Level 1...” She whispered. “But what language is that? It doesn’t seem to be the divine language...”

“Ah, it’s just something my god did to hide my Falna.” I lied easily. “He distorted the words to make it more difficult to read. It’s just a trick.”

“Ah... alright.” Said Misha while I put my armor back on. “But, if you really are Level 1... how did you defeat the Goliath?”

Hmmm... better give her a demonstration. “With magic. Watch.”

-X-

Misha Flott had expected... alright, she didn’t know what to expect from Welf’s party. When he had told her that he had found one, part of her was relieved, because it meant that he would stop bothering her for it. On the other hand, when he refused to tell her who the members of the party were, she had grown wary. And she had made some investigation.

It hadn’t taken long to find out the members. A young supporter girl and a tall human, far older than both of them. At first, she had feared that the old man was using the younger two for some plot, but it became clear very soon that no, that didn’t seem to be the case. On the contrary, Welf seemed very happy with the arrangement and returned from the Dungeon with plenty of materials and magic stones. She still made some investigation, just to be sure.

The girl was easy to find. Level 1, supporter, member of the Soma Familia. The Soma didn’t have a good reputation in the guild, but she didn’t look as desperate as the others, so maybe she was different.

The man was a complete mystery. He didn't appear in any document inside the Guild, nobody had even *seen* him, and what she was able to find out is that he appeared a month and something ago and started adventuring. The Guild frowned at people going into the Dungeon without an Advisor or using the Guild to sell the magic stones, but it was not like they could *stop* them, so she had sort of drawn a blank on that. Until something outrageous happened, she was just going to let Welf do what she wanted. He didn't seem in danger anyway.

Then the news that he had hit Level 2 and had done so by participating in a battle with the Goliath, the Floor Boss of the Seventeenth Floor arrived, and she just *had* to meet the mysterious stranger that was the last member of his party.

He was nothing she expected him to be. Instead of remaining silent and not revealing anything, he had been pretty open about the whole thing, answered all her questions, and he even let her look at his Falna! Nothing about him made sense! And now, he was ready to show her how he defeated the Goliath, in this same room. She had no idea how he planned to do so, and was half-tempted to stop him before he demolished the Guild with a single, powerful spell, but curiosity won over prudence so she didn't say anything.

She regretted that immediately. As his face focused on his raised hand, an overwhelming pressure started to crush her from all sides. She tried desperately to breathe, but the air was as dense as jelly and she was not able to push it down. She tried to squirm, but it was like she was paralyzed. She was going to...

"Mister, stop!" Shouted the Soma girl. Rexen, the mister in question, blinked, and the pressure disappeared.

"Sorry?" He said, sounding uncertain of what he had done wrong.

"Man, you have to warn people when you are going to do something like that!" Exclaimed Welf. "You scared Miss Flott to death."

The man looked at her. Fortunately, she was already sitting, or her knee would have betrayed her. What had just hit her?

"Ah, sorry. I knew that people with Magic could feel the gathering of magical power, but I didn't know even people without could. My bad." This time he sounded really apologetic, which she could appreciate, but...

Wait a second... Did he say that he was just *gathering* magical power?

"What was Mister trying to do, anyway?" Asked the Soma girl. "Mister, you need to be cautious. This building is sturdy, but it can't take Mister's full power."

Rexen scoffed. "I'm not an *idiot*, Lili. At most, I'll have contained my magic. But I was probably going for an illusion. The ones that feel real are expensive to make."

His companions seemed mollified at that. Misha, on the other hand, not so much. He didn't even *use* a spell! He was just preparing to cast it! And it still felt like she was going to be crushed by invisible coils. This man was absurdly dangerous.

"I hope that's enough to convince you that I'm a real deal, Miss Flott." Continued the human. "If you're willing, I can try to cast my spell again. Maybe if you're prepared-"

"No!" Squealed Misha, terrified by the possibility. "No, it's quite alright. I'll notify the Guild that you're an unaffiliated Adventurer which still has to find a new Familia. It's rare, but they exist."

"Alright." Nodded the man. "And if possible, I'd prefer if the Guild didn't spread the news of my victory over the Goliath. I don't want to be assaulted by people wanting me in their Familia. Things could get... *unpleasant*."

Flashed of random destruction being rained over Orario filled Misha's mind. "It's all right! As unaffiliated party, you have to report the defeat of a Monster Rex, but not to claim the victory for yourself. If you don't want fame, you can always let the inhabitants of Riviria to take the credit. They kill it regularly anyway."

"Actually, I think Mister should take credit for it." Argued Lili. She got a confused gaze from Rexen and Welf.

"Why?" Asked the man.

"So Mister will have the opportunity to expand the party. Even with Mister Welf at Level 2, we're not enough to descend into the Lower Floors. We need at least someone else before we risk going deeper."

Misha nodded, suddenly in her playground. "Lili is right. You're surely a formidable Adventurer, but only three people, with one being Level 1 and the other being Level 2 is absolutely insufficient for the Lower Floors. The Amphisbaena is known to roam, and it's an opponent you cannot fight without risks."

Rexen frowned. "The Amphisbaena? You mean the next Monster Rex?"

Misha nodded again. "Yes. It normally inhabits the Twenty-seventh Floor, but it's known to climb up to the Twenty-Fifth or even the Twenty-Fourth. It's a Level 5 Monster, Level 6 is the area is full of water. You may be able to survive the encounter, but I doubt the rest of your party can. No offense."

"None taken." Replied Welf. Lili just shrugged.

Rexen was stroking his chin, thinking. "Hmm... I wanted to give a look at the Lower Floors, but... Is the average level of the Monster of the Nineteenth and Twelve Floors higher than the Middle Floors?"

"Usually. Most monsters are considered Level 2, but Level 3 are not uncommon. The more you descend near the Deep Floors, the more the average level increases. Also, a lot of monsters start to have more varied types of attacks. Siren and Harpy are one example, but the Lower Floors are also the home of the Green Dragons, who are Level 4 and have a powerful breath attack. And the numbers of monsters you may encounter continue to increase."

Rexen was still frowning, but he had stopped stroking his chin. He must have reached a conclusion. "Sounds too risky. I'll give it a look on my own, before deciding what to do, but if it's as dangerous as it seems, we'll need more people. I have a spell to increase your Abilities, but numbers are numbers."

"You can create more numbers." Pointed out Welf. Misha blinked, confused. What did that mean?"

Rexen dismissed the objection. "Summoning is stupidly costly in terms of magical power, and I can control just a few at the same time anyway. It will not solve the problem." That said, he looked conflicted. "It's worth trying, though. I'll experiment on my own. You two can take this as a vacation."

Welf and Lili had some conflicted expressions, like they were happy that he was thinking about their safety but they were worried he was going to do something stupid.

"In any case, we can think about it after I finish the spar with Ais. Unless you want to come and look at the fight..."

Misha paled. On top of being a powerful mage, he *sparred* with the Sword Princess!?

"Nah, I think I'm going to experiment with my new Skill. I want to make a Magic Sword that doesn't break. Can I have a sample?" Asked Welf.

Rexen nodded. He... how... what was going on!?

"Lili has to help a friend." Said the girl. "Also Lili needs to recover from the fight with the Goliath. Lili is still sore."

Rexen chuckled. "I can heal you if you want."

He could!?

"No, thank you. Lili will bear with it for a day."

Still smiling, Rexen patted the girl on the head. "As you wish, Lili." She seemed to like the contact.

"So... you want me to give your party the credit?" Asked Misha. She needed coffee after this. No, maybe something stronger. Hopefully, Eina will be up for a drink...

Rexen narrowed his eyes for a second, thinking. "Fine. But keep my real Level secret. People will not believe I did that if they see that I'm Level 1."

Misha nodded. *She* could barely believe it and he had seen his Falna. She had to double check with Loki Familia. "Alright. Thank you for your cooperation."

"My pleasure, Miss Flott." Replied Rexen with a warm smile, making her blush again. "I hope we'll see each other again."

“Ah, yes, if you want...” She stuttered, as the party got out of the room. As they did, she slapped her face.

Focus, Misha Flott. It’s not time for fantasies. You had a job to do.