

XXXXVII

Jakob sat behind Ciana, as she rode the horse, while Heskell ran beside them. It was, he considered, perhaps high time for him to learn how to wield the reins of such a beast himself.

They galloped down towards the edge of a great lake that lay easterly of Hekkenfelt, upon the sloping cliffs of which they would find some monster den that had resulted in four deaths thus far and the loss of countless livestock, along with supply chain disruptions of a nearby fishing village.

With an arm around Ciana's waist and his older holding the Quest Flier, he considered the specific wording that had caught Heskell's attention:

A Quest issued by the fishing village 'Siltsoil' on the shore of Lake Pemuthid

Bronze Rank

Quest type: Investigation, Retrieval & Extermination

The lives of locals on the western shoreline of Lake Pemuthid, primarily those of the village Siltsoil, have been disrupted for months by seemingly-random feral animals. When some fishermen took it upon themselves to investigate, after Adventurers' Guild members failed to solve the problem permanently, they came upon a cave that had seemingly been sealed off for a long time, but was unearthed by a mudslide during heavy rainfall in the previous season.

Your task is to find the reason why animals, such as wolves, bears, boars, deer, and wildcats, all act with such hostility.

You are also to locate and retrieve the badges or other identifying items of the group of three Iron-ranked Adventurers who are presumed to have died while investigating the cave. Siltsoil locals are also looking to see returned the body of a fisherman who is presumed to have died in the cave.

Lastly, you are to exterminate and burn to ash any hostile animals you encounter, as these are believed to be infected with some behaviour-altering contagion.

Reward fee: 1600 Crowns

Lars-Albert

Deputy Guild Master of the Hekkenfelt Branch

"How did you manage to get a hold of this quest? Aren't you still Iron rank?"

Ciana steered them around a bend in the forest path and they began to slow down as they started down a cliffside path towards the distant water of the great lake.

“They practically begged me to,” Ciana told him. “It seems that after their Gold-Ranker killed himself in public, there has been external pressure from the Head Office in the capital for them to shore up the Hekkenfelt Branch, starting with going through unresolved quests, of which it seems they have quite a few. It seems they are low on capable Adventurers and what few they have a worked to the bone already, so, given our ability to quickly resolve investigation-type quests, they thought this one fitting for us.”

Jakob nodded. “It was a good find.” The mention of a contagion, not to mention an unearthed cave sealed for a long time, smelled strongly of Grandfather’s machinations. Though Jakob had no clue what exactly could be the root of animals going crazy.

“And they’re paying us sixteen-hundred crowns,” Ciana replied. “You could buy a house for that kind of reward!”

“We have no need of coins,” Jakob replied. Heskell who was running alongside them grunted in agreement.

“Well, I do! I’m tired of stealing everything I want,” she argued. “And remember, you said I was in charge of keeping us concealed from seeking eyes!”

“I suppose there is a sense to what you’re saying.”

Octavio was bleeding for dozen superficial cuts, but his constitution and faith were stronger than the Wrathful Demon’s feeble claws and blades.

They locked weapons again, his two swords holding back the Demon’s two clawed and powerful fists. The two limbs sprouting from its back kept reconstructing themselves whenever Octavio let off pressure, but he was tiring fast and the Demon seemed possessed of bountiful energy, almost seeming to grow stronger with every wound he inflicted.

With a powerful kick, Octavio was sent flying away, but as he travelled, he began an incantation, realising that this foe was beyond even his ability to destroy.

As the Demon leapt after him, the appendages on its back regrowing, he carefully intoned the words, not even pausing as he tumbled head-over-heels and collided with the lone standing wall of a bakery which had become a smouldering ruin after having been set aflame by the scalding winds.

He finished the final two verses as he got to his feet:

“Take this devourer of Thy children to kneel before Thy throne of purity and punishment!”

“Reveal to this foul beast Thy just ways and cleanse it of its corrupting seed!”

It was always a risk to reword existing incantations, but his Lord had not failed him thus far, and he held an unshakeable faith in the justice of the Eight Saint.

The Wrathful Demon was only a few paces from reaching him and he lifted his swords, coated in a waning light, preparing to continue the fight, but then, from one moment to the next, a pillar of light fell upon the Demon. Its snarling and distorted body slammed into the barrier formed by the light, which burned so bright that even Octavio had to shade his eyes, while the impure monster within was letting off long streamers of black-and-crimson smoke, while its carapace of hardened blood, flesh, and bone fell off in large chunks.

“WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME! I WILL DEVOUR YOUR SOUL! YOUR BODY! YOUR MIND!”

“You are blessed by the Eight Saint. Rejoice in the justice that will punish you, for it will be the holy waters that will reforge you and cleanse the sin from your bones.”

Small child-like hands started sprouting from beneath the Demon, who remained trapped within the pillar. They kept growing upwards and grasping hold of its foul body, numbering quickly in the hundreds after just a couple seconds. Before long, there were so many of these long-limbed child hands that the creature beneath was totally obscured.

A strangled threat emerged before the hold of the thousands of arms tightened their grip and started dragging the Demon into the floor from where they had spawned.

Octavio stared at the scene all the while, until the pillar started to shrink and fade, leaving behind no sign of the Terror that had plagued his city for over a full day, killing upwards of three thousand civilians and men of his Elite Corps, not to mention the only man of the rank of Earl.

He had defeated this unexpected scourge, but he had lost too much in the process. This took his war with Helmsgarten to a different point. That they had sent such a foul monstrosity to soften up his beautiful city prior to their invasion was a thing Heimdale and Lleman could not ignore, for it violated all the treatises that previous apocalyptic wars had established as a result of the devastating outcomes.

Octavio raised his bleeding palm towards the sky, sending a flare of light into the air, and, minutes later, a joyous roar echoed across the city.

They had lost a lot this day, but they had just won the coming war. Providence had delivered them the impetus upon which their neighbouring countries would aid them and lend credence to Octavio's claim that Helmsgarten had become a hotbed of sin. Even the Pope, the ever-cautious figurehead of their faith, would be beholden to him now, his public downplaying of events now being the very thing that condemned him.

He walked over the where the Demon had stood when his improvised exorcism had taken hold. He stooped low and with his still-glowing swords, wane though their light had become, carved the eight-pointed star into the limestone street, first burnt by hateful scalding wind and then cleansed by the pillar of his Lord's pure light.