

## 14 - The Worst Type of Monsters

It had been a sombre affair, watching the body be slowly consumed for fire until just the bones and wood ash were left behind. For one brief moment I wondered if I ought to collect his ashes, as they might be considered a Sinner's Ashes, though I pushed the consideration from my mind as the abhorrent impulse it was. That being said, I did find a large vase that I swept the ashes into, along with the bones, before handing it to Cecilia. She said that she would see to it that he received a burial. Then she left the old Margrave's room and I wondered if I would ever see her again. It was probably for the best if I didn't.

"What happens now?" Lukas asked. He was sitting on a cushioned footrest and balancing an empty bottle of the cold fruit tea I'd finished on his index finger with impressive deftness.

"Now we turn the quest in," I replied. I'd used Sumi to look through the East Wing and there was no sign of the Teruterubōzu-looking Shade, so I felt confident in saying that we'd pulled off the Exorcism.

"Can I come?"

I blinked in surprise at the question. "I don't see why not, but won't Colleen be upset if you go missing?"

"She says she doesn't really care where I go," he replied and it made my chest hurt to hear.

"You know, I don't want to get your hopes up, but I think you should try the Role Assignment at the Guild."

"Really? I've always wanted to be an Adventurer!"

Rana looked at me seriously. "*What* are you doing? Don't give him false hope like that, it's cruel."

"You can't see it," I told her, "but he has a very strong aura. To my eyes he already looks like an Adventurer."

"Natives can't obtain a Role," she replied simply. Her voice wasn't mean or cruel, but there was an ironclad certainty in it that didn't invite room for *maybe* and *perhaps*.

"Why not?" I asked her, genuinely wondering.

"Why should I know?" she replied. "But it just doesn't work *that way*."

"I think we should try it," I said stubbornly.

"Try and it fail and you'll be the laughingstock of the city."

"What's new there?" I asked. "Not like anyone took me seriously before."

She let out a sigh. "It'll be detrimental to your reputation... but I suppose you're an accomplished Exorcist with two Exorcisms under your belt, so maybe it won't matter if people think you're eccentric."

I highly doubted two Exorcism Quests made me anything as fancy as 'accomplished', but I had a sense that, if the Role Assignment was based on the auras I could see, Lukas had a shot at becoming an Adventurer. Granted, he was still a kid and would need a steady hand to guide him, not to mention a competent teacher, but surely it was better to let a mischievous and adventurous soul like his soar free, right?

"Lukas," I started and the boy stopped balancing the bottle on his finger and looked at me as though I was the only thing he could see. "How about we meet in front of the Adventurers' Guild around noon?"

"Okay!"

"But first, I need you to go tell Colleen that we have finished with the Quest and will be taking our leave."

As the blonde boy ran from the room to go find his mistress, I carefully collected all the Sacred Corpse Ash back into its pouch, before leaving the room alongside Rana. We took our time getting down the many stairs, as her broken ankle made the steps painful for her though she took it in stride.

We walked out the front door of the East Wing and I took in a deep gulp of fresh dawn air. Beads of morning dew covered the garden in the courtyard like a thousand jewels and reflected off the first questing rays of sunlight that broke across the sky.

By the bridge stood just a lone guard, someone different than the two we'd seen the day before, but his aura was much the same and, from the glare Rana shot him, I was sure that it was a fellow member of the Mercenary Guild. After we passed him and went out towards the Noble Ward, I couldn't help but feel like eyes were tracking us the entire way.

When we neared the Guild Ward, Rana told me that she would go to the nearby Church to find a Priest to heal her ankle. I promised her that I'd pay her back what it cost from the Quest Reward.

"Let's meet back at my apartment," she said as a farewell and I just nodded lamely in response.

It felt like quite an awesome thing to have been able to exorcise a spirit without Master Owl holding my hand. Although, by his own words, it had been the kind of quest most suited for a new Exorcist and I reckoned that, aside from the pretty horrific consequences of screwing-up the exorcism, he was

probably right. Still, without the knowledge of the Encyclopaedia and what I'd learnt from Hamsel's Rest, I would've probably suffered a lot of injuries, or perhaps even been killed.

*But maybe it's not so bad to feel like I did something amazing?* I thought to myself as I crossed through an alleyway that lay three-or-four streets from the Adventurers' Guild.

Suddenly the sound of boots running caught my attention, and I turned around just in time to see a fist being swung my way. Before it could connect and I could even register what was happening, my attacker was flung against the nearby wall. But no sooner had he been thrown aside than a second man came at me. Then a third and a fourth.

Each were repulsed in turn by Armen, whose autonomous defence kept me from harm and threw them away against the walls of the narrow alley.

"Fucker has some kind of familiar!" one of them yelled, and his voice triggered some recollection in my mind, though I wasn't sure from where exactly.

One of them, a man with spiky leather armour swung a bat at my head and the bat shattered into a half-dozen pieces thanks to Armen's powerful hands. Realising that I would quickly run out of energy before they gave up, I started running down the alley, while Armen covered me. But then two came at me at the same time and one managed to trip me up, before the Wraith slammed him face-first into a wall, knocking him out cold.

*I don't care if you have to hurt them bad, but don't let them get to me!*

**"As you desire."**

The next man to come at me, while I got up from the ground, was picked up by his arm and tossed head-over-heels back the way I'd come, but he quickly recovered.

*This is bad, they're all Adventurers or Mercenaries!*

Each of them had prominent auras. Two were red, meaning Vanguard, and the other two were auburn and yellow, which I didn't know what meant, but they were clearly all high into the physical Attributes and all I had was Armen to protect me.

The yellow-aura one came for me next and my familiar grabbed his punching arm in such a way that when he pulled on it, it clearly came out of its shoulder socket, then he followed it up with what looked like a gentle palm strike, but which flung the man back against the Vanguard who was just getting up, sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Then the auburn-aura came at me with a series of jabs like a boxer and somehow managed to evade all of Armen's repulsing strikes. In the same moment, a terrible realisation hit me, as my vision began to blur.

*I'm out of energy.*

**"You should run,"** Armen advised.

A second later, the Boxer's fist passed through my Guardian Wraith and connected right against my chin, flinging me back into the nearby wall. I managed to stay upright until his second punch hit me in my stomach and keeled me over.

As I fell onto the ground, I tried to lift my arm and use my only offensive spell, but he quickly stomped on it, fracturing my forearm.

I heard someone come over to join him and then a powerful kick of a metallic boot connected with the side of my head and everything went black.

I came to sometime later. It was maybe early morning by then, although I couldn't tell. A sobbing whimper of pain was the only thing that came out of my mouth.

*Everything hurts.*

A migraine to beat all migraines stung painfully and I wanted to just bury my head in the dirt I was lying in, but there was a hatred in me at the injustice and cruelty that I'd just been dealt that made me struggle to my knees.

With a cough of dirt and blood, I spat out what must've been the fragments of at least four teeth and as I ran my tongue around my mouth, it felt all wrong, as though they'd kicked me in the mouth until all my teeth were broken.

It took me a moment to realise that my Spirit Goggles were gone... along with my rented Staff and Focus. But, worst of all, my bag was gone, wherein lay all the tools Master Owl had gifted me, as well as the Quest flier and my Guild Card.

"...Sumi, find those bastard..." I begged my Watcher familiar, but I had no energy and thus it did not respond to my command. In that moment I also did not realise that such a command would be a violation of my Pact.

"Gods, you look like a sack of shit," said someone next to me.

I recognised the voice, but part of me was just wondering if it was a concussion-induced hallucination.

Then an arm grabbed me around my waist and pulled me to my legs. It made everything hurt ten times more.

"Ah, they really did a number on you," he said, his warm breath flooding my nose.

"...They took my Guild Card," I croaked out. "And all my things. My money. My tools..."

"I'll get it back for you," Owl said.

"Why? How?"

"Cause I can. Although let's get you to a Priest first, huh?"

I wondered how he'd found me, but realised it didn't matter. I leant against him as he walked us to a Church.

When I was taken to a simple wooden slab to lay on while a Priest tended to my broken bones, shattered teeth, and concussion, the self-pity, pain, and fear all came in a tsunami wave that washed over me.

I sobbed as the Priest used his magic to spread a warmth through my body, restoring my ruined right arm and somehow even regrowing my shattered teeth.

Master Owl sat nearby, just watching me. I had no idea how much my treatment cost, but all I could think about in this moment was revenge.

"Stop *that*," he scolded me. "Go ahead and feel sad about your predicament, but don't become focused on the hatred you feel right now. An Exorcist that becomes wound-up in their negative emotions will follow a dark path in life. Don't become that person."

I couldn't simply let go of the anger, but I tried to push those feelings away, although they kept flowing back into my head, along with one simple question: Why?

The warmth moved through my body below the tip of the Priest's staff, while he ran it up-and-down the length of my body like a heat-lamp.

After having my body healed, I was given a washbasin and a cloth to wipe down my body, which was covered in dirt and blood. Then I left the stone church with Master Owl. He knew exactly where we were going it seemed.

"How much did it cost, my treatment?"

"Don't worry about it."

"I don't want to owe you anything."

"Bit too late for that, boyo. But I'll take the blame for this, as I did tell you to accept the Quest."

I paused. We were almost in the Market Ward by now and prospective vendors were busy setting up their stall for the crowds that'd arrive a few hours from now. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Did I get beaten up and robbed because of the Margrave's Quest?"

Master Owl sighed. "I thought it'd be a teachable moment, but you really are daft sometimes."

I frowned. "It's because of what I found, isn't it?"

"Of course."

"And you knew it would be a troublesome quest."

Owl nodded. "You should immediately assume foul play when you're told there's a Haunting but it's been left alone for years, despite being in the middle of a goddamn city..."

I thought back to the letter that Steffen had written to the old Margrave, Reis Litterby, wherein he confessed his sins. He had poisoned his Master over several months, because his life and that of Cecilia had been threatened by the goons of the aspiring Margrave, Finn Serelliam. That guilt he felt had, following his murder to silence him, led to him becoming a haunting ghost. The new Margrave must've known the cause of the Haunting, but had not tried to have it dealt with, except through private requests to Master Owl.

"Why did he want you to do the exorcism?" I asked, suspiciously.

"Because I have a reputation. Undeserved I'd like to add! But everyone thinks I'm some morally-bankrupt Exorcist who'll take on any job as long as the pay is good. Heck, I've even been propositioned to sic apparitions on some people or to curse them."

My frown deepened. "And you knew the Margrave, Finn, was one such shady character, but still thrust me into his claws."

"There are bigger things at play here than some egotistical and messed-up Margrave," he replied. "I need you to be Seeker rank for my current headache, so, yes, I sent you on a bad quest. But we Exorcists must learn to deal with the quests we're given, regardless of the circumstances."

"I want to expose this Margrave and see his head chopped off," I replied barbarically.

"As if that'll happen," he said. "The powerful stay powerful in this world. It takes a greater force to deal with them, and in Arley only the Prince is above the Margraves and petty Lords, but he doesn't give a shit how corrupt or evil Finn is, so long as his tithe of gold flows the same as ever."

I sighed and we continued heading towards wherever it was Owl was taken us.

Eventually he stopped in front of a random tavern. "There's only one way to get powerful people off your back," he said, then pulled out his dagger-like talisman and opened the door.

As I followed him inside, Armen hovered in front of me, though my energy was barely replenished, so he wouldn't be good for much.

Although the tavern wasn't that wide, it was deep, having a rectangular floorplan, with the bottom floor entirely used as a restaurant and bar. As we walked towards the back, I spotted four men laughing as they were eating some kind of grilled meat and slamming back frothing beers.

One of them, the guy who had punched me in the face, suddenly noticed us and got up from the table. The whole atmosphere of the tavern changed as his friends got up as well. Several people saw the writing on the wall and immediately left the back of the tavern to hover closer to the door, ready to bolt when things got crazy. The guy who stood behind the bar counter looked poised to make some comment like, "Take it outside!" but he was clearly not interested in drawing the four men's ire.

As the Boxer stalked towards us, each of his steps landing heavily on the floor, Master Owl said in a calm voice that belied the intense fury that I could feel practically radiating from him: "My apprentice here seems to have lost some precious items and I hope you four gentlemen might be able to help locate them."

The Boxer didn't say anything and went straight for Owl with a rapid jab, only to be stopped by an invisible wall. His eyes widened in sudden terror, as though he saw something the rest of us could not, then his body was simply torn in two, sending blood and intestines raining all over the floor, furniture, and his friends.

One of them, the one who I recognised as having the yellow aura and whose arm Armen had dislocated though it had since been healed, screamed something and pulled a sword from his belt and charged at us, but then Owl pointed his talisman at the guy and said, "Repel."

An invisible force took hold of the guy and then sent him flying backwards into the table they'd all been sitting by a moment prior. Before the other two could pull out their weapons and come at us, Owl ran the pointy end up his dagger talisman across his left palm and spilled his blood on the floor, before saying:

*"Feast."*

A heavy pressure came over the tavern and the temperature dropped significantly, while the blood on the floor began frosting over. Then, for one terrifying moment, the creature he had summoned flickered into reality as it manifested: It was like a frost-blue shadow made physical and given life. It had an enormous maw within which were a thousand teeth running down the throat, as though anything it swallowed would be chewed all the way down to its stomach. Its lower half was legless and it supported itself on arms with enormous many-fingered hands, which dug into the floor as it dragged its enormous frame across the wooden floor, leaving hideous rends in the panels underneath. And its eyes... there were so many of them that it hurt my head to think about and made me nauseous, but in the very instant all those eyes shifted to look at the target Owl pointed to, one of the Vanguard's, its entire body became invisible to me.

The man it was looking at seemed to be able to see it though, as he screamed and pleaded for his life. I tracked the rents in the floor and the heavy impacts its hands made as it moved towards the guy. Then, when it had locked him to a corner, he let out a final scream that was cut short, before his body simply vanished, leaving all his clothes and equipment behind and not shedding a single drop of blood.

The hideous and terrifying monstrosity became visible for a moment as its eyes moved about the room, but then Owl pointed his talisman to the downed yellow-aura guy who was still unconscious from the Repel. The creature became invisible again, and moments later, as furniture was pushed aside in its path towards the downed man, he too disappeared, leaving behind his clothes, coin pouch, and sword.

I saw as Master Owl pointed his talisman towards the last Vanguard and a moment later his screams filled the tavern, before he also vanished with a cry cut short, leaving behind only his equipment.

*“Banish.”*

The pressure vanished from the air and I let out a breath, realising I’d been holding it in out of pure terror. Master Owl reached into a pocket and extracted five golden crowns, then went over and placed it on the counter in front of the barman, who had soiled himself in fear.

“Go on and retrieve your stuff,” he told me. “It should all be here.”

I swallowed hard, then stepped around the frozen pool of blood and the Boxer’s severed body. Sure enough, amongst their possessions I found my bag, within which were all my tools. I found my Guild Card and the Quest flier on the remains of a different person than the one who had my bag, but my Staff and Focus were gone, perhaps having been tossed somewhere since they weren’t worth anything to the robbers. I also found my Spirit Goggles, which I put on.

For a brief moment, I thought I saw an aura around Master Owl, but then I blinked and it was gone.

It had been an aura of pure black.

He looked me in the eyes and said, “To keep powerful people off your back, you have to make them fear you.”