

## 19 – Demon Galleon I

It was maybe just around midnight when Owl woke me up and dragged me out of our room, barely allowing me to put my robe on. Before I could ask what was going on, we were outside and I saw the sky in the district beyond, as it lit up with wisps of unholy light. Owl continued to drag me by the wrist towards the arch that led to the Port District, but we were halted by guards before we could enter.

“No one is allowed inside,” one of the guards told us.

“It’s fine,” Master Owl responded, “we’ll just watch the fireworks from here.”

As we stood by the district arch, I saw the lights swell as they swirled from the distant port, before those lights condensed and took form, riding down from the heavens like vengeful ghosts wearing the guises of soldiers. Their armour and weapons did not match that of any guards I’d seen in Arley, as though they were of a past era, because the wraiths were dressed in padded armour and metal vambraces and helmets, wielding simple shields and metal-tipped spears. Some of them even wielded bows and shot ethereal arrows from the sky while ascending down into the district.

A lot of the ghosts never made it down to the ground, as spells flew up to meet them, along with arrows that shone with a golden light. Some were also caught in pillars of white energy or torn apart by invisible hands.

“Is it *like this* every night?” I asked, astounded.

“That’s right. I’ve never seen anything like it before. Certainly I’m no stranger to ghost armies, but to think that a single entity has the power to conjure these night-after-night, it’s unheard of.”

The guards around us were starting to get annoyed with our presence, so as soon as the lightshow ended, we were shooed away.

When we made it back to the room at the inn, Owl told me, “Find a Fighter familiar you like. You’ll be summoning and forming a pact with it before dawn.”

I sat on my bed, a frown on my face, as I leafed through the pages of the Encyclopaedia. Pretty much all the familiars labelled as ‘Fighter’ were dreadful-sounding and I couldn’t help but recall the story of how Owl had lost his eye to the ‘Crimson Nightingale’, nor could I forget the vision of his ‘Spawn of Nwetrou’ as it devoured the Mercenaries who’d attacked me.

Among the names of those I considered, were: ‘Writhing Prisoner’, ‘Priest of the Deep’, and ‘Formless Envoy’. Each sounded less difficult to manage than most of the other ones, but when I showed the entries to Owl, he commented:

“The Priest of the Deep will try to kill you or find a way to get you killed, so that’s a bad idea. The Writhing Prisoner hates forming pacts and will do *anything* to be set free, which includes killing you.”

“Awesome...” I replied sarcastically. “What about the Formless Envoy?”

“I don’t really know anything about that one, but it’s similar to the ‘Eye of the Observer’ and my ‘Spawn of Nwetrou’ in that it’s the offspring of one of the Old Gods. Some of them come with some bizarre requirements or tolls that may end up being pretty bad.”

I thought about it some more, then after twenty-minutes-or-so found another entry that sounded promising, based on the apparition’s behaviour that was listed both in the Familiar section and the Entity section.

“Corpse Tree,” Owl read aloud, nodding to himself. “I think that’d be a good pick.”

The Corpse Tree was a type of Revenant that was extremely rare to encounter in the wild, but which could be caused by a type of execution performed in this world where condemned men and women were hanged from a tree. Over time their flesh and souls would bond with the Hanging Tree and turn it into a living creature of their combined spirits. It was described as a tall entity with several legs and arms, which often had a single enormous eye in the centre of its body within a large gaping maw.

As a Hunter, it was described as territorial and vengeful, but was known to only target those who had condemned its constituent souls to death and it had even been observed guarding people, perhaps due to a lingering sentiment or something like that.

“I’ll choose the Corpse Tree,” I decided.

“Excellent, although, since you’ve chosen a Revenant, there are some requirements for summoning it.”

I read the description of the ritual and couldn’t help but furrow my brow. “How am I supposed to find all *this*...?”

The list went as follows: Remains of a Condemned Man; Putrid Flesh; Kindling of a Dead Tree; & Blood of the Invoker.

“Luckily for you, I always carry around some deadwood and aged meat.”

I didn’t want to know why.

“As for the Condemned Remains, your Sinner’s Ash will work.”

“I might need some help drawing this summoning circle,” I told him.

“You’re on your own,” he replied unhelpfully. “Though I’ll check your linework for you. Just so you don’t, y’know...” Owl did a slashed-throat gesture for emphasis.

I knelt on the floor of our room and got to work drawing the sigil described in the text. Hopefully I could wipe the remains off the floor and not incur a cleaning fee from the proprietor of the inn.

“Hmm,” Owl hummed to himself.

“What?” I asked and looked up at him where he sat on his bed across from me.

“Nothing.”

I sighed annoyed. “Just say it.”

“I was merely thinking that it may be a bad idea to summon the Corpse Tree into this room. I’m not sure how tall it will be.”

I looked up at the ceiling, we were on the top floor and had at least two-and-a-half metres from floor to ceiling. “Don’t you think we have enough room?”

Owl shrugged. “It might be fine.”

It was not fine.

After completing the strange summoning sigil with its head-scratching-bizarre design of overlapping lines and seemingly-random doodles, I had placed the three offerings in their allocated spots, before borrowing Owl’s knife to cut open my palm. Though I hesitated for a while, remembering the pain from summoning Armen, I eventually managed to spill my blood onto the Black Tallow Candle that served as the ritual’s conduit. Unlike when I summoned Armen, there was no invocation to read out loud, which I thought was odd, though it was possibly because I was summoning a Revenant.

The very moment that the summoning took hold, a massive creature emerged out of the floor and continued to grow-and-grow, until its enormous back pushed against the ceiling, making the rafters *creak* in protest and producing such an ungodly amount of noise that I was sure every lodger in the inn would awaken.

Though Master Owl had warned me against being too hasty with forming my Pact, I felt that time was not on my side, so I concentrated briefly, before extending my spirit outward to touch the hideous fleshy body of my summoned familiar. It felt like my body was gripped by dozens of hands as my soul connected with the entity I’d invoked with my blood.

*Powerful and fierce Corpse Tree, whose spirit is formed of those condemned souls that were hanged from your branches, and whose vengeful fury forgets no transgression. In exchange for an offering of my spirit and blood, lend me thine aid as a warrior and allow me to wield thy fury.*

*My foes will tremble at the very utterance of thy name.*

*I name thee Kabanenoki.*

The entity shuddered with some sort of glee as the Pact took hold. Just before I dismissed it with my Banish, I got a proper look at its horrifying visage.

The Corpse Tree had only a vague semblance to a tree, though its eight-or-more arms did slightly remind me of branches, albeit a nightmarish version. The middle of its body was a thick trunk-like pillar, where one lopsided and large slash of a maw gaped open with hundreds of bone-shards for teeth and a single enormous rheumy-and-bloodshot eye stared out from within. Each of its arms were twisted and gnarled, with a seemingly-random number of claw-like fingers each, as well as the impression of corded muscles under its fleshy exterior. The body was covered in a spongy and pustulant tough meaty exterior that lacked any sort of skin, as though the bark of the Hanging Tree from which it had been birthed was replaced by the soft tissue of the condemned who'd been hanged from it. The different donor bodies also resulted in a mismatch of colours, and was perhaps to blame for the way that the arms didn't seem to match, not to mention the odd sewn-together appearance of the three thick legs upon which the body walked. Altogether, the Corpse Tree was easily three metres if it stood upright, but thanks to the confined space it was kind of just stuck between the floor and ceiling.

When my new familiar vanished, it was as though the whole house breathed a sigh of relief, given how there followed a drawn-out *creak* as the ceiling settled back into its normal place.

"I hope you're naming your familiars something good," Owl remarked. "Although knowing you, they probably all have really obvious names in your mother-tongue. Like translating the name of the creature directly or something silly."

He must've realised that he hit the nail on the head, because he grinned triumphantly, before adopting a serious expression.

"I may or may not have mentioned this, but other Exorcists, Summoners, Spirit Callers, etc., can Banish your familiars for good if they know their names or even turn them against you if they're skilled enough. You don't want that to happen, trust me."

I figured it was like a password and now felt rather dumb about the names I'd given my Watcher and now my most dangerous familiar, the Corpse Tree.

"How do I change their names?" I asked.

"You can't. Just keep it in mind for next time."

"But why would other Adventurers want to Banish or turn my familiars against me?"

Owl shrugged. "Sometimes people will discard their morals if the reward is good enough, and sometimes they just want to watch the world burn."

I frowned at the image he was conjuring. "I thought Adventurers fought to help people in this world."

"If only everyone else was as naïve and sincere, then it might be possible," he mocked me. "You have to realise that a lot of people who come to this world have never experienced what it's like to have *real* power before and it can go to their heads.

"You may not think much of it, but we are able to call upon terrible creatures to do our bidding with, honestly, rather simple and easy tolls. That revenant you just summoned... do you even understand how dangerous it is? I've seen a Corpse Tree decimate an entire village. The way it fights is brutal and they're really difficult to Exorcise, requiring a full team of Adventurers, preferably ones with fire-elemental abilities."

I grimaced and wanted to, but didn't say, "You said it was a good idea to summon it!"

"Is it common for Adventurers to turn evil?" I asked instead.

"You're looking at things in too simple of terms," he answered. "It's not like someone considers themselves evil because their moral compass is out of whack. I've seen truly despicable acts justified by people I normally would consider good. So it's not a simple thing to explain. But you need to keep your guard up, because there are those who find joy in others' misery. Heck, there are even Exorcists who deliberately cause Hauntings, just because they see the people of this world as having no value other than as sacrifices."

I swallowed hard. When I thought about it, there wasn't really anything that stopped me from causing a Haunting. After all, it seemed to just require me to summon an apparition and then not form a Pact with it. And, with the knowledge of the Encyclopaedia in my hands, I could even cause a Haunting to naturally occur, just by setting up the right conditions for someone's death.

Suddenly, the thought of what my Exorcist Abilities could do in the wrong hands felt overwhelming and I struggled to find rest in my bed until dawn eventually came calling.

Owl and I were standing on a large pier that led to the Haunted Galleon. Along this particular pier, which was made to serve the largest possible vessels the city of Ochre might welcome, there were other boats that were larger or longer than the Galleon, but none were as imposing nor impressive.

From what I'd overheard, while standing behind my Mentor as his dutiful-but-silent aide, 'Fallow's Fortune', as the ship was known, had a distinguished history from the last war between the Principality of Arley and the nearby island nation of Goldentide. Following the war, wherein the Captain had died, Fallow I presumed though he was unnamed by the storyteller, the ship had been acquired by a rich merchant who wished to ply his craft on the open seas and its many cannons had been sold off. The vessel had been a favourite of Ochre's Lord, Peter Garfh, as, every time it arrived in port, it always brought with it trinkets from faraway lands, as well as peculiar art and sculptures.

Owl seemed to take particular note of this nugget of information and I remembered that the quest had mentioned that there were rumours about *something* having been brought aboard, like a Demon in disguise or some curse. I also recalled the descriptions of some entities in the Encyclopaedia, which mentioned that they might be caused by a cursed artefact and I wondered if such a thing could be to blame for this.

When our briefing was over, the person in charge went to fetch us the retinue of four Paladins who would accompany us inside the Galleon as we performed our investigation into the Demon.

Suddenly Owl grabbed my left hand, which sent a jolt of fresh pain through the wound in my palm, which I'd bound tightly with a simple cloth.

"I thought your Protector had regenerative abilities," he commented upon seeing that I still had the wound from the ritual earlier that morning.

"I don't think so," I replied, pulling my hand out of his grasp.

"He can talk, right? So ask him."

I almost argued back, but then realised that it was a silly impulse.

*Armen, are you able to heal me?*

**"Indeed. In life I was a Priest Crusader and a lingering fragment of my once-powerful healing magic is still under my control."**

I blinked in surprise, then my expression soured.

"If you can heal, then why didn't you do so after I was beaten up!?" I blurted out loud.

Owl grinned in response, but I paid it no attention, as my eyes were focused on the hovering wraith in front of me.

**“It requires a substantial amount of energy and you were exhausted of your energy at the time. Further, I have not been instructed to perform such duties.”**

I sighed in frustration. *How am I supposed to know you have such an ability if you don't tell me?*

**“I understand the confusion,”** Armen replied unhelpfully.

*I'm telling you now that I desire for you to heal my wounds unless explicitly stated otherwise.*

**“Understood. My priority will still remain on the prevention of such injuries, but I will ensure that I utilise my powers to mend your wounds when you are not under attack.”**

A weak glow started to envelop my left hand and I took off the makeshift bandage stained with my blood, just in time to see the wound knit itself shut as if my skin had come alive to mend the tear. The act drew a lot of energy out of me though, which was worrying.

“I'll be damned...” Master Owl muttered. “I think I can guess what sort of Wraith you've acquired. It's a former Adventurer, right?”

“He says he was a Priest Crusader.”

Owl tilted his head in confusion. “Huh. I didn't know that was a possible Specialisation for a Priest. Is he able to use his Heal on others? And does he have other Priest abilities like Cure and Blessing?”

**“I can wield Heal and Cure, but I do not have the ability to utilise these abilities on anyone but you,”** Armen answered before I could even ask. I was surprised that he could hear what Owl said as he had thus far only reacted to my words.

I shook my head.

“That's a shame. But still, what a rare find. If you ever grow tired of him and want a replacement, make sure you give me his name.”

“Not in a million years,” I replied with a smile.

“It was worth a try,” Owl replied.

A few minutes later, four tall and brawny men in polished plate armour came marching up to us. As expected, all four of them had yellow auras to match their shared Role.

The frontmost one stepped forward and said, “Master Owl, my name is Holm and I am the leader of your guard. It is an honour to be able to aid you in dealing with the foul Demon that has beset Ochre.”

The way he spoke made him seem courageous and trustworthy, but the way his aura trembled made me think that he was absolutely terrified. It wasn't obvious from his chiselled face what exactly his age was and I had no idea if it was common for people to become Crusaders or other Advanced

Roles around Harleigh's age, though I got the impression that all four of these men were in his age-group.

Holm had curly black hair and intense pale-blue eyes, while the other three looked like triplets, with only differing eye colours separating them from each other, since each had semi-long dark-blond hair and angular chiselled features.

"These three are—"

"I don't need to know your names," Owl interrupted harshly. "Follow my orders and don't get killed, that's all I need from you."

Holm paused, but then nodded simply.

"Understood."

His aura was the same as before, but the men with him seemed to already be angry with my Mentor.

*He needs to work on his people skills...*

Before we could even step towards ramp that led to the upper deck of the Galleon, Master Owl handed each of us a rectangular vellum paper strip with strange squiggles on it.

"What are these for?" I asked before Holm or his gang could.

"They're Wards. We're dealing with a Demon here so it will seek to assault your mind, either to possess you or trap you in a mind-loop. These are to prevent that... for a time. If you start to see the paper tarnish, then it's time for you to leave the ship. Understood?"

"Understood," the four Paladins said in unison, while I just nodded lamely.

"Make sure your weapons are ready. If you haven't already, you should gather a waterskin of Holy Water from the Priest over there," Owl told the four, while pointing to one of the many Adventurers who made up the cordon of the Port District.

"When are you gonna teach me how to make *these*?" I asked as the four men left us for a moment.

"Ward Crafting is no simple thing to teach," he replied. "But, maybe after the Exorcism is done I can at least show you how to get started with learning it, though a lot of it you will have to discover for yourself."

Moments later the Paladins returned.

"Alright, I want two of you as vanguard and the other two as rearguard. Make sure to keep your Ward on the front of your body so the rest of us can see them. If you start to feel weird, even though your Ward is in good condition, then you need to leave the ship immediately. Make sure to keep your mind fortified and strong, because a weak and insecure mind is like sweetmeat to a Demon."



—Patreon-Exclusive Copy—  
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka "Dosei")—

I swallowed hard. We were finally going into the Demon's Lair.