

20 – Demon Galleon II

The ramp leading from the marbled stone dock to Fallow's Fortune creaked below the heavy steps of our Paladin guards, as we made our way up to the top deck of the ship.

As one, all of us froze when we stepped out onto the dock. A heavy weight had settled on each of us, and one of the Paladins let out an uncomfortable grunt. It felt like the intense pressure that I'd experienced when the Remorseful Betrayer had become enraged, but ten times stronger. My entire body was aching from just the raw presence of the Demon, while a whining tone filled my ears like tinnitus.

"Alright, we're all still alive," Owl remarked. "That means I didn't screw up the wards."

Holm let out a chuckle, though I could tell from his aura that he was as scared as his men.

The top deck of the Galleon was full of merchandise in barrels and boxes, which had been discarded in the middle of being transported off the ship. At the front of the vessel was a small raised section that led to the fore mast after climbing a ladder, as well as a small room where might be stored a few things, though which seemed to have held the fore cannons in the past. The deck we were on was about half the length of the vessel itself and behind the main mast next to us was a large section that raised up to a half-deck one floor above from where the ship was controlled and where the last of the three masts stood.

I'd never been on a ship such as this before, although it reminded me vaguely of my school trip to Hiroshima, where my class had taken a large ferry to visit Miyajima. I wasn't great at the rocking motion of the waves, so I was glad that we were at least connected to dry land here, although the waves from the ocean still made the vessel bob ever-so-slightly in the port.

"There's a ladder down from the deck hatch, but it's locked. There are also ladders down within the aft cabins and the upper gun-deck," Holm told us. He had apparently studied the layout quite well, though it seemed that Master Owl was likewise informed, as he nodded in agreement.

"We'll go through the cabins," Owl said, but as soon as we took our first steps in that direction, the deck lit up with that light I'd seen the night before.

A moment later we were surrounded by spirits that looked like soldiers.

I was just about to summon Kabanenoki, when Owl put a hand on my shoulder. "Let them handle it. That's why they're here."

The four Paladins spread out and used their golden-glowing weapons to dispatch the ghosts with ease, though one of them caught an ethereal arrow to his breastplate and stumbled back for a moment, before his comrade cut down the archer responsible.

When the ghosts were gone, Holm commented, "Good thing they're weak to Blessed Weapons."

I gaped in awe at their martial prowess. They'd taken down nearly twenty ghosts in an instant, without anyone being injured.

Maybe it only gets dangerous when we go deeper? I wondered.

Assured that no more ghosts were lurking on the deck, Holm led us towards the aft cabins. The door was already flung wide and within we found an upturned mess of papers, art merchandise, and furniture, as well as stains of blood, although no bodies nor foul stench to go along with it.

In fact, the whole ship smelled faintly aromatic, like a teashop. *That* smell was all I could really detect, which surprised me, given the powerful smell of the sea that'd been ever-present in the city up until now.

Behind the mess that greeted us was a staircase that led to the half-deck above, and past that was a ladder that led down into the bowels of the ship.

Master Owl pulled out his Energy Stone and I mimicked him, while we both swept it around the cabin. Mine pulsed faintly, though I couldn't tell what exactly it was reacting to. Without a word, Owl pushed past the staircase and ladder to the main cabin further back. Holm and the three Paladins quickly followed, shoving me along, while ensuring that our rear was protected.

Any help you can give me here, Armen? I asked my Protector.

"My forte lies not in the investigation of spirits," he replied.

It was worth a try, I guess.

When we caught up to Master Owl, he was rummaging through letters or something, his Energy Stone returned to its pocket.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, while the Paladins formed a ring around us to guard the entrance.

"If you're gonna protect us from ghosts, you need to understand that they can move through walls," Owl told the Paladins, and they immediately changed the pattern of their defence, while shifting closer to us. "And to answer your question, Pipsqueak. I'm looking for clues about what the captain brought on board."

"You're sure that it was something he brought with him?"

"It has to be," Owl replied.

"Wouldn't it be easier to just go deeper and find out what's causing the Demon to manifest?" I wondered out loud.

"No."

Before I could ask why, Holm interjected, back turned to me, "From all the reports, the last two Exorcists vanished after they ventured down into the ship. The same was the case with the parties of Paladins, Priests, and Crusaders that were sent in to exterminate it..."

"Basically," Owl continued, while flicking through a leatherbound journal, "the Demon's domain doesn't truly begin until the lower deck."

I didn't get the time to reply, because suddenly ghosts began crawling out of the walls and floor. The Paladins immediately got to work cutting them down, but this time it was much harder, since we were in a cabin and the apparitions could just move through the objects in their path.

Suddenly Armen moved to my flank and intercepted a spear jabbed at my neck, breaking the ethereal weapon in half, before slamming the wraith into the wall. A moment later one of the Paladins slashed his blade through the pinned ghost.

Thanks.

"There are too many for me to guard you from effectively."

Focus on just intercepting their attacks. The Paladins will kill them.

"As you command."

Just then one of the four men let out a pained sound, and I turned just in time to see him swipe his blessed blade through a spear-wielding soldier who'd emerged out of the floor behind him, jabbing its weapon into the back of his knee.

Holm went over to aid his comrade, while the tide of soldier ghosts seemed unending. I looked to Master Owl for aid, but he was looking through the journal and letters as though there was nothing to worry about.

I bit my lip as I moved closer to him. The Paladins likewise moved closer, while the injured one leaned on Holm's shoulder and muttered some kind of incantation.

As over three dozen apparitions emerged from the floor, walls, and doorway, the injured Paladin finished his spell by shouting: "Consecration!"

A golden light formed in a wide circle around him on the floor and created a barrier that not only kept the ghosts at bay, but seemed to actively harm them when they touched it.

"Have you found anything yet, Exorcist!?" Holm yelled at Master Owl.

"Still searching," he mumbled. "Keep up the good work."

After what felt like an hour, but which might only have been ten minutes, Owl announced that we were leaving.

“Holm, if you would, please clear the way to the ramp for us.” The Old Exorcist was carrying the journal with him, as well as some sort of ledger, while I was just sticking to him lamely.

As one, the Paladins each started chanting separate incantations, following some predetermined plan that I was not privy to.

“Repulse!” shouted the first, sending a golden wave of energy out in front of him, which pushed all the ghosts by the Consecration barrier several metres back.

Holm lifted his shield out in front of him, then slammed his blade into it with the flat side and yelled, “Spirit Bane!”

To my Spirit Sight it was as though an aura imbued his shield and continued to send out rings out light that, when it hit the ghosts, made them all recoil in pain.

The last Paladin ran forward while swinging his blade into any ghost that was in our way, then a second one followed suit, before Owl pushed me in the back and I followed after them. My Mentor, the injured Paladin, and Holm all brought up the rear, and the six of us ran out of the cabin, past the ladder down and the stairs up, out onto the deck and towards the ramp.

When we were only a couple metres away from the ramp that led back to the pier, the horde of ghosts broke free of their momentary stasis, before swarming us from below the deck and within the aft cabin. I waited by the ramp and watched as the wraiths were almost about to reach Holm and the injured Paladin, and then, because I had no other clue what to do, I pulled out the Blessed Golden Bell. When I rang it just once, its sound echoed outward like a church’s call to prayer, echoing impossibly around us and making all the charging ghosts cower and freeze. They broke free of the spell a moment later, but it had given the rearguard enough time to catch up before we all ran down off the ramp together.

With our feet on firm ground again, the four Paladins took up formation and waited for the wraiths to charge us from the ship, while Owl and I hid behind them, but they simply vanished.

Owl mumbled something.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I said, ‘Good thinking, using the Bell like that’.”

“Oh,” I replied, wrongfooted by his praise. “I just thought that since they looked like Wraiths it might work.”

Owl nodded. "I've been too focused on the fact that a Demon is behind it and hadn't considered that its servants might still have the weaknesses of Wraiths, even if they also somehow share the Demon's weakness."

"But we're sure it is in fact a Demon?" I asked. "No one has actually seen it, right?"

"No one has seen it and survived, that's true, but *that sensation* we felt when we stepped onboard is a trademark of theirs, and the weakness to Blessed weapons and powers is a dead giveaway. Of course, there's the possibility that it's one of the kinds of entities that defy categorisation, in which case, we're totally fucked."

I frowned.

"But your action with the Bell gave me an idea," he revealed. "But we'll need more Sacred Corpse Ash for it, plus a lot of extra holy water."

"What should I do?"

"Rest for now. We'll go back in, four hours from now."

I nodded and made to leave, but then couldn't help but ask, "Why am I here? It seems like I can't do anything to help."

"You may be an utter novice, it's true," he started, twisting my words, "but I'll need your aid for what comes when we delve below-deck. I've fought Demons before and they're a handful, let me tell you, so having you nearby will be a boon, not to mention, it gives me peace of mind while I investigate."

I couldn't tell if he was speaking the truth or not, and a sceptical part of me thought that I was perhaps being used as bait again.

"Speaking of investigation," he added. "I discovered something interesting in the main cabin."

Owl showed me a page from the journal he had brought along:

Day 28 of our voyage to the isles

The weather is fair, though the waves are no less punishing than usual.

The meeting with the Benefactor in Goldentide went well and he was glad to hear that profits for this year would surpass those of latter years by quite a margin.

As a token of my hard work, he showed me a unique and beautiful piece that he said my esteemed Lord Garfh would be delighted to add to his collection. The sculpture is of

such uncanny likeness that I at first mistook it for a petrified boy, and the pearl clutched in the statue's arms is of such brilliant and mesmerising lustre as what I have never before seen.

This is turning out to be a good year. Finally, Fallow's Fortune is looking like a sound investment, even father will have to acknowledge that now, especially when Ochre's Lord and retinue view my business and acquisitions of cultural artefacts with such rapturous excitement.

The rest of the page went on to talk about some particularly-troublesome venereal disease that the author had not yet managed to find an ointment for, followed by a long string of curses aimed at the brothels and prostitutes in some island town of Alegria...

"We're looking for a statue then?" I asked, confused.

"The description matches an object noted in the ledger and in later pages the Captain goes on to state that his crew were starting to experience nightmares wherein the statue came to life."

"And it was meant as a gift for Peter Garfh?"

Owl nodded. "There had to have been malicious intent behind the gift. No doubt the 'Benefactor' named in the journal is seeking to disrupt trade in Ochre, as well hopefully killing its Lord. And given that the statue was picked up in Goldentide, it's not too far-fetched an idea."

"Because they were once at war with Arley?"

"That's right, glad to see you paid attention to the history lesson earlier."

"How do you weaponise a Demon like *this* though?"

Master Owl's expression changed into something very ominous.

"You don't, not normally."

"Then how?"

"There's only one way someone could pull this off and it requires an ability that you've yet to use: 'Contain Spirit'. But that only explains how someone was able to bind a Demon to a statue or whatever for the voyage from Goldentide to Ochre. The person responsible would also have needed to summon a Demon... an act that is deeply forbidden. Most of all the entities that we Exorcists are forbidden from forming Pacts with are Demons of one form or another."

"Wait... you're saying that another Exorcist like us is behind this?"

“Either that or this ‘Benefactor’ conveniently found a cursed relic that *just happened* to break down and release its Demon within as it hit the port of Ochre... But my guess is that it’s an Exorcist behind it, one with a *particular* Advanced Role.”

“What Role is that? First off, I don’t even know anything about Advanced Roles for Exorcists. Æmos told me that they’re not well-known, because so few manage to reach the level necessary.”

“Tell you what,” Owl started, “You go take your rest and I’ll explain it to you when you get back.”

I wondered if this was a strategy to get me to forget about it, so I said, “I’ll hold you to it.”

He grinned at me, in *that* frustrating manner of his.

“Do you know where I can find Rana and Lukas?” I asked.

“If they’re training still, then I’d recommend checking out the Guild.”

His grin spread further and then he tapped the lens of left eye.

I frowned. Of course he was watching them...

Sounds of clashing blades sounded from the Adventurers’ Guild courtyard that lay behind the Hall itself and I moved around the side of the stone edifice to see if it was Lukas and Rana sparring.

“That’s it!” someone said encouragingly and the voice sparked recognition in me, making me pause. “Focus on your footwork,” the person continued, while a series of *cling* and *clang* sounds echoed from beyond the courtyard wall that I was next to.

Sumi, I need your sight.

The ink-stain Watcher appeared beside me and shared its eye with me. I concentrated on maintaining my own vision alongside the shared one in my left eye, while trying to use my subconscious to control the familiar, but it was draining. I had no idea how Master Owl was able to maintain his, presumably, great number of Watchers with such ease, because it felt like I was trying to split my brain in half.

Instead of covering my right eye with my hand, I just tried to squint it slightly instead and that seemed to help stem the mental drain. Meanwhile, Sumi was lifting above the wall to stare into the courtyard from where the sounds of sparring and encouraging instructions still rang out.

As its grey-washed sight revealed the courtyard to me, I saw that it was similar in layout to the one in Lundia and I saw that three figures were in a small arena that was demarcated with an elliptical knee-high wooden fence. Further back was a Brawler practicing on a wooden dummy with a dozen branching arms, a bit like those used by Wing Chun martial artists back on Earth. There was also a

Priest overlooking a spell-caster who was rapid-firing shards of ice at ranged dummies, similar to the ones I'd practiced my Repel on.

I moved Sumi closer to the arena, where a red-haired woman in full armour sat atop the wooden fence, while a blonde teen repeatedly attacked and disengaged from a tall armoured knight, who was deflecting every strike of the boy's shortsword and off-handed knife. The movements of the dazzling knight were simple and precise, as though he was a veteran of a thousand wars, while the boy fought like a street urchin whose life depended on it.

Letting out a sigh, I cut my connection to Sumi and continued walking along the wall of the courtyard, until I came to the brass gate that I pushed aside, before entering. As the auras of the six people within became visible to my Spirit Sight, it confirmed what I'd already known from Sumi's spying: it was Rana and Lukas, as well as Harleigh and his party.

I saw the way that Rana watched Harleigh's movements and nodded along to his instructions, and it made a ball of envy and anxiety form in my chest.

That night we shared had nothing to do with me... I realised. She just used me to try and forget about him... it's so clear to me now...

In that moment, I realised that I wanted to believe in Master Owl's characterisation of Harleigh, if only because believing he was a lying and backstabbing bastard was the only way I could justify the emotions inside me.

"Do not let yourself be overcome with envy."

I sighed. I can't help it, Armen. I think I love Rana, so this is painful to watch.

My Protector, who was hovering in front of me, actually seemed to nod in response, before he said, **"Unrequited love is painful, but sometimes you may wrongfully infer a truth that does not exist."**

Look at her, she's clearly in love with Harleigh! It's obvious to anyone.

"Is he looking at her?"

Well... no. But there's clearly something between them!

"I believe you would be best served asking her directly for an answer. Perhaps things were different in my time, but I do not believe she would have shown you such affection just because it was convenient or because you could serve as a distraction."

I scoffed. I thought we weren't going to talk about that night ever again.

Before he could reply, Armen suddenly moved around to my flank and shot his arm out to halt someone. I turned around on the spot, just in time to see a man avoid the defending strike Armen sent his way.

"Woah... *what* did you just try to do to me?" the man asked. I recognised him as the Brawler in Harleigh's party. He was almost two metres tall, had very wide shoulders, rose-tanned skin, and his arms were like tree trunks of corded muscle, though his lower torso was narrower and his legs almost spindly, giving him a very top-heavy look. His facial features were sharp like a statue made of steel, his eyes were black with faintly-grey irises and his hair was a shock-white buzzcut. Most peculiarly, his ears were pointy at the top, like those of an elf from fantasy stories.

"You snuck up on me," I said as calmly as I could, trying not to imagine what he could do to me if I tried to take him on in a fight. "My familiar acted accordingly and tried to protect me from you."

The man grinned, exposing large canines and pearl-white teeth. "I was merely wondering why you were watching us so intently. It's not nice to stare, y'know."

"An odd way to approach someone, if your intentions were innocent," I replied.

"I'm not sure I like your tone, *Exorcist*." The way he said the last word was full of venom and hatred.

I took a step towards the arena that Harleigh, Lukas, and Rana were still training in, while oblivious to me and the Brawler's tense chat. The Brawler made to put a hand on my shoulder and I felt my energy drain slightly at Armen's deflection, thought the Adventurer avoided it deftly again.

When he tried a third time though, my Protector seized his wrist and flung him over my back sending him tumbling across the gravel of the courtyard, though the Brawler quickly recovered and, as he got up, he pulled two axes from his belt. The clothes he wore were casual, a baby-blue sailor's shirt and comfortable-looking shorts of some soft fabric, but his casual attire was overshadowed by the brutal weapons he pulled to his hands.

"**How do you wish to proceed?**" Armen asked me, for the first time seeking my direct command before he took any sort of action.

Just keep doing what you're doing, I told him, drawing the Focus from its pouch on my belt.

As the Brawler charged towards me with thumping steps and axes gripped fiercely in his hands, Harleigh and Rana, as well as the Priest and Elementalist by the range, finally seemed to take notice.

"What are you doing, Gilliam!?" Harleigh yelled, but the Brawler didn't even flinch at his name being called.

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

While he came closer and Armen repositioned himself in front of me, I tried to calmly imagine the energy building up within my body and flowing down my arm into the Focus I held.

As he was just three metres from me, I lifted my right hand with the Barrier Ring Focus and then I muttered the words, "Repel."