

22 – Demon Galleon III

When I returned to the pier, I only found Holm and one of the Paladins there. They were sitting on a raised bit of stone that was a minimalistic attempt at either a table or a bench.

“Where’s Master Owl?” I asked them.

“He went to get something from the Church,” Holm replied. “Think he said it was a type of Ash.”

“Sacred Corpse Ash,” the other man elaborated. I recognised him as the one who’d gotten injured in his knee, though he seemed better now.

“How’s your leg?” I asked him.

“It’s fine, thank you.”

“I never got to know your name,” I said and added, “I’m Ryūta.”

The Paladin reached a hand out and said, “I’m Frode.”

I grasped his hand and he looked surprised for a moment, then Holm let out a chuckle.

“It’s always curious how Otherworlders greet, don’t you think?”

“I’m not sure I follow,” I responded confused.

Frode got up and then grasped me by my forearm instead of my hand. “This is how we do it where I’m from,” he explained.

“And where’s that?” I asked. “I’m from Earth.”

“Jörð, we call it, though I believe it must be the same world as yours. At least I have been told in the past that my world may be referred by such a name as well.”

“Is it possible we’re from different eras?” I asked, surprised that such a thing might even be possible. But, then again, we were in a world full of magic and monsters, so it was hardly a stretch to imagine those brought here against their will might hail from different worlds.

“Which King ruled the northern territories in your world?” he inquired.

“King?” I asked, confused. *This guy must be from the middle ages or something.*

“Did you have technology in your world?” I continued.

“Of what sort?” he responded.

Suddenly I was wondering if the words I were using were somehow translated into words he could comprehend, since he no doubt also had the Omniglot ability. Unfortunately, I didn’t know a lot about history to properly narrow down what era he might be from, let alone what country. And his appearance might be a red herring, given how this world could alter one’s visage.

“For example, were your lamps lit with electricity?”

He shook his head, slightly confused. “Ours were lit by fire.”

“It was the same in my world,” Holm replied. Again I had to wonder what the word ‘Electricity’ was translated into for them. Perhaps it sounded to them as though I’d asked if lightning was used for lanterns in their world.

“What world are you from?” I asked him.

“Midrealm, specifically the Winter Isles.”

“Midrealm?” I repeated. *That’s the same as Rana’s world.* “Do you know about the Thorn Dynasty?”

Holm nodded. “They’re the rulers of the Summer Isles.”

There was another thing I wanted to ask of them, since it was something that’d been floating around in the back of my mind ever since discovering that Otherworlders came from worlds other than Earth as well.

“Wasn’t it hard being brought *here* without a say in it?”

Holm shrugged and Frode just replied, “It’s more comfortable in this world.”

“I see...”

“You’re not from a world steeped in war, are you?” Holm asked.

“I suppose not. Everything was pretty safe, at least in my country. There were wars in other countries, but before coming here I’d never been in a fight for my life.”

Frode nodded as though he knew this already. “Otherworlders from peaceful worlds tend to have a harder time fitting in here.”

“My nation,” Holm started, “We were always at war, either with the creatures of our world or neighbouring kingdoms. The first time I held a sword was when I turned five.”

This explains so much... Suddenly my sense of feeling like an outsider, even amongst outsiders, had a good explanation. I had to wonder if Master Owl’s world of Oblus was the same as mine or not. He had said that it was ruled by a Meritocracy, which might have been conducive to peace or something close to it, after all, he seemed very denigrating of the political systems in this world.

“I’ve gotta say, though, you really drew the short straw,” Holm remarked. “It must be tough being an Exorcist.”

I nodded. It definitely wasn’t as glamorous as being a knight in shining armour, plus the way that Harleigh’s party had treated me had reminded me of how most people viewed my profession.

“Is it fun being a Paladin?” I asked.

“Like everything, it has its ups and downs. Generally, it feels like a blessing. In my own world, I had little worth and was expected to die for my Queen, but *here* people look up to me. At times it feels unearned and I’m at a loss on how to live up to their expectations...”

Frode cast his friend a weird look. “I never knew you felt that way.”

“You don’t feel the same, Frode?”

“Not really. To me, this just feels like one long glorious battle. I’ve never been so happy to have a purpose before. If people look up to me, why would I doubt their perception of me as being anything but true?”

“If only I could have your simple optimism,” Holm replied with a grin, clapping on friend on the shoulder.

I couldn’t help but smile at their comradery, although it reminded me of Renji and I, which made a wave of melancholy wash over me. *I wonder how he’s doing...*

Before I could ask anything else, Owl appeared with the two other Paladins, each of which were carrying a large sack of what I could only fear were the cremated remains of Sacred Corpses...

“Ready to get back in?” he asked with a devious grin. “I have *something* I want to try.”

While the four paladins protected us, we lined the length of the deck with Sacred Corpse Ash, as well as the doorways and ladders to the upper deck and raised area at the fore. It took maybe ten minutes, wherein we were consistently under attack from a ceaseless horde of ghastly soldiers, but this time around the Paladins were less sparing with their abilities, tearing through over two-hundred of the wraiths in the time it took us to lay down the tremendous amount of Ash.

“Phew,” Owl said as he finished the final line. I traced the entire thing, ensuring there were no gaps in the Ash, then returned to his side.

“It should be good,” I told him.

“What did you do?” Holm inquired. “The ghosts... they’ve stopped coming.”

“The deck should now be a safe place to retreat to,” Owl told him without really answering his question. “But make sure that you do not disturb the lines of Ash. Any breaks in the lines will allow them to enter this area.”

“What now?” I asked him.

“We give the cabins the same treatment.”

I frowned. It would be a lot harder to work in the narrow rooms, plus it would be impossible for Armen to follow me without having to break the lines. Then I realised that I could simply dismiss

him and summon him back after crossing the lines... it would be a pain, but it beat having to create gaps to allow him to follow me, since that also opened up the possibility of the wraiths getting in.

Owl used his Blessed Golden Bell as soon as he stepped over the line of Ash and entered the aft cabin with the upturned mess of furniture and sprays of blood coating the floor and walls. Following the reverberating echoes of his bell, the Paladins spread out, as Owl and I quickly made lines in the doorways, windows, and before the staircase leading up. We then moved on to the ladder down, which we surrounded with a ring of Ash, before moving to the larger main cabin in the back, repeating the procedure.

"Alright, this should hold," Owl commented.

"How much Ash did we just use?" I asked him. "Will we have enough for the lower deck?"

"We're not doing this down there," he told me. "Demons have too many tricks to deal with Sacred Ash, so it'd be pointless to attempt. Plus, we need to stay focused, because it'll try to exploit any opening it finds."

I looked down at the ward on the front of my robes. Owl had safeguarded them after our first visit to the ship and had returned them to us before we boarded it the second time. I had to wonder just how useful it was though. It was just a slip of expensive paper with some writing and symbols on it.

It was strange though, despite my Omniglot ability, I couldn't read what was written on the vellum slip.

"Are we finally going down there?"

Owl nodded gravely, but then put on his usual grin. I suddenly recalled how Rana had noticed that his smile never reached his eyes, and I couldn't help but look at his goggled face and realise that she was absolutely right.

If I could see his aura, would I be able to tell his actual emotional state?

"Is everyone ready?" Owl asked. The four paladins looked concerned, but each nodded in turn.

He looked at me and said, "Don't forget your Soul Barrier skill. It's your best defence against a Demon trying sink its claws into your mind."

"I'll do my best," I told him, remembering exactly how he'd taught me to use the ability... I'd promised myself that I wouldn't have anything else to do with him after *that*, but look where I was...

I let out a sigh, then mimicked the other five as they pulled out their waterskins full of holy water. As one, we all dumped the water onto our heads, letting it drench our clothes and hair, or, in the case of the Paladins, cast a warm gleam to their plated armour.

"Alright, in we go," Owl said, and Holm hopped straight down the hole, skipping the ladder altogether. After announcing that it was safe, Frode followed behind him. Then Owl took the ladder down and I followed suit.

With each wooden rung I stepped down into the dark bowels of the ship, the heavier the invisible burden on my body became, and I realised in horrified dismay that what we'd all experienced after setting foot on the deck was but a diluted version of the Demon's oppressive aura.

As my feet touched down on the wooden floor and Frode lit a lantern he'd found, I did my best to stand tall despite the crushing sensation of the burdensome aura. Moments later, the last two Paladins jumped down the hole, landing behind me one after the other.

Owl went around inspecting our Wards.

"So far, so good," he said.

I grimaced. Alongside the intense aura, the scent of teashop leaves had grown significantly stronger as well, giving me a headache with its complex smell of sweet and herby aromas.

Come on out again, Armen.

The Guardian Wraith appeared by my side.

"**I find this place suffocating,**" the Protector commented.

Glad I'm not the only one.

After finding and lighting a second lantern that was handed to the rear-guarding Paladins, Holm and Frode led us down the cramped spaces below the deck. The way the light from their lanterns bobbed over the surrounding wooden walls and floor seemed quite strange to my eyes. It was as if the shadows reached for the light, rather than simply being pushed back by its glow.

"Repulse," said Holm, sending out a golden wave ahead of him. Surprisingly, the shadows seemed to move away, as though the holy power of the Paladin was able to dispel them. I then realised what had been odd about the lantern light, because the moment the encroaching shadows were repulsed, they glowed a lot brighter, like they ought to have from the beginning.

"The shadows are unnatural," I commented.

"We are in the Demon's domain," Owl replied. "It can control everything."

Our group of six split around the large pillar of the central mast, which pierced the ceiling and continued down through the floor. When we linked up on the other side of it, I noticed that something was slowly trickling out of one of Owl's belt pouches.

He saw me looking and answered, "It's on purpose. I'm leaving a trail of Sinner's Ash so we can retrace our steps."

The way he worded it made me think he was preparing to get lost in a labyrinth and not a linear series of rooms. No sooner had I thought *that* out loud than one of the rear-guarding Paladins let out a surprised gasp.

“Kat... he’s gone!”

We all stopped and looked back.

“He was just here,” the Paladin said, his face a mask of fear.

“It has already begun,” Owl said ominously. I couldn’t help but just stand there and gape. We’d been in the Demon’s lair for less than five minutes and already it had taken someone.

“It’s okay, Christian,” Holm told the guy, patting him on the shoulder. But I could see their auras and knew that he did not believe his own words.

“He still has the Ward,” my Mentor said. “If we can find him before it is destroyed, we can save him.”

They all nodded.

“But remember: our focus is still on finding the statue,” Owl continued. “Conserve your abilities for now, but if you get lost or taken, use them as much as you can.”

“He can’t have gone far,” said Frode encouragingly.

Owl shook his head though. “In a Demon’s domain, logic and reality are flexible concepts. For all we know, this space may be ten times as big as it truly is... It all depends on the strength of the Demon.”

I swallowed hard.

I don’t want to be here.

“**Leaving is no longer an option,**” Armen commented and I felt my heart sink.

After allowing for a couple minutes of recovering our spirit, Owl urged us on, but a sense of paranoia had fiercely gripped each of us and progress was slow. It also didn’t help that the ceiling was so low in places that even I had to hunch forward slightly to avoid bumping into the doorframes every time we passed into a new room. Strangely, some of the other rooms were over two metres from floor-to-ceiling.

While we walked in sombre silence, we passed crates of merchandise, which seemed full of everything from grain to artworks. A few of the crates held nothing but statues, while others contained carefully lined canvases in hand-carved frames.

We passed through another door and were then greeted by a three-metre-long pillar piercing the room.

“Are we already at the fore mast?” wondered Frode out loud.

“It’s the central mast again,” Holm replied, his voice full of genuine dread.

“We haven’t walked in circles,” Owl stated, “my trail of Sinner’s Ash would’ve been here otherwise.”

“Those crates are the same we’ve seen before!” I told them, inadvertently adding to the feeling of paranoia they felt. “It’s like the whole ship has looped...”

“There should only be six rooms spanning the lower deck,” Holm muttered. “But we’ve gone through at least sixteen.”

“Everyone, come here,” Owl said, and we all obliged. He looked over our wards, then nodded satisfied. “We keep going.”

“We’re supposed to go even deeper, right?” I asked.

“That’s right.”

“But we haven’t seen any ladders or stairs leading down yet,” I said.

Holm took on a look of consternation, then said, “There ought to have been one right here, next to the central mast...”

“Everyone, calm down. You are applying logic to an illogical place.”

His words had little affect on them, nor on me for that matter. It felt like I was stuck in a bizarre nightmare.

“*Help!*” a voice suddenly shouted from up ahead and I saw a spark of recognition enter the Paladins’ eyes. A second later the rearguard, Christian, ran off towards the sound, shouting, “Kat! We’re right here!”

“Stop him!” Owl yelled, but before either Holm nor Frode could react, the man had gone around the central mast and vanished.

There was a tense moment where the four of us looked at each other, after moving around the mast together and not seeing any sign of the Paladin, and it was clear that to the remaining two Paladins, their thoughts were on rescuing their comrades. But then they seemed to reach an unspoken agreement and looked to Owl for guidance.

“What should we do?” asked Holm, while Frode swung the one remaining lantern around, perhaps trying to drive away the encroaching shadows. Armen was hovering in front of me, and

though his blurred wraith body was hard to discern much emotion from, I could feel through our Pact that he was worried.

My Mentor seemed deep in thought for a bit, but then nodded to himself, before pulling something from a jacket pocket and tossing it into the air. I saw the object briefly as it tumbled towards the darkness ahead of us. It was like a small bone of some sort. From one moment to the next, a *thing* appeared out of thin air and chomped down on the bone with a loud *crunch*.

Holm and Frode both instantly drew their weapons, but Owl moved in front of them before they could attack his summoned familiar. He stretched a hand out towards it and it walked into the lantern light, before putting its strange head against his hand.

It was the Tracker he had shown me in Lundia: the Scenting Tongue. Unlike the first time he'd shown it to me, it was fully corporeal and visible without the need of my Watcher familiar. Its body was far larger than I remembered, being almost as long from head-to-tail-tip as a horse, with a standing height of a bit over half a metre. Its weird eyeless and nostril-covered head was no less disturbing than it'd been the first time I'd seen it.

An endlessly-overlapping chorus sniffing sounds emerged from its long head, while the slobbering tongue in its mouth continued applying saliva to its nostrils.

Owl patted the creature gently on its head, then, without turning to look at us, said, "These guys are immune to hallucinations and many of Demons' other tricks. It'll help us find a way down."

I saw Holm struggle to suppress a shudder, while Frode looked less concerned.

"*Hunt*," Owl then intoned, swiping his dagger-like talisman through the air once. I was sure that he gave it more specific instructions directly through his Pact-formed bond, just like I did with Armen, but we obviously weren't privy to those.

Immediately the Scenting Tongue began circling around us, while we each tried to watch the two ends of the seemingly-endless tunnel of the first floor of the lower deck.

It took only about a minute before the otherworldly creature had locked-in on a scent, and then, surprisingly, it started climbing up the mast to get to the ceiling, where it began digging into the wood.

"Is it trying to escape?" wondered Frode.

"No... I think it's showing us that we have to go up," Holm replied.

"Fascinating," Owl remarked. "I think I understand how this peculiar domain works now."

A moment later the Komodo-Dragon-like creature had torn through the ceiling with its destructive claws and a strange floor was visible above us. Instead of revealing the central deck of the Galleon that we'd entered from, there was instead a different deck with its own ceiling.

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

We each shared a glance at one another, before Owl asked, "Anyone bring a rope?"