

73 – It Lives in the Shadows

“I’ll go with you,” Rana told me, while Renji was going around the room, seeking volunteers for the group that would head to the Castle in Noble Quarter, with the dual purpose of killing the Flayed Noble and reinforcing the Prince’s army that was believed to defend the place.

Elye and Lukas had gone to a room in the basement and allowed themselves to be locked in. It seemed that underneath the Hall was a few cells that dated back to before the building was made available for the Adventurers’ Guild. The Elfin had promised me that she would look after the boy and despite her peculiarities, I knew that she wouldn’t let me down.

I looked Rana in her eyes and shook my head. “It makes more sense for you to join Renji.” What I didn’t mention was that she would likely not be much aid for me if the entity I was seeking was able to kill over a dozen guardsmen. Without knowing the specifics, given that no one had survived encountering the Haunter, it seemed very likely that it was of a sort that I was uniquely-suited to deal with, that is to say: an incorporeal being.

She frowned at my words and said, “If you get hurt, I’ll beat the crap out of you.” Then she pulled me into a kiss, before letting me go and addressing my familiar, “Keep him safe.”

“Of course. I would be remiss if harm was to befall him.”

After watching our exchange, the Branch Master came over, followed by three Natives who guarded him and a Spellhand that looked only a year older than me.

“We’ll take you to the Barracks,” he said and off we went.

I watched through my right eye as Renji, Rana, and their group of about thirty Otherworlders moved through Artisan Quarter. With a sigh I broke off the connection to my crow familiar in the sky and its countless clones spread all about the city. I couldn’t afford to spend my energy frivolously, because, while I’d been able to catch my breath and take a short rest, I had only recouped about a third of my overall essence, and who knew how much I’d need for what was about to come?

We were moving through Market Quarter, where bodies lay scattered everywhere, most of them belonging to the citizens that’d thronged the area. The vast majority of deaths were those who had no homes to seek shelter in, such as the beggars and vagrants, as well as those visitors who came-and-went daily to sell their wares. Already, rats and birds were feasting on the bodies, and the stench in the air was horrid.

“It took the guards too long to mobilise and secure this Quarter,” the Branch Master said. “Part of it was due to ineptitude, sure, but the biggest factor was the monster that suddenly emerged within their Barracks, preventing access to weapons and equipment for those not already on duty.”

As we moved down through a wide street lined with stalls, we had to manoeuvre around scattered produce and trinkets, as well as the bodies. What disturbed me most was how few of the Flayed Ones actually lay dead here. Unlike the other parts of the city, the concentration of guards and Otherworlders was significantly reduced here, with the main focus for the ones present being the city gate and not the civilians. The result was that the relatively-few Flayed Ones in this Quarter had been able to kill to their hearts’ content, dwarfing the number of fatalities of the rest of the city.

A few priests moved about the dead, murmuring prayers to lay them to rest. With the amount of death, fear, terror, and tragedy that Helmstatter had experienced, it would no doubt become a seedbed for hauntings if such preventative measures were not taken.

“Tell me about the Barracks,” I said. All that I knew about it was that it lay near the city gate. The Castle in Noble Quarter had its own, but it lay within the castle grounds. It was likely that other traps and infestations had been placed there, but since no reports had come from the Castle, it was anyone’s guess.

“It lies up against the city wall and allows for up to five-hundred men to reside within it at the same time. Normally, there are about a hundred guards on rotating shifts who stay in the Barracks. It has three floors and a sizeable basement. The top floor is for officers, dignitaries, and such, featuring meeting rooms and a priceless collection of wines, or so I’m told; the second floor is for the captains, and is where the weapons and equipment are kept; the first floor is for the guardsmen and is mostly several dormitories split into men and women; and lastly, the basement is where criminals are kept before sentencing.”

I frowned. That was a lot of room for a Haunter to hide in, and it brought back memories of the Shade in the Margrave’s Castle. Depending on what I was dealing with, it could become quite an arduous exorcism.

“And you said that there were still people inside?”

“One of the cooks managed to escape and *that* was all she reported, as well as the fact that fourteen people had been eaten.”

“But she didn’t see the Haunter?”

“Unfortunately no.”

“Did she give any other descriptions? How did she know people were eaten?”

“She said she saw remains, like bones picked clean, and that she kept hearing chewing and slurping sounds.”

Crap, this definitely isn't ringing any bells for me. I don't think this is an entity featured in my Encyclopaedia.

“It sounds like a type of Demon I once heard described,” Armen said. **“I believed they called it a Glutton. It was like a giant Goblin with a fondness for human flesh.”**

I shuddered involuntarily.

The people accompanying us were on high alert for any nearby Flayed Ones, but also seemed to be hearing the Branch Master's descriptions for the first time, with two of them looking on the verge of turning around and running. Fortunately for them, *I* was the one who had to deal with this...

“There's another thing,” the Branch Master added. “All the windows have been blacked out, and the cook said that every torch and flame was extinguished.”

I nodded. “Thank you, that's useful to know.”

Karasumany, I said internally, *Send some clones to the Barracks building, I wish to look inside.*

CAW! cried the crow in the sky above me, where it coasted on the wind.

One of the guards jumped at the sound, while his two friends laughed at his expense.

By the time we reached the Guard Barracks, I'd already lost four of Karasu's clones that I'd sent into the building through the only available access-point: the chimney. Before I lost connection with each of them, I'd seen nothing but darkness, though I'd heard whimpering and the loud reverberating sounds of crunching and smacking lips.

I was slowly building an image of the Haunter in my mind's eye, but it was not a great one.

“The mind is a powerful tool, but it can also be your undoing.”

I can't help imagining things! I fired back at him.

“I understand, but do not allow it to alter your perception of reality.”

The Branch Master was speaking with some guards that were standing outside the large Barracks building. A Priest was moving amongst them, overseeing the many injured who had gathered here, after repelling the Flayed Ones from the district. There were a handful of Otherworlders amongst them, one of whom had the aura of a Paladin. I recognised him.

He looked up at me as I came closer, but then quickly began staring at Armen, sizing him up.

“Who's your new friend?” he asked.

I leaned in close and said, conspiratorially, “He's my familiar.”

“**My name is Armen,**” he introduced himself.

The Paladin got up from where he’d been sitting and offered Armen his hand in greeting. “My name is Holm.”

“**I am aware of your name. I accompanied you aboard the Galleon, though you did not see me.**”

Holm blinked in surprise, then glanced at me.

Maybe don’t reveal that last part next time... he’s clearly weirded out.

“Is Frode with you?” I asked him, changing the subject.

“He’s still in Ochre. I came here as part of the escort of some Church officials who wished to meet with the Prince after his return. We arrived a couple weeks back.”

Armen suddenly reached out his armoured glove and golden light flowed from it and onto the side of Holm’s face, before quickly dissipating into his skin.

“What was that for?” he asked, more surprised than outraged. “I didn’t even realise you were a Priest, you have more the look of a Vanguard or Brawler, maybe even a Crusader.”

“**You had a concussion and your left eardrum was damaged. I healed both.**”

“...Thanks. I had no idea, though perhaps it explains the headache.”

I hadn’t noticed he was injured, I commented. After all, Holm’s face showed no signs of damage, though he did have a bit of blood in the corner of his left ear, now that I looked closer.

“**The Priest here is not powerful enough to deal with internal injuries.**”

Holm stuck a pinkie inside his ear canal and rummaged around, scraping some dried blood out with his fingernail.

“I guess I’m so used to concussions that I hardly noticed,” he said nonchalantly, while flicking the dried blood off his finger.

“Were you fighting the Flayed Ones?”

He nodded. “And I also tried going into the Barracks to help out, but *that* was a bad idea. Creature inside doesn’t react well to my magic.”

“Did you see it?” I asked eagerly.

“Hardly. Although I saw its eye. It likes to stare from afar. When I used Consecrate to try and make a foothold within its nest, it went completely mad and I was forced to flee with the Cook.”

I pulled out my Encyclopaedia, adding the info to the untitled entry that I’d begun filling out with the few noticeable traits, like darkness, aversion to light, and sounds of eating.

“Wait, what do you mean ‘nest’?” I asked.

“You’ll see what I mean if you go in there, but it is like the walls, floor, and ceiling is draped with webs of shadow. I wouldn’t know how else to describe it than to say that it’s like a spider’s nest.”

“Anything else?”

“The Cook kept saying ‘*It lives in the Shadows*’, and at first I didn’t understand what she meant, but I think I figured it out. After I entered the Barracks, I heard sounds from the basement, like something was chewing, then I heard those same sounds from the second floor. I initially thought that I was dealing with several monsters, but I’m pretty sure that it’s caused by some ability it has to immediately move between areas within its nest. As though it is literally living in the shadows.”

I didn’t like the many parallels between this creature and the descriptions of Demons in my Encyclopaedia that I was noticing. The ability to control a territory and manoeuvre through it quickly was very similar to the domain of a Demon.

“Did you notice any illusions or warping of the space around you?”

“Like with the Galleon you mean?”

“Yeah.”

He shook his head.

“I see...”

“Do you know what it is?”

“Not yet,” I replied, trying to sound like I would soon find out, though it was mostly bluffing. I was quite stumped to say the least. “I might have more questions later. Would you mind sticking around?”

“Of course,” he answered.

I left Holm and went over to the Branch Master.

“I need torches and such brought here,” I said.

“Have you figured out what we’re dealing with?” he asked hopefully. Several of the men around him looked like they’d been through hell, and I noticed a woman who was hugging herself tightly while repeating, “It lives in the Shadows!”

The Priest that was tending to them all was clearly exhausted and way out of her depth, but it seemed the best they’d been able to locate, given how most others of her Role were needed elsewhere.

“Not yet,” I told him, “But I believe that it is afraid of light. I also think I know where the remaining guards are hiding. I heard whimpering on the top floor when I sent my familiar inside.”

Armen left my side to walk among the injured. They were laid out on primitive bedding and had everything from minor wounds to amputated limbs. The Priest Crusader stopped by the side of a few,

casting a bit of his healing magic on them, before moving on. Though it consumed my energy slightly, I could hardly complain with him saving lives.

The Branch Master watched my familiar with surprised awe, while muttering, “We’ll get you enough torches to light up the whole city, if you just save the people inside.”

“I want twenty gold for this,” I told him.

His entourage and a few of the nearby injured looked at me with disgust, but the Branch Master didn’t miss a beat, “You’ll have it.”

I hated the way they stared at me and made me feel guilty, but I had no doubts that this Exorcism Quest would be dangerous and quite possibly out of my league, so I needed to be properly reimbursed for risking my life.

“Do not feel the need to justify your demanded price,” Armen said directly into my mind, as he continued walking through the rows of injured people.

I know, I replied to him, but all they see is someone who might be able to solve a problem demanding money to do what should be done out of the goodness of their heart.

“The world does not work that way. Even Priests demand payment for their life-saving art.”

I frowned. I knew he was right, but I hated that the world worked this way.