

78 – The Larder Keeper

“I think I understand your plan now,” Holm stated, “You mean to scare the beast back into his cave, while we prepare to release its living prey.”

“Something like *that*,” I replied. “But I have no idea if it’ll work.”

He nodded as though convinced. “If it acts like a beast as you say, then we will treat it as such.”

“It may also become enraged as a result. Some beasts fight back when threatened.”

The Paladin put a hand on my shoulder, “Have faith in your intuition. You’ve already saved many thanks to it.”

It was hard to accept the praise before I had proved my plan would work, so I instead looked to where the Captain was organising the ladders that led to the many windows. A total of eleven teams of two would enter. Most were non-combatants paired with a guardsman and they all had four torches ready to be lit and placed into the rooms they entered.

Thus far, exorcisms had always seemed like such delicate tasks that required precise knowledge and understanding of the Haunter in question, such that a perfect solution could be achieved with minimal danger. Of course, none of the exorcisms I’d taken part in had gone that route, but it was theoretically possible as I thought back to how I could’ve handled something like the Weeping Widow or Remorseful Betrayer.

This monster, however, had been planted here intentionally and it had been picked to be as difficult to get rid of as possible. I’d realised that in its natural habitats of ancient forests, it would never be able to claim as many hostages as it had. It seemed that its number of hostages, or perhaps the number of people it ate, were what increased its power and territory, hence why plopping it into a well-populated building like the Barracks allowed it to be such a troublesome foe. If I did find an exorcism guide for this creature, it would surely state: “*Burn down its nest and sacrifice its few hostages. It’s not worth the trouble to free them.*”

Whoever had chosen this creature must’ve known that the easiest way to get rid of it, burning down the building, would kill all its hostages, even if it got rid of the beast itself. It had been picked because it wasn’t simple to get rid of, but I would change that.

Exorcists normally worked alone or with a small team, but I had many volunteers willing to lend me their aid, so I could pursue a route of extermination that would normally require dozens of familiars manifested at the same time.

Are you ready?

“Let us burn it all down!”

Be serious, Sera. Many lives are at stake.

“Yes, yes, Exorcist, I will be sparing with my flames...” she grumbled compliantly.

With a glance across the gathered volunteers ready at their ladders and the torches they were carrying, I gave a nod to the Captain, while Holm stood behind me, ready to follow me in through the main entrance.

I’d figured out that it wasn’t the creature itself keeping the door sealed shut, but rather its shadowy webs. Thus, it should be simple enough to burn through the door and get rid of them, allowing for direct access to the nearby basement stairs that led to the cells, where I was sure the heart of its nest lay.

“Let’s move!” the Captain shouted and all the volunteers and guards moved up the ladders.

With a simple push of energy, I manifested Seramosa into existence before me, setting ablaze my right hand. I swept my hand through the air and the many torches I saw were lit ablaze, causing a few surprised yelps, while also making all eyes glance to where I stood briefly.

I didn’t revel in their awed and frightened gazes, but instead strode forward with the Condemned Ifrit walking next to me, a summer’s dress of soft waving flames appearing on her charred body, while the fire itself seemed to make her visage far more human, even if it was just a mirage.

Burn down the wooden gate, but be careful of any cocoons that might await on the other side, and make sure to stay near me, as the Haunter can break our communication.

With a gleeful screech, Sera hopped forward in a long leap, her blackened hands becoming massive claws of condensed fire that she slashed through the wooden double doors, turning them to ash immediately.

I knew I had enough energy in me to sustain her for about four minutes, so I didn’t waste any time following her inside. Despite having experienced it already, the moment I crossed the threshold and all outside sounds vanished, I briefly paused in apprehension.

As I had predicted, the entrance into the Barracks was covered heavily in black webs of shadow that ran in strands as thick as my forearms and absolutely coated everything I laid eyes on. Hardly any of the light from outside filtered in through the dark entryway behind me, but fortunately I had a manifestation of a torch as my companion.

Behind me came Holm, looking about him in surprise, while also unable to keep his gaze from wandering to where Sera floated nearby. She was captivating like a blazing conflagration and her beauty, albeit dangerous to touch, was hard to deny.

Immediately I saw the telltale eye of my quarry, as it stared at me from the darkness ten metres ahead of us, near to some overturned cots the guards would’ve used to sleep in.

Kōtama, prepare to light up as much of the building as you can!

As the full body of the Shadow Elemental was revealed by the Ifrit’s bright flames, it began charging towards me on its dark-furred limbs, producing three loud *thump-thump-thump* sounds in quick succession like the hooves of a ten-ton horse and bringing to mind the mythological image of the raging Minotaur of Crete.

Before Sera could strike it with her flaming claws, I shouted, “Unleash Gravelight Ring!”

From the ring on my left finger came an explosion of light that, for a brief few moments, illuminated everything in sight, erasing all shadows, even the ones that formed the body of the Haunter.

All the volunteers who had broken through the windows in the second and first floor would hopefully see Kōtama’s light and know it as the signal they had been told to watch for. Within seconds, they would begin burning down the cocoons that kept their friends trapped, while I pursued the monster to its lair.

“This way!” I yelled as I ran towards the stone steps that led down into the basement. Sera moved ahead of us, illuminating the darkness below.

As Holm and I reached the bottom, we stepped off the stone steps and onto a soft pillowy carpet of fuzzy blackness. It was as though the fur of the beast had been shed in such quantities that it obscured the floor below. However, in the Ifrit’s burning glow, this ‘fur’ quickly dissolved into nothingness.

Kōtama’s light, which illuminated the floors above and my immediate surroundings, began to blink before disappearing entirely as it ran out of energy. I still had the fire on my right hand, which served as a torch for Holm and I, but it was hard to not feel a primeval fear as our surroundings darkened when the Gravelight withdrew its power.

I fed more energy into my right hand, sacrificing a few seconds of longevity for a brighter glow. While we moved across the rapidly-diminishing ‘carpet’, I kept stepping on hard fragments under my boots, like errant stones brought in from outside, but when Holm stooped to pick up one such fragment, I saw that it was a shard of bone.

We continued through the dark, the light of my hand and that of Sera’s body catching on the metal bars of prison cells, which we walked past as we moved down the long winding corridor. There were cocoons in most of the cells, kept like food in a larder, preserved for later consumption. The way the webs trembled and shifted hinted of the living people trapped within. They would be rescued, but not until the monster was slain.

“*I see the beast!*” Sera suddenly exclaimed and flew ahead, moving around a bend in the corridor and robbing us of precious light. Holm and I immediately ran after her. Perhaps it was a natural instinct to stay with the brightest light we had, or perhaps it was our desire to finally lay to rest the nightmarish Haunter.

We came around the same bend that the Ifrit had disappeared past and found a large storage room marking the end of the cells, where the Ifrit was slashing away at the same monster I had dispelled with Kōtama’s light just moments prior.

As she swung her flaying claws through its body and cut off its dark limbs, new ones immediately sprouted from its bulbous body and flung back at her from her blind angles, though were incapable of harming her, as its darkness could not quell her light.

“Is that its true body!?” Holm yelled as he pulled out his sword and shield.

“I don’t think so,” I replied, looking around while feeding more energy into my Claw, increasing its brightness.

Kōtama, if you have a modicum of energy left, can you light up this chamber?

Though it was far from its normal golden glow, my ring released a pulse of light that lasted only a second, but burnt an image of our surroundings into my retinas, allowing me to manoeuvre around the fight between the beast and my familiar to reach a strange bone-white ball, which was suspended between the floor and ceiling with thin strands of darkness.

The moment I reached out for the ball, I heard the creature turn around and charge for me.

Holm caught the impact of one of its limbs against his torso and arms with a pained grunt, and I quickly swiped out with my Ifrit Claw, severing the strands that held the ball perfectly still in the air.

Sera! Burn this thing with the brightest flames you have! I yelled internally as I tossed the bone-white ball towards her.

I watched as the large yellow eye of the monster shifted to track its trajectory through the air, while it disengaged from Holm to try and catch it, but it was too late.

Seramosa flew forward and caught the ball in her arms, then released a flame so bright and loud that it stung my eyes and hurt my ears.

A warbling scream filled the air, making a violent tremor roll through the entire building.

Holm and I both tumbled to the floor, hitting the hard stones, while severely discombobulated from the veritable flashbang that my familiar had released.

And then came blissful quiet.

“I have been freed,” Armen said directly into my mind.

I released a sigh as I lay on the cold stones of the basement storage. Seramosa hovered in the air, still clutching the strange ball, while letting the volume of her flames die down.

A strange booming sound could be heard from above. I didn’t realise what it was until Holm said, from where he lay nearby, “They’re cheering.”

I smiled in satisfaction.

“It almost went according to plan too.”

Around us, the unnatural darkness had vanished in an instant as the fires of the Ifrit scalded the vessel of the monster. Part of me couldn’t help but think of the statue that I’d seen Owl bring out of the Demon Galleon, within which its soul was housed. It probably wasn’t far-fetched to imagine the same hand had been involved in this Haunting.

“We should go help the people in the cells,” I said, as I heard their panicked sounds from nearby.

Holm got to his feet and cast me a smirk from where he stood above me. “How about I handle that and you take a moment. We’re going straight to Noble Quarter after this, right? So take a couple minutes to regain your breath.”

“Good idea.”

Though one monster had been defeated, there were still plenty left in the city.

Lukas’ warning also still floated around in the back of my mind.

Once this is all over, I want a vacation.

“Let’s go to Mourn!” Sera insisted, dropping to the ground and dispelling her fiery attire as she came to sit next to where I lay.

“Lacksmey is nice this time of year,” Armen added from where he was.

We’ll take a vote on it, I promised them.