

## 23 – Demon Galleon IV

Frode had been the first to climb up the mast that pierced through the room, such that he could get to the hole that Master Owl's Tracker had clawed open. Once he was up there, he sent down a rope that Owl used to scale the mast with. Then it was my turn.

I gripped the coarse rope that we'd found conveniently lying nearby, feeling the pain in the soft skin of my palms immediately as I put all my weight on the rope and used it, in concert with my boots against the mast, to climb up through the hole. By the time I was just below the hole, I was already out of stamina and could feel my grip slipping, but then Frode reached his armoured arm down and pulled me up.

Holm was the last to climb up and he brought the lantern with him, so that we could see our surroundings. As the light pushed away the shadows for a moment, before they started encroaching on its glow again, I saw that the wood on this floor was gnarled and bowed in a lot of places, as though of some other sort of wood than what had been used on the rest of the ship. What's more, the ceiling was suddenly really far above us, easily twice the height of the room below us. The mast was still there, but it was twisted like the branch of a very old tree.

"It's like we're on a different ship," Holm remarked.

"Master, where's your Tracker?" I asked.

Owl pointed left through a doorway so short we'd have to crawl to get through it.

"How are you able to tell where it went?"

"It leaves a trail behind only I can sense," he replied.

Frode lifted the lantern off the ground where Holm had settled it, then moved it around a bit, before saying, "Let's follow it."

Owl and Holm nodded. I stuck close to them as they moved towards the tiny doorway, imaging that whatever had snatched away the other two Paladins was watching us from the darkness beyond our lantern light.

Frode was the first to crawl through the doorway, then Owl followed, before it was my turn. Frode had taken the lantern with him, so it was hard to see Holm, even though he was right next to me.

"Shout if you see anything," I told him, trying to sound reassuring.

He put a hand on my shoulder, then pushed me towards the doorway. "Don't worry. I'll be right behind you," he said.

I knelt down and felt for the opening, being careful not to bump my head against the low threshold, then I crawled through. I crawled on my hands and knees for a bit, then tried to lift my head when I assumed that I was through the doorway, only to knock into a low ceiling.

I froze.

"I thought this was just a tiny doorway," I called down ahead of me. When there came no reply from Frode and Owl ahead or me, or any response from Holm who was surely behind me, panic started setting in. Worse still, my voice didn't even echo, as though absorbed into the tunnel walls around me.

Up until now, I'd never experienced claustrophobia, but this was also the first time I'd ever crawled through a narrow tunnel in the dark. I immediately began trying to turn around, but it was too tight, so instead I began pushing myself backwards. A tremor of soul-clenching fear shot through me when my boots suddenly knocked into a wall behind me.

I began hyperventilating.

*I'm trapped!*

"**Do not be overcome with fear,**" Armen commented. I couldn't see me, but he was somehow still around.

*Where are you? I can't see anything.*

"**You are unscathed. I advise you proceed ahead.**"

I swallowed hard, but in the absence of any better options, I reluctantly began crawling forward again, scraping my hands and scuffing the knees of my pants as I hurried along the gnarled and rough wood under me.

The further I advanced, the narrower the tunnel became, until I had to suddenly lower myself down and almost drag myself forward, while pushing off the ground. The staff on my back, as well as my pouches and flowing robe-coat made it very troublesome.

I didn't consider that I might end up lodging myself stuck in too narrow a space, because my mind was completely fixated on the thought that this tunnel had to have an end.

While almost prone against the floor, I dug my nails into the wooden boards under me, all to get just a slight bit of purchase, and then, suddenly, as my fingers dug into the floor, it began to crumble, cascading out from my hands to all the wood around me, until suddenly the walls and floor around

me fell away. My body was then cast into freefall and it was as though I tumbled down a pitch-black ravine for kilometres.

I screamed myself hoarse as I fell farther and farther into that impossibly-deep space, tumbling head-over-heel, though there was no sound of rushing wind or anything.

With a painful impact, I collided with a body of water, my clothes soaked through instantly, as I struggled to stay afloat. I wondered if I'd gone blind, but before I could figure out the answer, it was as though a rope coiled around my right foot and dragged me into the water's deep. I was already too winded and exhausted to put up a struggle as it took me away.

*Help me, Armen!* I screamed desperately in my mind.

I blinked myself awake.

Renji was looking at me sidelong from where he sat next to me, but when he noticed I was awake, he cast me a grin. A second later the teacher came over, saying my name in a stern voice.

*Ah... I must've just dozed off in class again.*

My faceless classmates laughed at me being singled out for not paying attention—

**“Believe not the visions!”**

I was walking past neatly-lined Sakura trees, the petals of which floated through the air like snow. The wind was still rather brisk, but the sunlight was warm on my skin. It'd be a hot spring this year, I could already tell.

Renji was walking in front of me, talking about the latest game he'd stayed up all night to complete. I wasn't really paying attention to his explanation of his virtual struggle and ultimate victory, but nonetheless I was glad to be walking behind him like *this*. It was a very comfortable feeling.

Ahead of us lay the university we'd both gotten into, after a series of gruelling exams—

**“Come to your senses!”**

When I looked at my right hand, I saw that Kumi's fingers were interlocked with mine. I turned to gaze into her amber-brown eyes and she smiled at me, while squeezing my hand slightly.

We were sitting on a bench that overlooked a nearby river. She was telling me about all the new friends she'd made, as well as one of the female professors whom she admired. I smiled in return.

I never knew that having my one-sided love reciprocated after so many years could feel *this* rewarding. I leaned in and kissed her—

**“Wake up!”**

I shot upright, coming to my senses in a courtyard with large braziers casting their warm light on everything and which was lined with large flagstones. Above was a night sky full of bright stars. Nearby, the ocean waves slapped against a rocky shore.

*Did I fall asleep? What were those visions??*

I looked at the apparition in front of me, my mind taking a second to catch up.

“Armen?” I asked, confused. “Where am I?”

The Wraith was floating in front of me restlessly.

**“You need to run before they get you.”**

I quickly got to my feet and looked around. Past the courtyard lay a large estate with the same warm light shining from its windows. I turned to look towards where the sounds of waves came, and saw that from below the dark waters came a glowing mass of transparent humans. It took me a second to realise that they were the wraith soldiers that'd attacked us when we first set foot on the ship.

*When was that? It feels like weeks ago...*

**“No time to waste!”** my Protector said. I heeded his advice and immediately took off towards the estate. But my body was sore and I'd never been a fast runner, so I did not get very far before the horde of ghost soldiers was right on my heels. Instead of continuing my vain attempt to outrun them, I stopped and spun to face them, pulling a small blade from my belt and slicing it across my left palm.

*Kabanenoki, come forth and destroy my foes!*

From the very moment that my blood hit the flagstones, my tall Corpse Tree Revenant emerged out of the ground, its strange and gnarled multitude of arms immediately getting to work crushing and slashing into the glowing wraiths that came from the ocean in an endless stream.

While my Revenant kept them at bay, I ran to the front gate of the large stone estate as fast as I could. By the time I put my hand on the handle of the front door, my Fighter familiar was fully surrounded by a glowing mass of soldiers, who were hammering their spears into its hide, while

archers from the sides were pelting it with glowing arrows. Fortunately, my monstrosity was of a hardy sort, so it kept just mindlessly smashing the wraiths apart, though it was clearly a futile effort.

When I entered the estate and shut the gate behind me, I called Kabanenoki to me, commanding it defend the entrance. Then I ran through the entrance hall of the estate, where paintings on the walls and human-like sculptures tracked me with their eyes, while braziers around me glowed brightly.

I suddenly slipped on the floor, and when I looked up I was in a mossy stone tunnel shrouded in darkness. A second later, a distant lantern came into view, lighting up a narrow doorway and bringing with it the familiar faces of the two Paladins that'd disappeared.

"There's someone there!" said the guy holding the lantern excitedly. I remembered that Holm had called the guy 'Christian'. Next to him was the Paladin who'd been the first to disappear: Kat.

I stood up and waved to them.

"It's me!" I called.

The two Paladins looked at each other then carefully came towards me, both drawing their blades.

*What should I do, Armen?*

**"They may have been possessed by the Demon,"** the Guardian Wraith cautioned.

I pulled out my belt knife and prepared to make a second cut on my left palm to summon my Corpse Tree, but then saw that the first cut was gone.

*What's going on?* I wondered in confusion, while taking a step away from the two approaching men.

**"The Demon is playing tricks on your mind."**

*How am I supposed to tell what's real or not!?*

Then I remembered that the Sinner's Ash could be used for dispelling illusions and quickly dug my hand into the pouch on my belt, before flinging a handful at the two approaching men. It flew a lot further than expected, as though it was far heavier than ash had any right to be.

Like a wind wafting away a pile of leaves, a sense of change overcame the whole scene before me. On the floor lay Christian, dead from a wound in his torso and neck, while the other, Kat, was staring at the bloody sword in his hand. The hallway had changed too, becoming the familiar sight of wooden lower deck of the Galleon.

Carefully, I moved closer to the two Paladins.

"Are you okay?" I asked Kat.

He immediately turned towards me and I saw in the light of the lantern by his feet that the Ward on his chest was charred completely black. His eyes were wild and inhuman.

Armen deflected the bloody blade as it was swung at my head, disarming the Paladin in the same moment, sending the weapon flying off to the side, before violently shoving the man aside.

I picked up the lantern and then ran out of the room, not giving the deranged Paladin a chance to follow me. While trying to put as much distance between us, I remembered that Master Owl had told me to utilise my Soul Barrier. I had thus far not heeded his advice, but I stopped for just long enough to pull out my Barrier Ring Focus, and then did my best to try and send my energy into the tool. It was hard to do while also focusing on moving though, so after making it to the next room and making sure I wasn't being followed, I concentrated as best as I could and was able to conjure of a simple image of a bubble surrounding my entire body.

I had no idea if it was working or not, but did get the feeling that the oppressive aura of the Demon eased off a little. After the insanity I'd just gone through, I allowed myself a sigh of relief.

"Any idea what to do now?" I asked Armen.

**"If this is the real world and not the one made by the Demon's powers, then perhaps you can find a way out."**

"What about Owl, Holm, and Frode? They should still be in here somewhere."

**"Those who cannot help themselves cannot help others."**

I frowned, but knew he was right.

Not knowing what else to do I moved forward ever so cautiously, trying very hard to maintain the image of my Soul Barrier in my mind. It surprised me, but I actually worried about Master Owl. It was hard to tell if he was out of his depth here or not, since he rarely let any sign of his true emotions slip, but it was clear that the Wards he had made were insufficient, because when I looked down at my own it was charred black, just like Kat's had been.