

17 – My Party

I awoke within Rana's naked embrace sometime the next morning. It took me a moment to realise that the events of last night hadn't been some fever dream, but had in fact been real. Never in a million years had I imagined *it* would feel like *that*. I'd also always imagined that I'd be the taller person, but I couldn't say that I disliked the way she had taken charge. For a 'first time' it had not been as awkward as I'd feared, and I looked at her sleeping body for a while, uncomprehending of my situation.

Maybe an F-tier in Luck doesn't mean what I think it does...?

I shut my eyes and just revelled in the moment.

If I die now, I will have no regrets.

Although I'd prefer not to die...

... Wait, are you able to hear this, Armen?

"My apologies, but I have no way to ignore your thoughts. They enter into my mind with excruciating clarity."

Oh god... does that mean?

"Unfortunately, yes. I believe it will be in our mutual interest to pretend I did not overhear your every thought."

I grimaced. *A Pact such as this with a sentient being is quite an awkward thing...*

Eventually Rana woke up and went to the kitchen to get something to drink. I followed behind her lamely. She gave me a smile, but we didn't talk about last night at all as we shared a breakfast of eggs and sausage.

I remembered belatedly that the Jeweller had promised to have my Spirit Glasses ready by dawn, so I told her that I'd meet up with her back at the Guild Hall, like Master Owl had requested before we parted ways after dinner yesterday.

The walk to the Jeweller's store in the Commerce Ward was tense and fraught with paranoid fear that, given my recent good fortune, I was due for a calamity, but such a thing never manifested and I made it to his store in one piece.

"I am quite proud of the final result," he commented on his work. "The design you drew was quite brilliant, though I must say I've never thought of such a frame for spectacles before."

I held up the pair of glasses he had made. It was a fairly standard design I thought, but when I'd seen the few models on display in the Jeweller's store, as well as the pair I'd seen Æmos wear, it was clear that this world had a far more archaic idea of what glasses were. Back on Earth I hadn't ever worn glasses myself, but my mother wore them at home, so I had grown used to see them up-close my entire life. However, the design in this world were bizarre in that many had no limbs that could rest on the side of one's ears, nor did it have a proper way to rest on one's face, rather, they had a triangular nose-support that settled high on the nose-ridge, which I doubted was comfortable for prolonged periods of use.

"I didn't come up with the design," I admitted, "it's just very common in the world I'm from."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Lundia, and Arley in general, is not a great seedbed for the wisdom of you Otherworlders. If you travel north of Arley's border to the Kingdom of Lacksmey, you'll find that a lot of technology brought by your kind has been implemented into the governance and daily routines of people there." He sighed. "I miss having easy access to ice..."

"Why did you come here then?"

The Jeweller threw a hand in the air, kind of like a shrug, before saying, "The climate here is nicer and there's more work for someone like me. The big cities in Lacksmey are all very competitive in the crafting markets, while there's only two Jewellers here in Lundia, and the two of us have no need to fight over customers, because there's plenty here."

"Do you think there'd be work for an Exorcist like me in Lacksmey?" I asked, putting on the glasses. The Jeweller nodded self-satisfied when he saw that they fit me perfectly.

"Arley is rife with Adventurers because this is where you all seem to appear, but used to be that Otherworlders appeared in Lacksmey until about a hundred years ago, so they still struggle from the aftermath of losing access to cheap labour for menial and dangerous tasks. They've developed a fairly robust Explorers' Guild since, but only you lot seem to have access to magical powers, so any imitation without those powers will be lacking. Of course, many Adventurers travel to Lacksmey because it is full of opportunity and they find their work rewarded greatly. So, in short, yes, you'd no doubt be swimming in work. Exorcisms cannot be performed by anyone but an Exorcist after all."

"I see. I may just have to try it out sometime."

"You'll certainly find far less people suspicious or hostile towards you," he remarked. "If you have not been outside of Lundia yet, then you might not have realised that the treatment of Otherworlders here is the kindest you'll find in Arley."

"Why do you think people here are so distrustful of us?"

“Who can say? Suppose not all people are welcoming towards strangers, but I wish it’d change. I’d like to be able to drink ice-cold beverages again...”

I chuckled politely, though it did feel odd that people in the Principality of Arley didn’t like people like me, despite relying on us to keep them safe.

When I reached the Adventurers’ Guild half an hour later, Rana was standing outside, arms folded and staring menacingly at anyone who glanced her way, while wearing her full plate, with her shield attached to her left arm and her sword on her hip. Next to her stood Master Owl and Lukas.

Owl took one look at me and let out a huff. “Glasses, huh? Goggles are still superior.”

“I think they suit him,” Rana commented, which made me smile.

The Old Exorcist put on a lopsided grin at her words, which I found to be annoying, though I ignored it.

“Can I try them?” Lukas asked excitedly.

“Yes, but be careful with them.”

He put them on, though they were slightly too big for him. I was sure that in just a few more years he’d be a head taller than me. “They’re nothing at all like glasses the guy on the second floor wears,” he said, disappointed.

I put the glasses back on after he handed them back, then looked to Master Owl. “Why did you want us to gather here?” I asked him.

“Because we’re going to Ochre and you’re all coming.”

“Even Lukas?” I asked.

“Me?” he chimed in, surprised. We’d been telling him that he needed a mentor, so I felt that we were betraying his expectations.

“Rogues are valuable,” Owl said, then upon seeing our worried expressions added hastily, “Not in *that* way. I mean, a Rogue is a good support to have for your Party. They’ve got ‘Trap-Detection’, ‘Lockpicking’, ‘Lurk’ to spy on people or set up an ambush, as well as ‘Foresight’ which warns them of dangerous situations, plus they can be a decent addition to any Party’s arsenal. I’ve already had to swat away eight separate teams that wanted to scout him.”

I frowned. “Wouldn’t he be better off with a conventional team?”

Owl shrugged. “You found him, you decide how to use him.”

“I think the choice should be left to Lukas,” I replied.

The blonde boy looked between us, then just said, "I had fun in the Castle, so I want to follow you."

"You know you don't have to, right?" Rana said.

"But I want to," he insisted. "You have been really nice to me and you believed I could be an Adventurer."

"Alright, fine," I said, "But we need to get him a proper mentor."

"I can teach him what he needs to know," Rana said. A pang of envy hit me, but I shoved it aside. It was no use being petty over something like *this*.

"You said you knew a Rogue in the past, right?" I asked.

"Yeah... he was a member of my Party before I joined the Mercenary Guild."

The way she referred to him in past tense made it pretty obvious that the guy was no longer among us. "What happened to him?" I asked, but she shook her head.

"Maybe I'll tell you some other time," she said.

"Alright kiddos, we'd better get going. A carriage-ride to Ochre will take at least three days, maybe five if the weather takes a turn. The more days we idle, the worse the situation will be when we arrive."

"We ought to buy some resources for the trip," I said. Owl and Rana both gave me a look as if to say: "We're counting on you for that."

I let out a sigh of defeat, then added, "I'll go buy some stuff, then I'll meet you in the Market Ward by the carriages."

"Attaboy," Owl said with a grin.

"I'll come with you!" Lukas decided and together we left to find food that wouldn't spoil for the duration of our trip, as well as something to slake our thirst.

We linked back up with Owl and Rana, and I just managed to overhear the tail-end of Owl's haggling with the carriage-driver. It cost fifteen silver crowns for each of us, but he got away with paying him an even fifty for all four of us, arguing that one was still a kid. When I asked him if he wanted us to help chip in, he told me not to worry about it. The way he had acted today and yesterday made me wonder if his past actions of taking my forty silver to pay for his injury and making me pay Rana's one-gold retainer were meant as lessons, rather than him being miserly.

When we were some hours into the journey, I asked Owl if he had the quest flier for the Exorcism in Ochre and he seemed to vacillate between hiding it from me or showing me, in the end he reached

into a pocket and brought out a neatly-folded square vellum paper and handed it to me. I had no idea that they even printed quests on such expensive paper, after all, a single page of vellum was over four silvers in a lot of Lundia's stores, so it seemed a waste.

I gaped in a mixture of surprise and horror, as I read the quest info:

<i>‘The Demon Galleon’</i>		
EXORCISM QUEST	TYPE: <i>Calamity</i>	RANK: <i>Savant</i>
<p><i>Lord Peter Garfh of Ochre requests the aid of a veteran Exorcist of high standing in the Adventurers’ Guild to deal with a Haunting of extraordinary difficulty and complexity that is disrupting the port of Ochre and causing an unrest in the populace of the sprawling city.</i></p>		
<p><i>Little is known of the entity that plagues the merchant galleon known as ‘Fallow’s Fortune’, though it did not manifest itself until the vessel reached the port of Ochre, which seems to suggest an intelligent apparition. There are rumours that it was brought about by a malevolent curse, but there are also rumours that say the captain picked up a stranger from a foreign port and who turned out to be a demon in disguise.</i></p>		
<p><i>The Guild of Ochre, along with the Church, have their hands full containing the entity within the possessed vessel, as it spews forth a vast horde of malevolent spirits at midnight every day, though these are weak to Blessed Weapons and the unique powers of Crusaders, Paladins, and Priests.</i></p>		
<p><i>There is no telling if the daily attacks will eventually break through the cordon placed around the galleon, but it seems clear that if nothing is done then trade disruption will be the least of the problems.</i></p>		
<p><i>Given the fact that two Exorcists of Eminent Rank have succumbed to this entity already, the Adventurers’ Guild has decided that no Exorcist may attempt the</i></p>		

Exorcism alone, though the assistant may be of Seeker Rank, so long as the one accepting this quest is Savant or higher.

REWARD: 80 Gold Crowns

"I wish you'd have shown me this before I said yes," I told Owl.

"It's the most exciting quest I've gotten in years," he remarked.

I shot him a glare, to which he replied, "I'm joking, obviously. Although from the descriptions I've heard of the Haunter, as well as having witnessed the nightly attacks a few days in a row, I can say with a hundred percent certainty that this is a new type of Demon."

"But you're sure it's a Demon?" I asked.

He nodded. "Only Demons are weak to Blessed Weapons and attacks. Although, the spirits it summoned were like wraiths, but with fully-corporeal bodies that looked like soldiers. Unlike normal wraiths, they couldn't go invisible though, and given that their weakness is one that only Demons are known to possess, I believe they are an extension of the Demon who resides within the bowels of the Galleon."

"It must be bad if two high-ranked Exorcist have already died to this thing."

"Died is not the word I would use," Owl commented, "as their bodies have not been recovered. They simply vanished. Though you're probably right that they must've perished."

"Has it killed anyone else?"

"Oh yes, at least sixty people have died because of this thing. A lot of them were from the first few midnight attacks before the cordon was properly established, but even now they still see deaths from the spirit horde every few days."

"Do you have any plan for how to deal with it?"

Owl shrugged, which made me frown. I couldn't tell if he was taking it serious or not.

"The plan is to first ascertain what sort of Demon we are dealing with. As I say, I have never heard of one that might herald an army of spirits to attack on its behalf, but Demons are often quite unique."

I reread the quest flier again and noticed the difficulty rank.

"I thought Perilous was the highest rating for a quest."

Master Owl smirked. "Calamity is special, of course. It's the sort of thing they might post in other nations just to get the proper team to deal with it. As a matter of fact, I came to Arley because of this quest. I was in Lacksmey when I saw it on a Quest Board."

"I just heard about the Kingdom of Lacksmey from the Jeweller earlier today," I told him. "Is it a good place to get work as an Adventurer?"

"If you're an Exorcist who knows your stuff, Lacksmey is nothing but golden opportunities. But, y'see, I like having Lords and Margraves owe me favours, so I came to Ochre because Peter Garfh is a good man to know."

"What about Finn Serelliam?" I asked.

"He's a snake," Owl said without hesitation, making Lukas, who sat next to him, cast him an odd glance. "He is responsible for some many tragedies, but he's been clever with how he hands out bribes and, given that he's now a Margrave, there's no one to stop him except the Prince himself. He's not truly a useful man to have you owe a favour, because I doubt he would even return a favour owed, but, alas, he's just a symptom of the greater problem plaguing the governance of the cities in this world.

"The world I came from, Oblus, was ruled by a meritocracy and decisions were based on what would benefit people the most. It was far from perfect, but at least it beat this world where every new ascension of a King or local Lord can drastically alter the livelihood of everyone."

"My world, Midrealm, was the same as Mondus," Rana interjected, "But my family, the Thorn Dynasty, were the rulers of my kingdom, so my perspective was too biased for me to say whether it was different or not."

"You were royalty?" I asked in surprise.

"Sort of," she answered. "My Aunt was the Queen of our kingdom, and I was the daughter of her third sister, so I was very much on the fringe of royalty."

"I wonder if your blood would count as 'Royal Blood'," Owl commented creepily.

Rana put her palm on the pommel of her sword. "You won't get a single drop from me without a fight," she promised him.

Owl let out a phlegmy laugh that filled the entire carriage.

The following two days of travel passed without incident and for most of it I just listened to Rana explain to Lukas how to feel out his different abilities and whatnot, while also trying to teach him how to use Lurk, though he was unsuccessful at it. Apparently it required a similar state of mind as my Meditation ability.

On the third day, sometime before dusk, Owl nudged me in the arm and said, "Send out your Watcher to scout the road ahead, while I take a nap."

No sooner had he said the words than he leaned back and immediately began to snore.

Sumi, I need your sight.

The inkblot appeared in front of me and I used my thoughts to send it out in front of our carriage, while it lent its vision to my left eye. Instead of covering my right eye, I closed both my eyes, as it still allowed me to see what Sumi saw, but was less straining on my mind.

As I floated the Watcher further out along the road, I saw nothing except a few birds and small critters. I lifted it higher into the air, far above the road and the forest we were travelling through. The green canopies of the forest spread out to either side of the narrow road that bisected its territory, but all was calm in the rapidly-darkening world. In the distant eastern horizon I noticed the glinting waves of the sea that reflected the sun's waning light, as well as the outskirts of the city we were heading towards.

For maybe twenty minutes I scouted the road and the forest, but saw no signs of any ambushes or potential threats, so I recalled my familiar before I exhausted all of my energy on maintaining our bond. I hoped that, as I grew stronger, the strain on my reserves would lessen, such that I could maintain a link to my Watcher at all times like Master Owl seemed capable of. After all, it was a powerful tool to have.

I looked at my Mentor, seeing that Lukas had fallen asleep up against him, which looked like a mischievous fox daring to enter a bear's den to snuggle up for warmth. Before I could take a look at Rana, her head suddenly fell on my left shoulder. I remained still as a statue, not wanting to disturb her rest, while her breath tickled my neck with every exhale.