

## 60 – The Haunted Armoury I

By the time the Manager had brought the Branch Master to the counter, many of the Otherworlders in the hall had realised something was happening. The Master was a Native man with deep crow’s feet in the corners of his eyes and a dark-brown braided beard that contrasted with his blonde frizzy hair,

I cringed inwardly as I saw Harleigh get up to approach me, but his Brawler and Elementalist friends held him back. The Witch Hunters that had been chatting with them had no such reservations, however, and started pushing through the Adventurers to get to where I stood with Renji, Rana, Lukas, and Elye. The Elfin had her cloak hood drawn over her head and a hand on the shaft of an arrow, while my friends were less outwardly hostile in their postures.

The Branch Master looked at the quest and then studied the Cards.

“This blank one belonged to whom?”

“A Summoner by the name of Leopold Schober,” I said, recalling his entire name.

The man nodded. “I have heard of him before. Very few good things were said about him. And you say that he was not only the cause of the Haunting that drew you to Hearthshire, where he kidnapped you, but also that he is responsible for the deaths that happened as a result?”

I nodded, but his scrutinising eyes made it clear he did not believe me. When I looked at him with my Spirit Sight, straining my energy into my eyes to activate it, his aura was an indecipherable yellow hue.

He looked over at the approaching Witch Hunters and told them sternly, “You lot stay out of this. I won’t have more trouble from your order!”

The three men halted in their steps, traded glances, then, with a final glare at me, left the hall behind. I was glad to see that they were treated unfavourably, because otherwise I might’ve been heading straight for the Witch’s Pyre.

The Branch Master let out a sigh and said, “I think it would be better if you come to my office, away from prying eyes.”

“Can I bring my party with me?”

“Of course. I have questions for them as well.”

The five of us followed behind the Branch Master as he went up to the third floor, the Genius I had spotted on the bottom floor seemed to follow us.

“The Guild Genius will be overseeing our talk,” he Master informed us, as we arrived by one of several doors on the third floor. After opening it and letting us enter one by one, the Genius followed behind and then he entered last, locking the door behind him.

After we’d all sat down on a firm couch, with the Genius and Branch Master sitting down in two chairs, the man let out a deep sigh. Then he said, “This is all formality, because I have no reason to doubt your story, Exorcist Ryūta.”

The tension immediately left my body left.

“You must understand that when so many people die during a Quest undertaken by a member of our Guild, there are questions that must be answered.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Also, I do not appreciate being lied to.”

I knew what lie he was referring to and immediately fessed up to it: “I’m sorry for lying. I *did* kill someone. But it was in self-defence! I used my ‘Repel’ skill and it knocked them against a wall. It was an accident, I swear!”

“I see.”

“When I came to Hearthshire, the villagers were very hostile towards me and my party member, Lukas. It accumulated in them trying to kill us, when we were trying to exorcise the spirit that had cursed them.”

The Rogue nodded eagerly. “They chased after me when I lit a torch from the fireplace at the inn!” he said in defence of me.

The Branch Master considered our words, “A curse, you say?”

“The village was plagued by a Weeping Widow that held the control over the element of ice and cold. She cursed all those who heard her voice. If I had done nothing, all the villagers would’ve died.”

“And you say that Leopold Schuber set this up to trap you?”

“He wanted to use my ‘Contain Spirit’ ability for some purpose.”

“But you killed him before then?”

“I used one of my familiars and cut off his head, but he had a Soul-Pact with a dangerous entity and it took-over his body and started rampaging around Silvermarsh in Harrlev.”

“We have received reports and requests for aid, due to this monster,” the Branch Master informed. “It is some manner of rare Demon, or so it is believed. Its ability to block many of the abilities Adventurers possess is quite troubling.”

The members of my party traded wary glances, although Elye was not paying attention, instead focused on balancing an arrow on her finger-tip.

“But you are not to blame for that,” the Branch Master then said. “Besides, dealing with such a monster is for those of higher rank to deal with.”

“So, what happens now?”

“Well, unfortunately, due to the circumstances of the Exorcism, we will not be able to give you a reward for the completion of the Quest.”

I blinked, confused. I hadn’t even thought about the reward...

“What about the bounty?” Rana asked.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the Branch Master said. “However, I did have to agree to a request in order to have the bounty removed.”

*Uh oh...*

“You will have to take on an Exorcism Quest for the Bounty Hunter Guild.”

I frowned.

“What kind of Exorcism?” Renji asked eagerly.

The man got up from his chair and started rummaging around his desk.

“Where the hell did I leave it?” he grumbled, while the sounds of drawers being pulled open sounded again-and-again.

“It is in the top-drawer,” said the Genius, speaking up for the first time. He was similar to Æmos in a lot of ways, as he also wore spectacles and seemed as though he spent most of his day among books. Even now he had a book in his hand, some treatise on fungal infections, if I was reading the title correctly.

“Ah!” the Master exclaimed as he found it. Then smoothed the crinkled corners before handing it to me.

Renji was pressing up against me to read over my shoulder, while Lukas and Rana were both patiently waiting their turns, like civilised adults. I smiled to myself, glad that some things about Renji never changed.

<i>‘The Haunted Armoury’</i>		
<b>EXORCISM QUEST</b>	<b>TYPE:</b> <i>Troublesome</i>	<b>RANK:</b> <i>Initiate</i>

*The Bounty Hunter Guild in Helmstatter has been disturbed for many weeks by sounds of moving objects and the disappearance of items from within their second-floor Armoury.*

*Two Guild servants have vanished since the sounds began appearing, though to this day no bodies have been found nor any signs of foul play. Prior to their disappearance, they kept talking about how statues and other objects kept appearing in new places in the Armoury and at times seemed to be hiding from them.*

*Since the disappearance of the Guild servants, the Armoury has been locked off, though sounds of moving objects can still be heard from within at odd hours of the day and night.*

*As no physical signs of any monsters or foul play are present, it is believed that a Haunting is to blame.*

*You are to ascertain what sort of Haunter is involved and then Exorcise it. If the Guild servants are found, either dead or alive, an additional reward is granted.*

**REWARD:** 50 Silver Crowns for discovering the fate of the servants

**REWARD:** 6 Gold Crowns for the complete Exorcism of the Haunter

“That sounds mysterious,” Renji commented.

I passed the flier to Rana and Lukas, so they could read it, then connected with my Observer familiar.

*Karasumany, I need you to send part of your flock to the nearby Bounty Hunter Guild and somehow get inside the Armoury on the second floor.*

**CAW!** came the answering call of my familiar, audible even through the closed windows of the Branch Master’s office. The Genius looked at the window, then to me, before pulling out a little journal and jotting down some notes.

“Can I see what you wrote down?” I asked him, leaning closer, while Lukas and Rana were talking to Renji about the Quest, and Elye was doing a handstand up against the back of the couch.

The Genius handed me the journal, and I immediately saw that it had notes about many different people, things which the Genius had somehow observed.

On the newest page, he’d written:

- *‘Lisbeth’ the Mercenary Secretary is having is in a relationship with the Grocer ‘Sam’ in Market Quarter. His nickname for her is ‘Beth’.*
- *The Witch Hunter ‘Garven’ is addicted to the euphorics known as ‘Moth Wing’. He is quick to anger when he has not had his daily fix.*
- *The Exorcist ‘Ryūta’ has a crow familiar. His right eye turns black when he communes with it.*

“Very observant,” I told him. Then asked, “What do you do with this information?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why write it down? What if someone reads it and uses it to blackmail people?”

“I suppose that is a good question to consider.” He closed the journal and put it away.

“You’re accepting the quest, right?” the Branch Master asked, and I sat back down on the couch again. Before I could answer, Elye’s feet suddenly came down over my shoulders, pressing against my torso painfully as she pulled herself up and onto the top of the couch’s back.

Rana looked incredibly outraged at me and Elye, then yelled to the Elfin, “Get down from there!”

“You brought an Elfin here?” the Branch Master asked, looking at the girl’s exposed horns, while she crawled off the couch and my shoulders to sit back down, a petulant frown on her face. While she had been playing around, the hood of her cloak had fallen away to reveal her features, with the ears and horns clearly standing out.

“Is that a problem?” I asked.

“No. It’s just rare to see them here. But I would advise you to keep her close. They are not treated well outside their Enclaves.”

I realised just then that Elfin, like Elye, and the Natives, like the Branch Master, could understand each other, as they spoke different languages. As though to prove this exact thing, Elye said to me, “*Are we almost done? I am bored of being inside these manmade rocks.*”

“We’re leaving shortly,” I assured her, then turned to the Guild man and told him, “We’ll take the quest.”

He nodded. “That’s good to hear. I already told them you would, so it’d be awkward if you didn’t.”

As we were leaving the Guild Hall, with Elye’s hood back over her head again, Harleigh stopped me by the foot of the stairs. His party members stood behind him, clearly wanting to have nothing to do with me.

“Is it true that you killed the villagers in Hearthshire?” he asked, glancing to the members of my Party.

I put my Ifrit Claw on the breast of his plate armour, his friends seeming on the very precipice of attacking me. He looked down at my blackened hand, but before he could say anything, I told him, “If you believe I would do such a thing, then I would be very disappointed.”

I removed my hand and started moving towards the door, with Renji next to me and my friends following behind, although Elye and Lukas quickly moved in front, always eager to lead us wherever we were going.

As I crossed through the doorway, I spared a backwards glance at Harleigh and saw that he was staring down at his own hands, while his Party was trying to get his attention.

“Are we going straight to the Bounty Hunter Guild?” Renji asked, holding the flier in his hand.

“We may as well,” I replied.

“If they try anything, we’ll beat the shit out of them,” Rana said comfortingly.