

76 – Nest of Shadows

A clawed tendril shot out of the shadows behind me, seizing my right hand and making me drop the Focus to the floor. With tremendous force I was yanked into the wall, while three more arms emerged from the darkness around me.

Instead of struggling, I shout, as loud as I could, “Unleash Gravelight Ring!”

The floating orb of light, which lit up part of the hallway and the room the hostages were evacuating from, flew into the ring on my left hand, just as dark bands started wrapping themselves around me. A second passed and then an explosion of warm light bloomed from my hand, as the ring-bound familiar followed my command.

Like a flashfire, the shadowy arms disintegrated into floating particles of dust and the entire hallway lit up, as though the roof above had been peeled away to let the sunlight enter.

At the end of the corridor, the large yellow eye vanished, right as I found my Focus and aimed it in that direction.

I spun around, eyeing the dark doorways and nooks that the Haunter might hide in. Without hesitation, I ran to the room where the people were frantically shoving each other in order to get out first. A scream came as someone leapt from the windowsill, no doubt followed by a *thud* and *crunch* on the stones outside, though I couldn’t hear it thanks to the shadowy magics at play.

“Remain calm!” I yelled. “You’re only getting out alive if you work together!”

“You heard the man!” followed the guy I’d talked to moments prior. “He’s gonna keep us safe, so take care of each other and don’t worry about the monster!”

Our words mostly fell on deaf ears, as the hostages continued to jostle for the right to be first in line to the window, but soon a dozen had made it out and down the fire-ladder unscathed.

With my brightly-glowing ring out in front of me, aimed at the doorway to the room, I told the leader, “Break the other window and have the knight outside throw you the rope. They should’ve retrieved it by now.”

Kōtama, you can be at ease. Focus on lighting up this room and the doorway.

The glow subsided slightly, as the effects of my Unleash died down, before the Gravelight floated out of the triangular stone and hovered above me protectively. A crash of glass sounded from behind as the guy kicked the window-frame savagely to make an opening large enough for a person to squeeze through.

When he leaned out of the broken window, I couldn't hear what he shouted. The way that the Haunter didn't allow noise to enter nor leave its territory was worrisome, especially since it extended to my soul-linked familiars, like Karasu and Armen.

A moment passed, before the knotted end of a thick rope nearly smashed into the guy's face, as the rope was tossed all the way from the ground and through the third-floor window. Despite the frantic effort to evacuate, two of the hostages came to help their leader, as he found a place to secure the rope. Once it had been tied to a large and heavy bedframe, they began evacuating out this second opening as well, though most seemed to prefer taking the ladder.

As the adrenaline in my system died down, I began to shake violently, though I didn't let it distract me from guarding the doorway from the Haunter.

The next five minutes were tense, as the last of the hostages made their way down onto the street outside. Then something heavy squeezed through one of the openings behind me, producing a sound of tortured metal.

“It would seem this body is less conducive to making an easy entrance.”

I spun around at the sound of Armen's voice, relief flooding my body.

“I was unable to contact you from inside,” I told him. “This Haunter has powerful control over its domain.”

“I guess I will make my escape as well,” said the leader, surprising me with his presence. I'd assumed he already left.

“Thanks for the aid,” I told him.

“What's your name?” he asked.

“Ryūta.”

“Well, Ryūta, I'm mighty glad you came to our rescue.” With a strong grip, he took my right hand and shook it amicably.

I just nodded lamely.

As he was about to squeeze through the window and take the rope down, I stopped him, “What did you mean by ‘cocoon’ earlier?”

He paused, one foot already out onto the windowsill. “Those of us in the storage room were the lucky few who didn't get captured right off. The rest were taken and sealed into cocoons, as though stored for later by that nasty *thing*. We could hear their screams whenever a new person was released and eaten. It seems to have a vile predilection for eating people alive...”

“I see... Thank you.”

I turned to Armen, as the man gratefully made his retreat out the window, “What do you think? Is it like the Demon you mentioned?”

“A Glutton does not store its victims for later. It would sooner eat three humans in one bite than savour the taste.”

I frowned at the depiction. “That means this is definitely something else.”

“And your tome provides no answers?”

“Not this time.”

“Do you wish to save the remaining hostages? It may be safer to burn this building to the ground.”

“What bit of virtuousness I have would be dissolved by the act,” I replied. “I’ve already saved over thirty, I may as well save the rest.” The words left my mouth with a confidence that my face betrayed. I had been so incredibly close to becoming another of the Haunter’s victims. I needed to be more careful.

“How should we proceed?”

“Let’s start by lighting some torches on this floor and repel the darkness. It is able to manifest its body anywhere within its domain, as far as I can tell, but only from the shadows.”

“I will take the vanguard.”

I nodded. “Just remember, you can’t use your magic. It’ll enrage the monster.”

“How long before your Gravelight becomes exhausted?”

“Exhausted?” I asked.

Despite being a literal possessed suit of armour, Armen managed to shoot me a judging stare. **“There is no such thing as bottomless energy. Just as your energy has its limits, so too does the magic of monsters. Those beyond the veil of life are also not inexhaustible; speaking from experience.”**

“I never thought about it *that* way... I’ll admit that I assumed it would last forever, given that I don’t have to fuel it with my own energy.”

“We will make light, so that you might allow it to rest until it is needed.”

I didn’t like the idea of limiting my only defence against the Haunter, but I could see the wisdom in only utilising the possessed ring when necessary. It felt as though I had to worry about batteries on an actual flashlight, the tool which my Gravelight almost mimicked with its functionality.

Even this fantastical world has its own sense of natural laws...

Kōtama, when you begin to feel near to the limit of exhaustion, blink your light to alert me. Blink twice if you understand.

The Gravelight sphere above me blinked in quick succession to signal that it understood my command.

“Let’s find some torches.”

“**There is a fireplace in here,**” Armen observed.

I looked at him in stupefied surprise. “Suppose I should’ve noticed that.”

As I walked over to the fireplace and grabbed some of the dried firewood piled up neatly beside it, I willed a bit of energy into my right hand, lighting a flame at the tip of my index finger. After putting some of the wood into the stone fireplace, I touched my finger against it and the unnatural flame took immediately, before crawling across the tinder and roaring with glee.

“I wonder what Sera is doing,” I remarked, as I looked at the fire for a moment.

“**Focus.**”

A tremor rolled through the floor at his words and a desperate and pleading scream came from below, muffled by the layers between us but loud enough to notice, particularly since outside noise was filtered out. Suddenly the wailing was cut off by a loud *crunch* and snapping bones. There followed a lazy smashing of lips and slurping sounds.

I gritted my teeth. “We need to hurry. It’s taunting us by eating those people still trapped here.”

“**It is indeed taunting us, but to make unwarranted haste will be to our detriment.**”

“Grab one of the burning logs,” I told him, “We’ll light up this floor then move down. You’re right that we shouldn’t get ahead of ourselves, but let’s not dawdle either.”

“**Understood.**”

Kōtama, return to the ring and limit your light to a projection in the direction I point my hand.

With a double-blink of acknowledgement, the Gravelight reeled itself back into the stone on the ring that it was connected to with a tendril tether. Its light went from illuminating the entire petty officer’s chamber to simply producing a large cone of its shadow-expelling glow from my hand.

With my possessed ring now more like a flashlight, I hoped I wouldn’t exhaust my familiar’s energy as quickly. “Stay by my side, the Haunter will try to strike us from any nearby shadows.”

“**Understood.**”

Despite Armen insisting he would lead, I ended up going in front as we left the room and ventured down the hall. I peeked into the storage room where the hostages had been hiding, but it only had two empty torch holders on the walls. When I’d found the people inside, I hadn’t noticed

that several bottles had been opened and emptied. It seemed like some of the ones who I found had perhaps been sneaking a drink in here during the panic outside.

I shook my head. “Fools,” I said to myself.

“It is nothing new. An occupation alone does not a proper man make. Likewise, the pure cloth of the Church does not a pious man make.”

“Let’s limit the talking to a minimum. The Haunter seems to react to noise. Also, if the eating sounds stop, let me know.”

Armen inclined his head to show his understanding.

We left the wine storage behind us, though I wanted to return with a lit torch when we found some. Although it normally wasn’t very noticeable, moving through the silent hallway with Armen made me realise just how much noise his suit of armour produced.

I cast a glance around, moving the cone of my Gravelight Ring about the hallway, the light catching on the portraits lining the walls and making it seem as though the faces stared at me. I took a deep breath, then moved into a room on the left. Armen followed me a moment later, the flaming log in his hand licking his gauntlet with fire, though he seemed to not even notice. I distantly wondered if he could feel anything at all.

It’s a meeting room, it seems, I said within my mind.

“There are torches here,” he replied through the private link we shared.

A pile of unlit torches had been gathered atop one of the tables here, as though all the people I’d freed had been preparing to charge the lower floors.

Bring them with us and distribute them into the holders as we continue towards the stairs.

Armen didn’t reply, but took one torch, lit it with his log and then placed it into an empty holder near the door to the meeting room.

Go place one in the storage as well, I told him. As he followed my command, I waited in the hallway, scanning my cone-light around.

He returned a moment later, and though the light from the meeting room, officer’s chamber, and wine storage were rather faint, it did help dispel much of the darkness.

We continued going down the hallway, leaving a torch behind in every room we passed, most of which were more officer chambers and meeting rooms. At the end of the hall was the landing of the stairwell in a large open entrance of sorts, which led to another hallway that travelled down the other side of the floor.

We ought to check the rest of the rooms here survivors. Though I doubt there are others on this floor.

“I concur.”

We left two torches in holders by the stairwell and continued down the other hallway, which led to bigger chambers, no doubt belonging to higher-ranking guardsmen. There were signs of fighting in many of the rooms, making it seem as if people had been forcefully taken from here, scattering furniture and objects in the struggle. There was very little blood to be found, so it seemed the Haunter preferred to store its victims away before eating them.

At the end of the hallway was another wine storage, within which were many shattered bottles, as well as blood blended in with the spilled wine. It was pretty clear that at least one person had been killed and eaten in the room, though the blood was the only indicator that someone had died, as nothing else was left behind.

“It would seem this monster devours even the bones,” Armen commented ominously.

I frowned.

Let’s return to the stairs.

“The sounds of feasting have subsided.”

“Shit, stay on guard!” I told him.

As we left the bloodied storage room, a large yellow eye was staring at us from a dark corner down at the end of the hall.

Kōtama, surround me with your light!

As soon as the Gravelight obliged, I saw several dark arms that’d been reaching out from the ceiling and floor disintegrate under the glare of the golden glow.

“Let’s move!”

“I am right behind you.”

Despite everything in my body yelling at me to run away from the monster, I instead chased after the large eyeball at the end of the hallway with my familiar’s light.

The sound of my own heartbeat filled my ears, while the dull *thud* of my boots on the carpeted floor, Armen’s shifting armour, and my own breathing filled the silence. Before I could touch the Haunter’s eye with my light, it simply disappeared into the darkness, which a moment later was illuminated by Kōtama’s glow.

“Down the stairs!” I called to Armen and he followed me, as I thundered down the steps to the second floor.

I immediately skidded to a halt on the carpet, when I saw what greeted us here. From wall, ceiling, and floor were long thick strands of black web, like that of some nightmarish spider. It covered almost everywhere. And what’s more, there were two human-sized cocoons right next to the landing.

Despite all the shadows immediately vanishing under Kōtama’s light, the thick shadow strands and large black cocoons were slow to disintegrate.

“Light those cocoons up,” I told Armen, while looking around for the monster’s eye.

My Armour-Bound familiar knelt by the large cocoons, running his burning log against their strange webs, quickly burning them away.

As the strands of darkness broke apart, two lifeless humans flopped to the floor. Then, a second later they awoke with terrified shouts, as though they’d been put to sleep mid-scream, only to wake up and continue where they left off.

“Get them upstairs to the window!”

“**Understood,**” Armen replied and dropped his haul of torches, then put one of the two men over his left shoulder.

However, when he was about to lift up the other, a warbling scream made the webs around us shake violently and caused a pulsing tremor through the floor, making me stumble on my feet.

“Grab the other one and follow me!” I yelled, as I immediately retreated up the stairs.

Kōtama, spread your light out around me as far as you can!

Armen’s pounding steps followed after me, before he swept me off my feet and into his large arms.

With the two hostages on each of his shoulders and me in his arms, Armen strode down the hallway towards the chamber where the other hostages had been evacuated.

From far below came a super-loud and violent rumble as something like three large hooves stomped on the floor, chasing after us.

“We need to get the fuck out of here!” I told Armen, as he was pulling the two people off his shoulders. “Freeing its prisoners from their cocoons definitely enraged it and I have no idea if my Gravelight will work against it now!”

“**Understood. You go first.**”

“Don’t be silly.” I turned to the two dazed people we’d freed. They looked like servants, judging by their attire. “You guys need to get out of the window. People are ready to help you once you get down the ladder, but you need to go down by your own strength.”

“I can carry one,” Armen said.

“No, there’s no time! Use your Consecration to block the monster from entering this room!”

It was already enraged, so further provocation now would make little difference. At least I hoped not.

“Understood.”

While the loud thumping from below became louder-and-louder as it closed the distance to us, Kōtama suddenly began blinking, indicating that its power was near to exhaustion.

“Shit!”

“I will go last. You take the rope.”

“You’d better be right behind me!” I yelled as I squeezed through the second window, next to where the two servants were sluggishly making their way out onto the ladder.

As I emerged onto the windowsill, I heard a violent crash and warbling scream from nearby. I looked back just in time to see an enormous yellow eye staring from the other side of Armen’s Consecration spell. It was surrounded by three thick black arms, which seemed to be covered in shadowy fur, and these three limbs sprouted directly from a bulbous head that housed the giant eye.

The surprise made my foot slip and I started sliding back off the windowsill, only barely managing to catch my Ifrit Claw on the rope and arresting my fall two metres from the ground. A second later, the rope that was secured within the officer’s chambers was cut and I was in a brief free fall before someone caught me in their arms.

I turned and look directly into my rescuers face. It was Holm. I clumsily released myself from his grip and screamed up towards the third-floor window.

“Armen!”