

113 – Metal Avarice

“A Haunting???” both officers exclaimed, outraged and appalled.

“It is the most obvious conclusion that I can draw from the signs I have found. However, I may be incorrect.”

The auras of the two men were vastly different: one was marked by anger and frustration, while the other’s exhibited a little bit of relief, perhaps because he had suspected such a thing.

“Does this change the Quest?” Emily wondered, finally daring to speak up.

I shook my head. “I accepted it on its specific terms, so while the compensation would normally be different, I believe that the Guild would uphold the same terms. However, if I exorcise the entity behind the thefts, it would require additional compensation I believe.”

The angry officer glared at me. “How convenient that your theory includes work that you are specifically suited for!”

“Are you calling me a liar?” I asked him, not backing down from the accusation.

“How about this,” Armen suggested, **“If indeed a Haunting is at play, Exorcist Ryūta will exorcise the entity in return for the full Investigation Quest reward, regardless of whether he is able to entirely return all stolen items.”**

I nodded. “It would be a fair compromise.”

The two officers seemed to mull it over, before the second, more reasonable one, proposed the following: “We will leave these four guards with Exorcist Ryūta, such that we have trustworthy proof of the Haunting, should concrete evidence of this be found. In return, if such proof is determined, we will indeed give the full reward, though Exorcist Ryūta must exorcise the monster. If a Haunting is not in play, the standard reward will follow the terms of the Quest as written.”

“I agree to these terms,” I said.

“As a Crusader of the Church, I will ensure that both parties uphold their ends of this accord.”

The officer nodded, while the angry one made a big huff and stormed off to his tent.

“You must forgive Marcellius,” said the officer. “Ever since his brother and father perished because of an Exorcist’s actions, he has been very distrustful of your kind.”

As he said it, the amicable words were overshadowed by the fact that his own aura showed that he agreed with Marcellius on this, though it seemed he was able to put up a friendlier façade to obfuscate his true opinion.

“How did his family die?” asked Saoirse. The way she was showing interest in this made me uncomfortable for some reason. Perhaps it was because it was kind of like a mortician asking you how a loved one was buried.

“I do not know the full extent, but it seems they perished in an Exorcism gone wrong. Have you heard of Hearthshire?”

Ah... shit.

It seems this Marcellius has a good reason to hate you.

It wasn't my fault! I replied.

Should we tell him?

Are you trying to get me killed??

I nodded, trying not to let my inner turmoil show. “I have heard of it. The culprit, Leopold Schuber, has already been put to death for orchestrating it. He wilfully caused a Haunting to occur in Hearthshire in order to frame an Exorcist.”

The officer's eyes widened. “I was unaware of this. I will make sure to tell him, perhaps it will help him finally let go.”

“I have a request to make, which should hopefully help prove my theory of this being a Haunting.”

“Truly? Let me hear it.”

Night was falling over the camp and the nearby forest, but the officer, whose name I'd discovered was Clarke, had managed to fulfil my request. All the remaining metal weapons and armour, coins, jewellery, and such had been relocated to the Quartermaster's Hut, where two dozen guards were stationed on rotating shifts to watch over it. Theophanie was stationed within as well and I had my crows observing both the interior and exterior of the hut, as well as all the nearby treelines of the forest.

If indeed our thief was governed by greed, such a treasure trove would be too enticing to ignore. Granted, it seemed there was a limit to how much it could carry at a time, hence why the thefts of the officers' tents had happened on separate occasions, and why the Quartermaster's Hut had been raided at least twice, two days apart.

“Even if this thief can appear and disappear in the blink of an eye, I doubt we’d miss it if it actually appeared,” I postulated, while sitting some metres away from the hut, watching the interior with my right eye borrowing the vision of a crow within. “Right now, we mainly need proof that it is a Haunting.”

“I have not heard of a Haunting such as this before,” Armen commented.

“I may be wrong on this, but I think we’re dealing with a creature summoned from another world or perhaps a type of Demon I’m unfamiliar with.”

I’d gone through my Encyclopaedias, hoping to find a match for the traits I’d observed, but all the ones that seemed similar had clues tied to them that I should’ve observed by now, such as Spirit Prints and other visual marks. Given that Summoned and Demon type entities were the ones I knew the least about, and which the Encyclopaedias held the least knowledge of, they were the two that seemed most obvious, simply from eliminating all other options.

Part of me had considered that it might be an Elemental, similar to the Larder Keeper in a way, but the clues there also didn’t match up, since Elementals always left behind a bit of their innate magic and I’d found nothing of the sort.

Further backing up this building theory was the fact that Demons, as well as Summoned, entities were the ones that most often didn’t involve a specific Haunting ground, as they weren’t usually bound to one location, which was part of why they were dangerous. In my encounter with the Demon Galleon, the Demon had been bound to its statue, though I remembered Owl stating that it was a necessity for *that specific* Demon to remain bound to the real world, otherwise it would simply return to wherever it had been summoned from. Other Demons and their subtypes, like Leopold’s Pridelings, were more like twisted animals and humanoids, which could exist in this reality.

If indeed a Demon was at play here, it was a kind that was able to remain corporeal, although I did wonder if perhaps it wasn’t another of the Demonologist’s bound Haunters, made to sow chaos and disrupt the army in the unusual way of stealing their weapons to render them unable to fight.

I didn’t know enough about Summoned creatures to make any educated guesses here, but, given the fact that both Leopold’s Ethereal Spinner and Owl’s Scenting Tongue were part of this category, it suggested that there might be a magical otherworldly creature that was fascinated with metals and made a habit of stealing them, using its powers to appear and disappear before it could be discovered. The Leipridot creature that Ludwig had told me about also showed that it was possible to summon semi-intelligent entities from other worlds, and this fact alone filled my head with endless guesses for what sort of entity might be responsible for the thefts.

Granted, it was possible that a unique kind of Mage was behind the thefts, or perhaps a Visitor entity, but the lack of evidence was, by itself, proof that such causes could be ruled out. After all, if a piece of evidence was intrinsically linked with a type of entity, the lack thereof was also evidence to rule them out. Of course, there was the possibility that I’d missed some major clue or that the evidence had been deliberately erased, but that would suggest a larger conspiracy at play and I considered this highly unlikely.

A sudden commotion broke out from within the hut and I focused on the sight of what my crow was seeing. At first I just noticed how the soldiers and Quartermaster within were pointing at one of the objects in the pile, pulling out their weapons and preparing to attack.

Then I saw it.

Emerging head-first from a shiny silver mirror, a golden-brown bear-like creature came out into the centre of the hut’s interior. Two enormous eyes took up a third of its head, which had a large wide toothless smile and a curled ram’s horn protruding from the middle of its brow. Its body quickly followed behind its head, squeezing out of the silver mirror as though it had no bones.

I got up from my chair, the motion arousing Emily who had fallen asleep. Armen and Saoirse came with me as I ran towards the hut, watching the creature through the borrowed sight in my right eye. I pulled the Singing Branch from my back and wondered if my Drain Spirit would be able to work on the creature.

“It’s a Demon!” I yelled, as the door to the hut came into view. The soldiers stationed in the vicinity quickly began mobilising to join me.

Through my right eye, I saw how the creature had emerged fully. A long meaty tail was fighting off the guards and angry Quartermaster, while the polar-bear-sized monster was using its large furry human-like hands to shove armour, weapons, jewellery, and other such metallic objects into its cavernous mouth. It seemed that its stomach was bigger on the inside, because it quickly shovelled down a mass of items greater than itself. And then, just as I got to the door and flung it open, it took one look at me and was sucked into itself, disappearing faster than it had emerged, leaving behind an ominously-cheerful giggle in the air. It was almost like a child gleeful at getting away with a prank.

In the wake of its disappearance were some bruised and battered soldiers, all of whom had a look of “What did I just experience!?” plastered on their faces.

Armen pushed past me and came into the hut’s interior, immediately healing the welts and bruises sustained by the soldiers, while I rapidly flicked through the many different clones belonging to my Observer, trying to spot the creature anywhere.

While I stood there, Saoirse was next to me, a big smile on her lips. “It seems my guess was wrong, but I now know what thief it is.”

“What was your initial guess?” I asked, while continuing, and failing, to try and spot the golden-brown bear demon.

“It was close, so answering that will give it away.”

“I already know it’s a Demon,” I told her. “I’m guessing its one aligned with Greed or Gluttony.”

“That was my initial guess, a Greedling.”

“So it’s not a Greedling, but it’s close?” I concluded, mulling it over. Though it was a moot point, for I knew little about the intricacies of Demons. The time-worn Encyclopaedia had a description of a Greedling, but it was very different in behaviour and traits from what I’d just seen, not to mention appearance.

Emily joined us by the time Armen had finished healing the soldiers. He exited the hut and found us, with the Quartermaster right behind him. She looked pissed.

“Exorcist, tell me you know how to deal with this bastard!”

I nodded dully.

I don’t have a clue.

“I’m working on it,” I told her.

Lying comes easily to your kind, Saoirse remarked.

“**Some lie more than others,**” Armen commented in my head.

“What was stolen?” I asked.

“Well, for starters, it took my last full plate set, two swords I’d literally just oiled, and a bunch of the new stuff that was brought here. I’m guessing the soldiers will not be pleased to know that their belongings were used to bait this creature, only to be taken without the trap working.”

I frowned. I’d known it would put me in an awkward situation, but luring in the Haunter was the best plan I could come up with at the time.

“I’ll retrieve everything it stole,” I bluffed, managing to sound more confident than I felt.

“And how will you manage that!? It *ate* the damn things!”

“Just trust me on this.”

Do you always lie this much when you take on Quests? Saoirse wondered.

My frown deepened.