

141 – Cooperation

A man was spasming against the grip of three other men, shouting about how ‘the humming won’t stop’. It was fairly unnerving, but what struck me most was that all four men wore the same uniform, with ten more people nearby also wearing it.

The uniform was a light-brown tunic that seemed fairly thick, along with sturdy linen pants that were also light-brown, and dark leather boots. Alongside the uniforms were badges sewn onto the right side of their chests, which looked like a small coat of arms, but had the texture and craftsmanship of a Boy Scouts’ badge. Inside the badge was a simple compass shape, along with a stylised sun and pickaxe.

These were clearly members of the Explorers’ Guild, as I’d noticed a similar symbol on the flags of their compound which lay next to the Adventurers’ Hall in the Guild district. All but three of them were the kind of Natives who had dark hair and pale skin, with the remainders being the kind I more often associated with Arley, that is to say: tan and blonde.

But it was confusing to look at how they’d prepared, as many of them had weapons like swords, hammers, bows, and spears. Those wouldn’t do them any good. There were a few more intelligent choices in the equipment they had piled near the entrance to the building, such as bags of ash, smaller pouches with salt and various herbs, crates with candles, lanterns and torches, and what looked like religious relics.

However, none of it seemed remotely magical, and the ash was the wrong colour, looking more like normal wood ash, with large chunks still left in. Sacred Corpse Ash, Sinner’s Ash, and Consecrated Ash all had distinct colours, which were, in order: off-white like chalk; brown like dirt; and pure-white. This was neither of those three things. Likewise the candles were normal tallow, and though they might work for rituals, they had no innate power in an exorcism. The salt might work in some cases, as mentioned in a rare few entries in my Encyclopaedias, but the consensus was that, in terms of warding, Sacred Ash was superior. The herbs were generally useless as well, though there were some that worked for summoning spells, like the Nightshade, Lichen, and Red Moss, but there was no Gravebloom or other potent herbs that spirit responded to.

Out of the assortment of relics, there were a few that could potentially work, as they seemed similar to my Blessed Golden Bell, but use-cases were few for such a tool and it might inadvertently make a situation more dangerous if applied incorrectly, as some entities were enraged by such a tool.

I sighed. “They’re very underprepared.”

“**Not much has changed since my time then,**” Armen commented grimly.

“**They must be brave to challenge a foe without the proper tools!**” Jules insisted.

“**Or foolish,**” the Crusader added sceptically.

I walked up to their group. Many of them were staring in blatant fear at their member who’d clearly been driven to insanity.

“Armen, see if you cannot aid him.”

“**Understood.**”

At his deep imposing voice, almost all eyes turned to look at us. I pulled out the quest flier and held it out, before addressing them all.

“My name is Ryūta Temaru, I am an Exorcist of Eminent Rank. I have taken on the task of exorcising this Humming Haunter and would like your cooperation. My companion will attempt to heal your troubled comrade, he is a Priest-Crusader.”

The group of people looked between each other, with some looking relieved at my announcement, while others looked upset. I supposed that to them I was an intruder trying to take their quest reward, though it was clear that many of them feared whatever it was that they were up against.

Then a woman stepped forward out of the group to address me. She had long black hair that was pulled up into a ponytail, as well as pale skin with dark pouches under her eyes, and cracked lips. Her eyes were a calming shade of dark-green.

“I am Bellany,” she said. “I lead this Exorcism Group.”

I nodded. “Nice to meet you, I hope we can get along.”

She frowned slightly, then gestured for me to follow her as she walked away from the group of people, coming closer to the main entrance of the apartment building wherein the Haunter seemed to have dug in its claws.

“I am glad that you came,” she started, talking quickly as though taking too long would make her friends suspicious. “Quite frankly, we are in over our heads, and the more experienced Exorcism Members of our Guild are busy elsewhere in Evergreen at the moment.”

I nodded again. “Have you lost any members to this Haunter?”

“None have died, but eight have been afflicted with madness and hallucinations. We are quite certain it is a Demon, but we are not equipped to handle such a thing.”

I thought about the few clues I had, but it didn’t scream Demon to me.

“But,” she added. “We cannot just give up here, otherwise it will reflect poorly on our members.”

“What are you suggesting? If it is indeed a Demon, it would be folly to enter its territory unguarded.”

“I would like to accompany you, such that it would appear to my Group that we reached a compromise and didn’t abandon the quest.”

I wondered about that. It was possible that abandoning quests in the Explorers’ Guild bore similar implications as abandoning one in the Adventurers’ Guild did. That being said, it was too reckless to bring in a Native. However, I did want to get into the good graces of the Explorers, such that it didn’t cause friction on other quests.

“We can agree to that, but there are some rules you must follow, such that you do not face undue risk.”

Her blue-violet aura was trembling, but at my words she seemed to calm down a bit.

“Thank you. I’ll follow whatever you tell me to do. You’re the expert after all.”

This is not at all like what I’d feared, I thought to myself.

“It’s quite simple really. You have to stay near my bodyguard Armen, since he can keep you safe. You’ll also have to wear a ward that I will make, such that you can resist any attempt to influence your mind. And lastly, if it looks like I cannot handle what we are dealing with, I want you to run for the exit.”

She blinked rapidly, taking in the information.

“That being said,” I added, “I do not think it is a Demon. My fellow Exorcists are quite vigilant for entities such as those, so it’s unlikely that it would’ve been allowed to remain here for as long as it had if it was indeed a Demon.”

“With all due respect, our knowledge of Haunters is quite vast, and we believe our assessment is correct.”

I smiled, a sense of competitiveness flourishing in me unexpectedly. “I suppose we will have to find out.”

Bellany nodded curtly, before turning around and returning to her ‘Exorcism’ Group.

As I followed behind her, I saw how the man who’d struggled and screamed was lying unconscious on the stones of the street, with Armen’s hand hovering above his head and glowing golden.

Unlike Butchery, the streets here were comprised of large flagstones interspersed with cobblestones, though there were a few grassy areas for plants and small trees to grow from. As I took

in my surroundings properly, I had to conclude that it was quite a nice place to potentially live, and the thought made me quite eager to wrap up the quest.

“One more thing,” I told Bellany in a whisper. “I want the property when the exorcism is complete.”

She stopped and turned around. “If it is a Demon we are dealing with, then I half the reward money should go to my group.”

I considered it. She really wasn’t in a position to make demands, and I could easily tell her to get lost, but instead I smiled and said, “Deal.”

After all, I was fairly sure I knew what kind of entity we were dealing with.

“I have alleviated his panic attack,” Armen commented after he returned to my side.

“Good job,” I told him, as we were watching Bellany dole out orders to her Group. I’d asked for strong paper, a brush, and ink, as well as any Gravebloom and Sacred Corpse Ash they could find. I didn’t need any of it, truth be told, but I figured that I might as well give them a few obvious nudges in the right direction.

Several of their members were carting away the more useless stuff they’d brought, like the wood ash, salt, and herbs, while the rest were either going out in search of the demanded ingredients or sorting through their relics, like I’d also told their Group Leader to do. It seemed a good idea to let her handle giving out the orders, such that she could retain the air of competency, and I could reap the benefit of having her owe me.

“They are quite convinced it is a Demon,” Armen said. **“However, there were no signs of mind-control or any sort of Demonic perversion in the man.”**

I grinned at his choice of words. “It’s not a Demon.”

“What is it then?”

Lifting the Encyclopaedia in my hand and turning it towards him, I said, “I’m fairly sure it’s something like this.”

He read the entry and seemed to pause as he looked at the depiction, which was like a smiling shadow looming over a sleeping person.

“A Mare?” he asked.