

75 – Hostages

“There you are!” said the Branch Master when he saw me. “We thought you had run away.”

Armen chuckled to himself, the sound a reverberating *thrum* within his hollow suit of armour.

“Give me some credit,” I told the man. “You should know that is not my way.”

“You’ve been gone for over an hour! What were we to think? Lives are on the line here you know!”

“I am aware, but I have procured the means by which this monster might be defeated,” I told the man confidently.

He and his guard escort looked at the ring that I presented to them.

Kōtama, mind giving them a small taste of your power?

From the ring emerged a warm-glowing sphere that was connected to my ring by a tendril thread. It swirled around my hand playfully, before moving through the air towards the Branch Master. The look on his face and that of his fellows was priceless. A few of the injured people started murmuring stuff about ‘miracles’, which was a nice change in tune from when I’d left them earlier and they all seemed to despise me.

I think that’s enough, you can return.

Like a cord being rewound, the tendril tugged on the floating sphere and sucked it back into the triangular stone, letting off a tiny bit of golden light before returning to its passive glow.

“And *that* will help you defeat the Haunter?” asked the Branch Master.

“That’s the idea,” I told him. “Did you find me those torches?”

He nodded and took me over to where standing candle-holders a metre tall were gathered before the Barracks entrance. Six men stood ready nearby, all of their expressions turning into mixtures of dread and eagerness when they saw me.

“What are *they* for?” I asked. “I’m going in alone.”

“They volunteered to help place the torches.”

I frowned. It seemed an unnecessary risk for them to take. And the ‘torches’ were the kind that could easily be defeated by a gust of wind, making me wonder what exactly the Branch Master had thought I meant, when I said I needed them.

I suppose I will make do with these, hopefully there are plenty of torches inside already that I can relight to dispel the darkness. At least if it works the way I am guessing.

With a nod, I said, “I’m ready. Have two of the men open the doors.”

The Barracks entrance consisted of a wide double gate, constructed of wood and reinforced with iron braces running horizontally across, while the wall around it was large stones stacked atop one another. The size made sense, given that a smaller entrance would’ve made mobilisation difficult, but I didn’t understand why more people hadn’t been able to escape. I also wasn’t sure if the Cook’s estimate of people within was accurate or not.

Two of the volunteers grabbed a handle each and then tugged as hard as they could, but to no avail. Without being told, the other four went to help, though even with three men on each side, the double gate refused to budge.

“It’s like it’s bolted shut!” complained one of the men, while straining until his face turned red.

I walked over. “That’s enough,” I told them, as I began to look through the narrow opening between the two sections.

Armen joined me and looked as well, even trying his tremendous strength against one of the handles to no effect.

“It is not bolted. Something is holding it shut.”

I suppressed a shudder. I didn’t like what he implied, not one bit.

“What’s the issue?” asked the Branch Master as he came to investigate for himself. I could tell he was under immense pressure, no doubt someone high-up in the city breathed down his neck to have the situation resolved.

“The Haunter is holding the gate shut,” I told him.

His aura spiked at the revelation and he took an involuntary step back. “How are you going to get inside then?”

“We could break the gate down,” Armen suggested.

I thought about it for a moment, then said, “We’ll enter through one of the windows on the top floor. Bring me a ladder.”

“What about the torches?” he asked, as though they mattered more.

“Forget about the damn torches,” I shot back, maybe a bit harder than I ought to have.

Instead of scolding me for my tone, the Branch Master just nodded and told the men to go fetch fire-ladders from a nearby shed.

While Armen and I waited around for the ladder, I tried to send a clone of my crow Observer back inside the Barracks through the chimney, though it accomplished no more than the first time I’d tried.

I still heard the ominous sounds of the monster that possessed the building, but also the sounds of people who were still alive on the top floor, whimpering and crying.

“Why did you decide not to break the gate down?” Armen questioned me.

“Think about it this way: it’s a territorial creature that hates light, so what do you think it’ll do to its hostages when we suddenly barge in and flood its domain with sunlight.”

“I thought that was the plan.”

“Sure, I wanted to establish a safe area near the entrance to evacuate people, but if it’s securing the entrance, then it might’ve made its nest on the bottom floor or in the basement cells.”

“You believe we can evacuate the hostages through a window to the top floor?”

I nodded. “I realised that they must be on the top floor for a reason, perhaps the Haunter’s influence doesn’t reach them there.”

“Will liberating them not enrage it?”

“Let’s hope not.”

Three of the volunteers came running, each with a ladder segment that was two metres long. It seemed like they could easily be slotted together with hooks at one end and loops at the other to make one very long ladder.

“Where do you want it?”

Since I’d been using the chimney to send my Observer duplicates into the building, I figured that the nearest window to *that* part of the building was the best option. Thus I pointed them towards the back of the large Barracks, where it lay up against the city wall.

From the ground to the roof gutter was just shy of six metres, so the three men ended up hooking the long ladder to it, after connecting their three pieces. It would make reaching the window somewhat precarious, as it barely had a windowsill on the outside for me to put my foot on before crawling in. It would also complicate the evacuation, so I turned to one of the men and said, “Get me a rope that’s at least six metres long.”

Without complaint, he ran off to find just such a thing.

As we were looking at the ladder, Armen asked, **“Should I go first?”**

“No, I’ll do it,” I said. Even though the windows on the top floor were blacked out, I doubted they would be held shut like the door.

I took a deep breath and then started to pull myself up the rungs of the fire-ladder, making sure not to look down. I hadn’t ever been afraid of heights, but my experience in Skovslot still haunted me. After all, if you take a nosedive from the fourth floor and survive, you’re bound to have a

profound respect for heights afterwards. But alas, I had no choice here, not if I wanted to save the people inside.

I climbed all the way to the third-floor window, pausing to catch my breath, while my forearms and lower back ached from just this slight bit of exercise.

I really need to get my hands on a Vitality Potion...

After taking a deep breath, I carefully lifted my left foot off the ladder and placed it in front of the window. Then I used my left hand to try and pull it open, but it was locked, which, in hindsight, I should’ve foreseen.

An idea for how to open it then came to me, though it would require precariously balancing on the windowsill. I sighed, but knew it had to be done, so I scooted my right foot off the ladder and onto the windowsill as well, where only half of it fit on the stone outcropping.

I took another deep breath, then braced my left arm against the top of the window and took my right hand off the ladder. I wobbled for a second as my weight was taken off the secured handhold, but managed to remain crouch-standing on the windowsill without falling.

“I will catch you when you fall,” Armen said unhelpfully.

Shut up, I need to concentrate.

Pushing a tiny bit of energy into my Ifrit Claw, I moved my index finger up against the glass and concentrated the energy in the finger-tip, creating a burning claw from just that finger. Like a hot knife through warm butter, my Ifrit Claw melted the glass window with terrifying ease, allowing me to basically carve the entire pane of glass away, which fell down into the room on the other side of the obscuring darkness.

I breathed a sigh of relief, then dispelled the fire from my right hand and shifted my grip so that my left was free instead.

Kōtama, I need your light to dispel the darkness.

A golden sphere of warm light grew from the ring on my left hand, quickly growing into a bubble surrounding me and eating away at the darkness on the other side of the window.

Though the light only revealed the floor and the corner of a table inside, I lowered myself in through the narrow opening I’d made. A *crack* came from under my shoe as I stepped on the pane of glass that I’d already forgotten about.

Kōtama, expand and illuminate the entire room.

As my Gravelight slowly continued to grow its area of light, I took in the sounds of the Barracks that’d been impossible to hear from outside. Rhythmic gnashing and slobbering chewing sounds reverberated through the floor under my feet, filling me with a deep sense of dread and primal fear.

I swallowed hard, listening to the whimpering sounds I’d heard with my familiar. While I strained my ears, trying to ignore the sounds of something horrific eating gleefully on a floor below me, I had the sudden fear that the sounds I’d heard had been fabricated and that I now found myself within the domain of a terrible beast.

I’d entered into the territory of an entity that I had no clue about, and Armen’s description of a Glutton Demon suddenly came to mind, making my muscles ache with the desire to turn around and hop out the window.

Thankfully, as my Gravelight’s glow filled the room, dispelling all shadows with its peculiar omnipresent light, my rationality returned to me.

Armen? Can you hear me?

There came no answer.

Shit. This Haunter prevents outside communication... even when its darkness is pushed away...

Whatever I was dealing with here, it had to be a Demon of a sort, or adjacent to their entity type. Although, its rather simplistic need to feed was a comforting factor, as it implied it was more animalistic than intelligent. If I’d been dealing with a smarter creature, then I was certain it would’ve lain traps, but if it was food-motivated that made things easier. Or at least, that was how my theory went. I still couldn’t rule anything out and confirmation bias would be the death of me if I let it alter my perception of facts.

A whimper, followed by a *shush* immediately broke me from my reverie and I concentrated to try and figure out the exact direction of the sound was. As I waited with bated breath, I glanced around me.

The room I had entered into was like a small office of a petty officer, with neat furniture, a few bits of ostentation like a portrait of the room’s owner, presumably, and a bookcase full of treatises on history and local politics.

When I didn’t hear anything in the following minute, I stooped to pick up a shard of the broken glass and tossed it out into the dark hallway. With a dull *clunk* the shard bounced off something like a thin carpet, producing no further sound, but it was enough to cause the response I’d been looking for, as a small squeal came from nearby, muffled as if the sound was from inside a closed room.

Move to illuminate the hallway.

The floating orb of my Gravelight left the room, which was quickly overtaken by darkness returning, and I hurried after it, not wanting to be consumed by the shadows.

Out in the hallway, I saw that, sure enough, a brown-and-red carpet lined the floor, while portraits hung down its length on rusty iron nails hammered into the wooden walls. There were several rooms to my right, but only one to my left, which made sense given that the end of the hallway there would be where the Barracks sat up against the city wall. For some reason, the room to the left had no window on the outside wall, but it seemed sizeable when compared to the one I’d entered into. Its door was closed, but hopefully not locked.

With careful steps on the carpet, I made my way to the closed door, hoping that the creature would continue its feasting down below in ignorance. Kōtama was hovering next to me and I’d never been so glad to have a light with me before.

I placed my right hand on the handle and turned it slowly. From the other side came a flurry of muttered and panicked words, as someone inside noticed, while a few others promptly told him to shut up and be quiet.

As I cautiously opened the door, glad that it was unlocked, Kōtama’s light flowed through the opening and illuminated the people within and their startled faces.

I bit my lip and put a finger in front of my mouth as I opened the door wide, then motioned for the people to come out.

The Cook had been wrong. Deeply wrong. For within that large room, which was lined with rows of caskets and bottles of wine, huddled over thirty terrified guards and servants, many of them of a similar age to me.

I’d never seen so many people openly cry in relief before, but it was heart-warming to know that I’d been able to find them in time.

“Alright,” I started, in a low whisper, “I need you to follow me into the next room. I have made an opening through the window and there is a ladder to climb down the outside.”

Many of the people stood up slowly, though they traded glances with each other, perhaps wondering if I was a mirage formed at the bottom of whatever despair they’d been gripped by.

“Quickly now,” I said. “Hold hands so you don’t get lost.”

Kōtama, spread your light to encompass the hallway between the two rooms, as well as the first room we entered.

Dutifully, the Gravelight moulded the reaches of its glow and followed my orders, while the hostages moved past me with arms linked in tight grips. Thanks to the light, they all filed into the

correct room, where their boots and shoes produced quite a bit of noise on the floor, owing to their urgency.

The last person walked out a moment later, not having joined the procession, and I stopped him when I noticed that his even-keeled aura and demeanour marked him as a leader of sorts.

“Try and make sure they stay quiet as they evacuate,” I told him. “There should be a rope on the way, but currently it’s just a ladder to take you down to the street outside.”

“Understood,” he said with a nod.

“Also, tell the tall man in armour waiting outside to prepare to break down the front door on my signal.”

“I don’t think that will be a good idea,” he replied.

“Why not?”

“There are still many more trapped in the monster’s cocoons.”

“...Cocoons?” I asked.

The man held up a hand for pause. “Do you hear *that*?”

“I don’t hear anything,” I told him after a moment of listening intently

“Exactly.”

I swallowed hard as I realised the chewing noises had stopped. “Get to the room now! I’ll try and hold it off!”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than I looked down the hallway, past the light cast by my ring-bound servant, and saw a large yellow eye staring directly at me from the impenetrable darkness around it.

“Run,” I told the man as I began pulling out my Focus.