

24 – Demon Galleon V

I looked at the staircase leading up with a heavy dose of suspicion. Though I was sure it was an expensive commodity and refilling my pouch would not be cheap, I took a handful of Sinner's Ash and threw it at the stairs. The dirt-brown Ash settled on the steps and railing, confirming that it was not an illusion.

After walking around for what felt like hours with the lantern in the dark belly of the ship, I'd finally found the way out. I let out a heavy sigh and honestly felt like crying out of pure relief, before I began climbing the stairs, one careful step at a time.

The moment I reached the landing, wind wafted my hair and the setting sun licked me with its waning light and warmth. It surprised me that I had somehow found the staircase leading to the upper-deck before finding a doorway to the main deck itself. I leaned over the railing and looked down at the deck and the ramp to the pier.

Except... there was no pier. What's more, the Sacred Ash we'd lined the deck with was gone.

Shit...

"It seems we are still within the Demon's grasp," Armen commented.

I bit my lower lip in frustration. It seemed there was no way I'd ever get out of this place, but I also knew that I didn't want to go back into the dark bowels of the Galleon again, so I scaled the railing and dropped down to the main deck. My boots absorbed much of the impact, but I still felt a spike of pain lance up through my feet and calves.

I was still somehow maintaining my Soul Barrier, but it seemed that the Demon's powers of illusion and warping reality were too strong for me to overcome at my current rank of abilities.

After walking to the edge of the main deck where the ramp ought to have been, I knelt down and looked over at the water below. It was as clear as a mirror, though my reflection was distorted and weird somehow.

"The entire ship has been twisted by its influence," Armen remarked.

I turned my head to look towards the fore of the ship and quickly saw what he meant, because it was as though the fore cabin stretched into the distance, before curling down into the water itself. The aft of the ship was the same as well. I wondered if, due to the angle of the curvature, the twisted ship the Demon had made formed an entire circle. Or not a circle, a halo.

If *that* was the design of its domain, then it seemed obvious that its core, the statue described in the journal that Owl had found, was to be found at its centre.

“I do not recommend following that line of thought to its conclusion.”

“I’m not going back down there,” I told Armen. “Just because I may have figured out the logic of its domain, it does not mean that I have the power to use that information for anything...”

“How do you plan to proceed?”

I’d honestly grown despondent by now. It was clear that I did not possess the ability to fight back against the Demon in any meaningful way. It was just a matter of time before my Soul Barrier drained me of my last bit of energy and my mind was possessed by its visions again.

I sat down on the edge of the main deck, dangling my feet over. I let out a long exhale.

“Maybe it won’t be so bad to have my brain fried by the Demon?” I considered optimistically. After all, it’d given me some pleasant visions of what my future back on earth could’ve been in another universe; a universe in which I’d passed my university exams and Inoue Kumi had reciprocated the feelings I’d confessed to her.

Armen floated over and mimicked the way I was sitting on the edge.

“Sorry that I ended up being such a terrible master to you.”

“Though our time together has been brief, I have not found it unpleasant.”

I smiled weakly, then let my Soul Barrier fall off, while I continued staring into the horizon and the mirror sea that the Galleon was floating in without making any ripples.

In the distance, a large rift was forming in the sea, making its way towards me.

“That was fast,” I commented calmly about the impending vision that was about to overtake me.

The rift started splitting into branches, some ending, while others continued zig-zagging down the horizon along the mirror sea towards me, branching even further as they went.

Then the whole sea exploded into shards of reflective water, before I felt myself enter freefall, my stomach lurching as though I’d just leapt from a plane.

With a heavy *grunt* of pain, I ‘landed’ on the wooden floor of a cabin.

My entire body was sore, as though covered in a hundred bruises, and I was desperately gasping for air, while feeling the tickling sensation of liquid flowing freely from my nostrils and tear ducts. I managed to hold on to a gasp of air for a moment, then went into a coughing fit for almost two minutes, before regaining myself.

It took a lot of effort, but I managed to push myself off the floor and arrive at a kneeling position. I wiped my face with the back of my right hand and it came away covered in blood, snot, and tears.

"Ugh..." was all I managed to blurt out.

Then sounds from a nearby room brought me to my feet. I looked around and saw no sign of Armen anyway.

Return to me, Armen.

Nothing happened and I feared that I'd lost my ability to call upon my familiars or that my Pacts had somehow been broken. But then the Wraith materialise in front of me a moment later.

"It seems our Pact has survived this ordeal."

I was about to ask what he meant, but then I realised that the oppressive aura was gone and that the smell of teashop leaves likewise had vanished.

"Owl actually did it..." I mumbled, although I couldn't tell if *this* wasn't still some part of the Demon's illusions.

Then I saw Frode standing in the doorway. He was covered in wounds and his right arm hung limply by his side, but he grinned at me when our eyes met.

"I found him!" he yelled back over his shoulder. Seconds later, Holm was by his side, and then Owl came behind them. A strange creature that reminded me of the goblins that Rana had fought on our way to Hamsel's Rest stood behind the three of them, carrying some strange object in a sack.

I walked up to them and the two Paladins padded me on the shoulder. Holm was slightly better off than Frode, but it was clear that both of them had been put through the ringer as well.

"What's that thing?" I asked Owl, pointing to the not-quite goblin creature.

"A Greedling," he replied. Then smile weakly, before saying, "Good job staying alive. It seems my Wards were in fact quite shit... sorry about that."

I blinked at his apology. Part of me wanted to yell at him for promising that we'd be fine, but another part wanted to brush it off and say something basic like, "All's well that ends well." In the end, I ended up asking, "What's it holding in its arms?"

The Greedling was like a lanky goblin covered in golden scales, with pointed and long ears, as well as nubby horns. It was gibbering to itself incoherently, while clutching something dark and shiny in its arms.

"It's the statue we were looking for," Owl said, before adding, "Greedlings are great pack mules and are capable of absorbing the power of anything they touch, which should hopefully keep the

Demon trapped in the statue from being able to exert its influence. Granted, I also added some Wards to the vessel to hopefully limit its powers from leaking out, but who knows how long they'll hold."

"You didn't manage to exorcise it?" I asked in surprise.

"Demons are a pain in the ass, I believe I've mentioned this before. I have no idea if an exorcism I attempt will actually work. It might even make it worse."

"So what's the plan now?"

"First, we get off this godforsaken ship."

After returning to the stone pier of the Port District, the alarmed party of cordon guards who greeted us said that we'd been inside the Galleon for over three days. It was a disturbing revelation to me, because I felt neither hungry nor sleepy, although my battered mind and soul were past the point of exhaustion.

Several Priests, led by a single female Archpriest who'd come all the way from Helmstatter to aid in the cordon, were given charge of the Demon Statue, which, just like the journal, looked like a young boy curling his body around a shiny black jewel. The boy's body was sculpted with such perfect attention to detail that I had to wonder if it might not be the petrified remains of a real boy. Symbols of unknown meaning to me had also been carved deeply into his exposed back and shone with a malevolent purple glow, although it was apparently a much weaker glow than it had been before Master Owl slapped some Wards on it.

The Archpriest, whom Owl seemed to have some prior relationship with, told him to return early the following morning to aid in the analysis of the statue and adding his opinion on how best to deal with it. My Mentor let out a sigh at the demand, but didn't argue back, which I found intriguing, since he was normally such a cantankerous sort.

As for the two Paladins, Kat and Christian, neither Owl, Holm, nor Frode had seen any sign of them, but it seemed that the Galleon would be scoured from top-to-bottom by a small army of Paladins and Priests now that the danger was contained. Owl suggested that they just scuttle the vessel, but the Lord of Ochre himself had apparently decreed that the Galleon 'Fallow's Fortune' would be put back into use as soon as the Demon was removed...

"That seems a bad idea," I commented, as we were walking back to the place we were staying in the Crafting District.

"He just really likes the ship," Owl replied.

We'd said our farewells to Holm and Frode, and even Owl had managed to be almost polite.

“How did you manage to survive by yourself?”

I smirked at the genuine surprise in his voice. “I remembered the things you told me, which helped me a lot. But I also had my Protector. He managed to break me out of a hallucination I got stuck in.”

“I see. Despite your inexperience, you may have quite a lot of tolerance towards Demons,” he said. “Normally, once you start seeing things or getting lost in visions, it’s pretty much game over.”

“What do you think happened to Kat?” I asked.

He looked puzzled, which made me frown.

“The Paladin who was the first to disappear...”

“Oh.”

At least learn the names of the people you employ to protect you! I scolded him internally.

“I saw him after he’d killed the other Paladin, Christian.”

“It might all have been part of your vision,” he replied. “It’s best not to think too much about it.”

“But considering how many people have disappeared after entering the lower deck, shouldn’t it have been full of corpses???”

“Again, it’s best not to dwell on such things. It’s quite possible that if you die inside this particular Demon’s domain, then your entire body is consumed. Or maybe they’re all stacked on the bottom floor... who knows.”

I sighed. “I feel like I contributed nothing to this.”

Owl shrugged. “Possibly true, but you gained a lot.”

I couldn’t help but agree with that. Perhaps I’d gained a lot more than I really wanted.

“What happens now? Do you have other Quests?”

Owl stopped and turned to look at me with his goggled eyes. Then he flashed me a grin of his ugly teeth. “This is the end of my tutelage. Good job, Pipsqueak, you didn’t die.”

“That’s very anticlimactic.”

“Would you prefer that I died in your arms and passed the mantle on to you?”

“No, but—”

He slapped me on the shoulder with a surprising amount of strength. “You did well, Ryūta.”

I frowned at the finality of his words. “You promised to tell me about Exorcist Specialisations, not to mention Ward Crafting.”

“How about we get something to eat first.”

—Patreon-exclusive Copy—
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka "Dosei")—

“We should probably find Rana and Lukas first. If we’ve been missing for three days they probably think we’re dead...”

“Wanna play a prank on them?”

I shook my head in disbelief. Maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing that we’d be parting ways.