

Questing for Knowledge

With Ortis not three days behind us, we were beset by the first of what would doubtlessly be many trials and tribulations. In this case, my problems arrived in the form of pirates. They seemed to be based out of a large, steel-hulled cargo ship. Half a dozen speedboats came after us apparently feeling the Rose Thorn to be easy pickings as she appeared to be only a wood-sided frigate.

They were fatally mistaken.

Even as the pirates called to us over loudspeakers to stand to and prepare to be boarded, the captain and I were examining some of the instruments on the bridge. What they told us was that this particular world that we were sailing through allowed a mixture of certain magics and technologies. A very good combination at that. The captain and I shared a quick smile and commenced giving orders.

My crew already stood at general quarters. When the order came, they fired cannon on the speedboats quickly and accurately. The boats managed to fire off one shoulder-launched rocket which went wide and a few bursts of machine gun fire before the last of the attack craft exploded and sank. The Rose Thorns' cannons were magically enhanced and fired magically-augmented loads. Her crews were well trained and spent a lot of time in live-fire drills. And it paid off.

Now, with technology available to me from all across the technologically friendly worlds of the Probability Maze, one might wonder just why I chose to arm my flag ship with cannons instead of particle beams or rail guns or similar high tech weaponry. The answer is easy. The laws of technology vary throughout the worlds just as much as the laws of magic. As the machines become more complicated, it takes smaller and smaller differences between worlds to affect the performance or even the very functioning of the device in question. Cannons are very simple. Therefore, it takes a very great change in the physical laws to stop their functioning (although a few minor changes in chemical functionality can wreak havoc on even something so simple as cannons and heavy mortars). Still, something like chemicals working differently tends to occur on much fewer worlds than changes to high energy wave lengths and electrical pulse patterning.

Also, I just like cannons.

With their outriders defeated, I immediately ordered our course changed to intercept the cargo ship. My marines lined the deck, patiently awaiting their orders, but they were no longer wearing their traditional garb. Instead, they wore modern body armor, which had been magically enhanced, and carried laser rifles and stunners. Despite my preference for cannons, I make every effort to see to it that my people are equipped with the very best gear. In particular, I liked to take the best parts of both magic and technology when I could. After silencing the few defensive guns the enemy ship had, I sent the marines across in a boarding action. Twenty minutes later, I walked the deck of the opposing ship, reviewing the people my marines had captured. Fifty odd pirates and a dozen people who were being held for ransom. My crew had taken no casualties, a fact that I was proud of and let be known.

It was obvious that those being held prisoner had been abused. This angered me, so I had all the pirates hung even as I freed the hostages. And one of those hostages turned out to be Hilda Greystone. A member of one of the great houses of the Probability Maze. Upon learning that fact, I immediately began reassessing the whole pirate encounter. Indeed, it seemed I might have been a bit hasty in hanging the crew... even though they did deserve it. Hilda claimed she'd been captured

while unconscious from a drunken party aboard her yacht. She had been unable to free herself and too embarrassed to call any of her family members for help. I rather tended to doubt her story. It seemed far more likely that she had been the one in charge of the pirates and had placed herself in a cell when it became obvious her forces were losing. However, I couldn't prove this and it was actually to my benefit not to.

We sailed away with the cargo ship slowly sinking in our wake.

Over dinner in my cabin, I informed Miss Greystone that I'd mirrored back to my family that we had rescued her and that all was well. If she was indeed pirating, this would prevent her from trying to kill me. It would also most likely prevent her from summoning her family to free her. None of the great houses wanted to war with Diamond. We went to great efforts to ensure that the other powers would not willingly fight us at all unless they absolutely had to. However, according to her story, I'd saved her. That story would work for us both. And I'd make sure that word of that spread.

At the first large port we came across, I rented a mansion and hosted a large gala celebrating the release of all the hostages and prisoners. The local governor and the city mayor were in attendance amongst others and I was pleased to introduce all the former captives to them. I was not particularly surprised to note that the governor and Miss Greystone already knew each other. A fact that fit in rather well with both her story and my suspicions. Regardless of where the truth actually lay, a subdued Hilda Greystone took her leave of me after the celebration.

We sailed with the morning tide.

Three bad storms, one great sea serpent, and two now deceased krakens later, we arrived at the far distant trading port and fortress city of Dul Malice. This was the very edge of house Daemon's territory. The Rose Thorn anchored well out of range of the fortress' defensive guns and a squad of marines rowed me and my horse Juji ashore in a longboat. Dul Malice was located within a world where only rudimentary technology worked but most of the common magics worked well. Therefore, the marines and I were dressed in our more traditional clothing. For myself, this meant a creme riding dress with green trim and thigh high boots. The only jewelry I wore was the emerald necklace I'd won from Daddy. Additionally, I carried a couple of bags with technological equipment that I'd be needing further along my path. Or, to be more accurate, Juji carried these bags. He was such a sweet horse. At least he was until someone upset him. I did actually carry a travel bag but it was light and easily managed.

The lieutenant leading the marines again offered for himself and his team to join me as I fed my horse an apple while we walked ashore. Once more, I refused and politely thanked him. This was my quest. I intended to find the Book of Knowledge and I intended to do it myself. With occasional help, granted, but primarily by myself. As the marines began rowing back to the ship and Juji ate the last of his apple, a half demon dressed in fine clothing walked up to me.

"Welcome to Dul Malice," he greeted me with a silken voice. "Who might you be and what is your business?"

"I am the Lady Clarissa Dyle," I replied with a faint smile. "My business here is to pass through. Although, I must admit that I am considering opening a Dyle Alchemical store here." It would actually take quite a while before I'd be able to expand the company out this far. Still, there would be a lot of benefits to opening a branch here. He stood there thinking for a moment before his

eyes widened slightly.

“I take it that by Clarissa Dyle you mean Duchess Clarissa of House Diamond?” he said more than asked.

“Take it as you will,” I replied easily. “I am the same person either way. Now, who might you be?” House Daemon was made up mostly of various demons and half demons. Most were spawned from creatures and peoples from the various pseudo hells scattered around the Probability Maze. However, every so often they actually got a halfbreed from one of the truly hellspawned. The House Daemon also got the occasional demon who claimed to be escaping hell itself. Due to this most interesting makeup, House Daemon saw more intrigue in a day than Diamond had in an entire year.

And that was saying something.

“Ahh. Please forgive my lapse in manners. I am Lord Corin Mannus, the Darkseer. Dul Malice is my city.”

“Which would make you a lord of House Daemon,” I acknowledged with a nod. “I am pleased to meet you Lord Mannus.”

“Please, call me Corin,” he replied smoothly. “Are you seeking accommodations for this evening? If so, I can suggest no finer place than the Golden Pit. It features first-class dining and the rooms are as comfortable as they are secure.”

“That sounds ideal,” I told him and he immediately took my hand, placed it upon his arm. I think he had originally thought to carry my travel bag, however, he most perspicaciously changed his mind about doing so. With a bright smile, Lord Mannus promptly began leading me through the sizable city. His city. It had been a long time since I’d been through any area controlled by House Daemon. This was my first time doing so without one of the family accompanying me. As always, I was impressed with the size of the angelic temple as well as the amount of traffic the temple received. I mentioned this to my guide.

“Oh, indeed. While the true hell certainly has many spies and agents here, there are many, many more who are trying to escape their old lives or what is in their blood. The temples of the angels, arch-angels, and the Creator are some of the most popular places in the realm.”

“Fascinating,” I replied, as the mostly demonic crowd moved about its business. Demons and halfbreeds clinging to the hope of salvation. But then, weren’t we all?

Eventually, we arrived at the Golden Pit. Despite the name, aside from all the demons, it seemed like any number of fine inns I’ve stayed at on dozens of worlds. With the saddlebags over my shoulder, a stableboy with glowing red eyes and one of my silver pieces led Juji away to the stables around back.

Trumpets blared and the front doors opened. My half demon guide bowed me towards the entrance and I rolled my eyes causing him to laugh.

A few minutes later, the desk clerk asked, “Will you be staying long?” as he handed me the key to my rooms.

“No, just the one evening,” I answered.

“Are you leaving my fair city so quickly?” Corin asked.

“I’m afraid so,” I replied with a smile. “I have business that takes me elsewhere.”

“Alas, I feared as much,” he declared melodramatically causing me to laugh. “I suppose we’ll just have to wait a bit on that Dyle Alchemical store. I take it that you’re going to be traveling to Coventry? Don’t look so surprised. It’s not as if there are any inland roads from Dul Malice leading anywhere else. Coventry is the closest large city. And it is a place where many roads meet.”

“You are of course quite correct, sir,” I told him as he led me to the lift. “Covetry is my next stop.” An innhop opened the doors and we stepped inside. Once the doors had closed and I’d told the innhop which floor I was going to, he spoke into a voice tube. Immediately, the car began smoothly rising.

“In that case, I would be honored if you would join me. Tomorrow, I will be leading my tax procession to Covetry. My caravan is rather slow, however, it does have the benefit of being heavily guarded. Sadly, I’ve been having some small trouble with bandits lately. I’m sure you know nothing about that?”

“Nothing whatsoever,” I agreed with a frown, looking him in the eyes. “My business is of a personal nature and a lady does not deal with bandits.” Except to occasionally kill their leader when my king ordered it. But that didn’t happen very often and I certainly wouldn’t mention it aloud. Nor would he pick it from my mind despite any powers he might have developed in that direction. My emerald necklace wasn’t just a pretty bit of work, it had been magically augmented by a master enchanter to mentally shield the wearer. A little something Daddy had neglected to mention when we’d been gambling for it.

“Of course,” he agreed every bit as smoothly as before. “However, being a half demon, I am suspicious by nature. Please forgive me even mentioning it to you.” I had a feeling his sense of humor had once again been set loose but I nodded as though he were completely serious. “Naturally, I am most honored that you’ll be joining me and my little procession.”

“I don’t recall agreeing to join you Lord Mannus,” I replied as the car stopped. The innhop pulled a lever and the doors opened.

“You haven’t, but of course you will,” the half demon lord replied. “And please, call me Corin. You see,” he explained as we walked towards my suite, “Joining me would be a great gesture of goodwill on your part towards the house of Daemon. And, should we be attacked by bandits, word of Daemon and Diamond fighting together would surely leak out. Think of the goodwill such news would generate! Of course, that’s unlikely to happen. My tax caravans are more like army maneuvers than anything else. I doubt anyone will be foolish enough to so much as show a frown at us.”

“What an interesting interpretation of events, both current and potential,” I mused aloud, unlocking my door. “However, a lady does not go fighting in battles and such. It would be most unseemly.”

“As you wish,” he nodded, stepping past me. “Please allow me a quick, security inspection of your rooms. As I said, this inn has a good reputation and I’ve never had trouble here. But, I’ve never had a royal member of one of the great houses staying here either.” Not really trusting him, I followed him as we went through the sitting room, checked out the coat closet, into the small common room, and then into each of the bedrooms and bathrooms as well as the closets. “Good. It seems your rooms are just as secure as advertised. Now, additionally, I would like to introduce you to the Baroness Solla Vizun. She is the ruler of Covetry and the lands surrounding it. Gaining her goodwill will undoubtedly smooth your way.”

“Not to mention slowing it down a great deal,” I muttered to myself but he overheard me.

“That it truly will. However, is not the journey itself worth as much as the destination? For immortals such as ourselves, should we not stop and smell the flowers along the way? I believe that’s how the saying goes. Besides, as I recall, ladies do not rush about.”

“I will give it due consideration,” I told him, trying not to frown.

“Please do,” he replied, his face serious except for his eyes. “We leave from the north gate

an hour after sunrise. I have a wagon that we'll be riding in and will provide the morning meal."

"You still seem to be presuming that I will indeed be joining you," I replied, eyeing him a bit askance.

"I am. It would be the wise thing for you to do. If my caravan is attacked and you aren't there, word of your convenient appearance and disappearance will spread. Tensions between our houses would undoubtedly rise. On the other hand, traveling with me will certainly mean an easing of tensions between our houses. You are rumored to be as wise as you are beautiful. I have not doubt that I will be seeing you tomorrow at the north gate." And with that he stepped outside the doors, closing them behind him. Shaking my head, I magically sealed the doors and set a barrier against eavesdropping or anyone looking inside or scying.

I had a feeling that the demons and half demons were just working up to being annoying. But it had been a long sail and I needed rest. I'd have to dedicate time to thinking about them and their machinations later.

Without further ado, I stripped down and climbed into bed. My first evening back on land after a long sail always felt a little weird. Rather than wasting several hours in restless tossing and turning, I cast a minor sleep spell upon myself. Tomorrow would undoubtedly be a long day.

Ten minutes later I slept.