

62 – The Infested Armoury

“Mimics? You’re telling me that those objects are monsters?”

“If I’m understanding what I’m seeing correctly, then yes.”

“I’ve never fought a Mimic before,” Rana admitted.

“Nor I,” I followed.

“They’re not so common in Arley,” Renji explained, “But I’ve fought them a few times in Lacksmey. The small one, like that trunk *over there*,” he said and pointed, “They are simple enough to slay, but the greater ones, like the one resembling a bookcase, they’re trouble. And any Mimic that looks human is really dangerous. They have a name of their own: *Mimic Knights*.

“They only evolve into humanoid shapes after eating a lot and living long lives. Eventually, they become true Mimics that can easily take on any humanoid shape and have enough power to wipe out an experienced party of Adventurers.”

I swallowed hard.

“What are they doing in the city?”

Renji shook his head. “They can’t have been here for that long. They must’ve been smuggled into the city. But it doesn’t make sense, there are quite a few people with Tracking abilities in Helmstatter and they learn to pick up on the scent of Mimics quite early on. I don’t get how these three could’ve avoided attention.”

“I think something bad is brewing in Helmstatter,” I commented. “Charles received a Tracking contract for someone that Rana, Lukas, and I escorted from Ochre, but he said that he was unable to track her, as though someone was deliberately messing with her scent.”

Rana tensed at the mention of the Tracker’s name.

“That’s not great,” Renji remarked. “If someone has the power to obscure the Tracking powers of a Hunter and their bonded animals, then they would have the power to also smuggle such creatures into the city...”

“Someone like an Illusionist?” Rana asked.

Renji nodded.

“Is that a Role?”

“It’s a specialisation for Spellhand,” she explained.

“And Priest,” Renji added.

“Really?”

“Yep, I found that out just a couple months ago.”

I feel like I learn about more-and-more Roles every week...

“**There are quite a few,**” Armen replied.

Suddenly an idea sprang into my mind and I handed Rana my Singing Branch, then put the Whistle to my lips again and blew the deep bassy note.

Since my hand wasn’t on the staff, there came no uncomfortable reverberation, which Armen seemed pleased with, at least if I was understanding his vague body language correctly.

The air in the Armoury once again came alive with the scent-trails and something I had subconsciously noticed was now confirmed to me: the colour of the trails, at least the ones connected to Rana, Renji, and I were all matching the colours of our auras. With this knowledge in hand, I scanned the hundreds-upon-hundreds of coloured tendrils, looking for something that stood out.

“I’ll go tell the Guild Receptionist to clear the Hall,” Renji told us and left.

The fact that the hall would need to be cleared didn’t bode well, but I trusted his judgement on this, particularly since he was the only one here who had fought Mimics before.

As I looked through the many different scents, my mind started to become heavy and a headache was beginning to form in behind my eyes, like a pressure building. But, for better-or-worse, I was fairly accustomed to the sensation at this point.

I started to notice patterns in what colours were tied to what, even to the point where I thought I could tell if a weapon had been used to draw blood. Generally, the weapons and armour had earthy hues, with those that I believed to have been used in battle also having some rusty spots on them, almost like dried blood. The books and tomes were generally sandy or orange in scent hues, while the trinkets seemed as manifold as the people who had no doubt carried them.

Alongside these many uniform trails was the ringed trail of Renji, which was a sort of auburn, not to mention my crow familiar’s black-blue scent, and of course the red-spotted black trails of the three Mimics. As I looked closer, the one coming from the armour-set was definitely the most pronounced, followed by the one from the bookcase, and then the one from the trunk.

As though noticing my gaze falling on it, a strange inhuman-sounding giggle filled the air.

Tihihi...

I felt the hairs on my neck stand up.

“Well that’s unsettling,” Rana commented.

I couldn't shake the feeling that the small trunk Mimic was a child, while the other two were an adolescent and adult.

“Such thinking will dull your judgement and decision-making,” Armen scolded me. **“Do not humanise monsters.”**

I'm trying... This is still all so new to me, so how am I to just discard my inherent sympathy?

“Mimics and other mischievous creatures exploit your feelings whenever they can.”

Have you dealt with them before?

“No, but I once oversaw the recovery of a Party who lost three members to a Mimic Knight. They are not to be taken lightly.”

I tried to put the worry from my mind, but couldn't help but wonder why the Mimics remained here without making too big a fuss. As I looked at their trails, it was clear that the smallest one, the trunk, was the one that moved about the most, while the armour and bookcase Mimics only showed that they had repositioned themselves a few times.

While looking over their trails, I saw a faint trail that bound them all together. It was teal with spots of beige, but it was so very faint that it quickly disappeared from my vision when the light coming through the windows shifted imperceptibly.

“I think I saw the scent of the person who brought them here,” I told Rana.

“Troubling,” Renji said, nearly making me drop the whistle in my hand in surprise.

“You're back,” I replied, trying not to let my brief shock carry in my voice. I put the whistle into my bag again, then grabbed the staff Rana was holding for me.

“They've sent people out into the courtyard,” Renji said. “When they heard a Mimic Knight was here, they didn't waste a moment to leave.”

“Are any of them going to help us.”

Renji nodded, “Yes, but you won't like it I'm guessing.”

I looked back over his shoulder and saw three Witch Hunters standing there, in their usual gear of wide-brimmed peaked hats and storm-coats.

“They better not try anything,” Rana commented.

“Aside from their beliefs, it is no bad thing to have people like them backing us up.”

“I will burn them to cinders!” Seramosa suddenly screamed, hanging upside down near the rafters above.

If you want me to help you exact your vengeance, you must learn to control your impulses. Patience now will repay itself manifold in the future.

Renji gave me a quizzical glance. It was unnerving that he could tell when I was communing with my familiars.

“Do you have a plan?” I asked. “You’re the one with experience when it comes to Mimics.”

The three Witch Hunters walked up to us at the entrance of the Armoury. It was getting far too crowded for all of us in here and it was hardly a great place to fight any competent foe.

“Exorcist Ryūta,” said the man at the fore of their group. The blood in my veins froze over when I recognised his voice. “It has been some time since last we met.”

This is the guy from Ochre!

“**My functions are yet my own,**” Armen told me. “**I will defend you from them, if necessary.**”

Rana immediately got in front of me, putting her hand on her sword. Renji looked between us and quickly put two-and-two together.

“There isn’t time for meaningless drama,” he then declared, and the Witch Hunter nodded. “How about we do a quick round of introductions, and then we can figure out how to deal with these critters.”

The Witch Hunter’s sharp eyes scanned the room, then he asked, “Are we not at risk of attack, standing here?”

“Mimics are ambush predators,” Renji explained. “Even though there are three of them here, they will not openly attack us unless provoked or if it seems possible that they can take us out immediately.”

“Not even the Mimic Knight?” the Witch Hunter asked sceptically.

Renji glanced to where the exquisite armours stood at the other end of the room. “Fair point, let us go outside first.”

Sera grumbled some kind of invective, but stayed put near the rafters, while the six of us went out onto the second-floor landing. Lukas and Elye looked between us and the three newcomers.

“You should go wait out in the courtyard,” I told them, and while Lukas seemed poised to argue, he left as soon as Elye started bounding towards the stairs.

The lead Witch Hunter followed Elye with his hard gaze, then said to me, “You have made friends with Elfin. Admirable.”

I couldn’t tell if he was bullshitting or not, but I suppose it was rare for them to leave their Enclave, and so to have one following me was perhaps considered quite an honour. Although, given that Elfin revered Necromancers and Exorcists, perhaps it was for the Witch Hunters nothing less than an admission of guilt of all the evil things they suspected me to be a party to.

The man held out a hand and I eyed it warily, before a nudge from Renji made me reach out and grasp it. His grip was so strong that it felt like he was trying to crush my hand.

“My name is Oliver Smile,” he said. “The two with me are Garven and Merlisse.”

The woman, Merlisse I guessed, nodded, while the other remained stone-faced. It was hard to tell her gender from the obscuring hat and coat, but perhaps that was intentional. One thing was for sure though, these were not the same two he had been with in Ochre, which I thought was odd, but perhaps Witch Hunter grouping was not such a permanent thing.

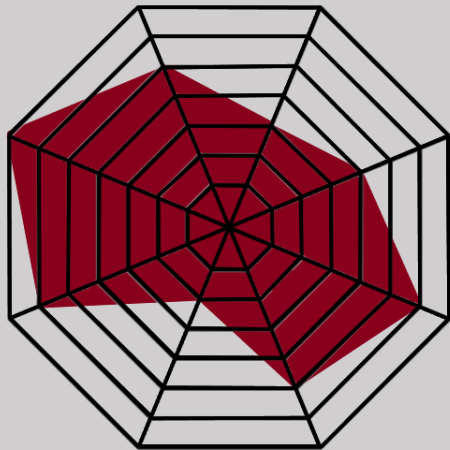
Oliver reached into an inner pocket of his dark-brown storm-coat and retrieved something that he handed me casually. My eyes widened when I saw what it was he held in his hand: a Guild Card.

“I’m not showing you my Card,” I replied immediately.

His face twisted into a predatory grin, before he said, “Consider this a gesture of goodwill.”

“His fellows are staring quite intensely at your hand,” Armen warned me.

I took the offered Card and looked down at it, frowning at the information it bore:

<i>‘OLIVER SMILE’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Witch Hunter</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>31</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>D</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>C</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>A</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>E</i>	SOUL: <i>A</i>	STRENGTH: <i>S</i>	VITALITY: <i>B</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Paladin V’</i> <i>‘Witch Hunter II’</i> <i>‘Huntsman’s Guile’</i> <i>‘Sangre Mort Wielder’</i> <i>‘Order Brand (Venator Maledictus)’</i>			

I almost tapped the card to expand the skill list tied to Witch Hunter, but figured it was probably not worth risking the ire of these people more than was already inherent simply due to the relation between our Roles.

Wait, is that a Possessed Weapon on his list?

“**Fight fire with fire is a saying that the Witch Hunters are wont to use.**”

I frowned. I didn't like that in the slightest.

After handing it back to him, I looked at Renji and asked, “So what is the plan?”

“I should be able to slay the small Mimic quite easily, although perhaps Rana will want the honours?”

Rana nodded simply. “Just tell me where to strike.”

“Below the lid of its trunk body is the brain. If you can pierce its top and strike it, do that, otherwise you'll need to get it to open up and strike it through the roof of its mouth.”

“As for the Greater Mimic and the Knight, we will need to work together. It is quite possible that we will have to fight both at once. Although the Knight looks smaller than the Greater one, it is stronger and very fast.”

“Like a Hobgoblin?” asked Merlisse.

“Stronger than that, faster too,” he answered.

Garven and Merlisse exchanged worried glances. I wondered if they were used to dealing with creatures, or if they spent all their time fighting Otherworlders like Exorcists and Summoners...

“Does any of you have access to frost magic?”

Each of us looked at the person next to us, but it was very obvious that the answer was a resounding ‘no’.

“Is that one of their weaknesses?” I asked.

“For most monsters that can transform, frost magic is quite a boon as it slows their powers down or even prevents them outright if sufficiently powerful.”

“Are they weak to fire?” I asked.

“If you can hit their flesh, then they're no different than other creatures.”

I thought about it for a moment, before asking, “What if I cook them from the outside?”

Renji chuckled, “That's brutal, but it should definitely work.”

I noticed the wary glances the three Witch Hunters were given me, but ignored them. “I'll try and kill the Greater Mimic then,” I said.

“I'll come protect you as soon as I kill the small one,” Rana immediately added.

Renji nodded. “Then it's the four of us against the Knight,” he said to the Witch Hunters.

Oliver drew his companions aside and they started talking about what equipment they had on them. Garven began pulling a heavy crossbow from where it had been slung over his back, while Merlisse withdrew a spear folded into three that she quickly snapped together to form a weapon over a metre-and-a-half long with a wicked hook-like point, similar to the tip of a cruel hunting arrow

meant to inflict a lot of internal bleeding. Their leader drew a small handheld crossbow and a longsword with red-glowing curling script along its fuller; no doubt the same one listed on his Guild Card.

Each of the three Witch Hunters intoned some litany that sounded almost religious:

“Hunters of Cursed Foe,”

“Watchful Eyes in the Dark,”

“We spark the flame,”

“Venator Maledictus.”

I activated my Spirit Sight as they spoke their words and saw how their auras went from erratic and moving, just like those of any normal person who experienced thoughts and emotions, and became flat and static, like someone whose mind was utterly quiet and to whom emotions were void.

“We are ready,” said Oliver Smile.