

WARNING: This story contains descriptions of violence and bodily injury.

“Monsters”

Ben plunked down in a chair in Chief Zane’s office in Cornelia City’s Adventurers’ Guild. Beside him sat a massive panda Being. He was more fit and athletic-looking than most of his bear-like kin, but he still retained a good deal of weight and Ben wondered how the little chair was holding him up.

Ben kicked back and folded his arms behind his head. Unlike most of his magi brethren, he had chosen to forego the typical “staff-and-robos” look. He wore a set of lightweight leather and chainmail armor, and a small rapier was sheathed at his side. He preferred it this way: it provided more protection than simple robes and at the same time provided the illusion that he was some sort of duelist instead of a mage. He liked catching his targets off-guard.

Plus, it didn’t make him look any more effeminate than he already did.

Chief Zane smacked Ben’s feet off his desk and began the briefing. “Gentlemen, we have a contract from Cornelia Defense Corps. It seems they’re having a little Demon trouble.” He held up a sketch of a well-built tiger Demon. “Kinaxan Daggerclaw. Half-Demon. Age 31, stands 6-foot-10. Likes to hunt strong Beings and eat them. Wanted dead or alive for wiping out a few military outposts. Lately he’s attacked three neighboring villages and killed thirteen.”

Ben grimaced and said, “The villages around here have few defenses save for some guard posts from the city. If he’s not wiping them out completely, I’m guessing he’s baiting us?”

“That is correct, Kitsune,” the Chief said. He always referred to guild members by their codenames. “He’s hoping for someone a little more challenging. Daggerclaw only feeds on Beings that can actually put up a fight. Those guards he slew were just to get our attention.”

The giant panda next to Ben grunted. “Let me guess, you want me and this... *idiot* to take him out?” he said, pointing a thumb in Ben’s direction.

Ben looked a bit annoyed by the insult, but he was used to it. The panda was not the most popular guy in the guild. While most of the guild was actually relatively progressive toward Creatures—most of its members coming from a Creature-friendly city-state, after all—Malcolm was a refugee from the neighboring city-state of Kandarthia, which had just recently been violently taken over by Demons. If he even *suspected* you of being a Creature, he would make it quite clear he didn't like you.

The Chief replied, "Affirmative, Tuppenny. Daggerclaw is *not* a target for our initiates. You and Kitsune are the only ones available at the moment who can handle this. Speaking of Daggerclaw, his movements suggest that his next stop will be the town of Melmond, to the west. You two will go there immediately and intercept him."

Ben and Malcolm looked at each other. Ben grinned sheepishly and extended a hand. "Partners?"

Malcolm just looked at Ben's hand as if it were toxic.

Ben and Malcolm had taken a Guild gryphon cart and arrived in Melmond that night. They booked a room at the local inn and settled in. Before they went to sleep, they had a drink at the bar. Malcolm had a mug of cheap ale. Ben had a mug of root beer.

Malcolm quickly chugged down his ale and went to their room. After Ben had joked around with the barkeep about pandas and alcohol, he gulped down his own drink and followed Malcolm. He found Malcolm in their room, sharpening his greatsword.

Ben spoke up gingerly, wincing at the massive blade. "So, uh... Got a plan?"

Malcolm stopped sharpening for a moment and glared at Ben. "Yeah. Stay out of my way, clown," he grunted with a slight slur.

“Clown’? That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever called me!”

Malcolm just growled and kept sharpening.

Ben shrugged and hopped up on the other bed. Long after Malcolm had dozed off, he was still wide awake. He was too excited to sleep.

Ben got up early the next morning and put on his armor. Malcolm was a heavy sleeper, and that ale didn’t help that fact any. Ben was very easily able to slip out of the inn and outside the town.

Ben stepped lightly along the trail going east. There were nothing but grassy hills as far as his eyes could see, with a few trees scattered about. After he had left the town behind a ways, he stopped to watch the sun rise.

Suddenly, he heard a roar behind him. Before he could turn around, a muscular tiger Demon was at upon him. The tiger extended a set of long, gleaming claws and slashed at Ben’s back. The claws met nothing but air and the illusion vanished. The real Ben appeared a few dozen yards away and Kinaxan just glared at him.

A smile crept across Kinaxan’s face and he cackled a bit. “*Finally!* A Being who can actually fight back! Pity you’re so scrawny. Still, you’re lucky you were upwind of me. That illusion had no scent.”

Ben grinned in a mean sort of way. “I like to think of myself as ‘lithe.’ And if you really want a meal, we could wait around for my partner to show up.”

Kinaxan chuckled. “Adventurers, eh? ‘Bout time. Those guards were barely even enough to be called an appetizer.”

“You’re lucky it’s just me and not my partner. He’d take your head off as soon as look at you, but me? Nah, too squeamish for that. So what do you say we cut to the chase and slap some bracers on your wrists?”

Kinaxan grinned wickedly and lunged. “You’re a funny guy! I’m gonna enjoy ‘playing’ with you!” Ben launched a quick volley of fireballs, but they barely even singed the Demon. “You’re gonna have to try harder than that!”

The tiger slashed at Ben, but this time instead of simply fading he split into four duplicates that ran in different directions. Kinaxan was clearly not used to fighting an illusionist, but he wasn’t surprised for long. With terrifying speed, he dashed from clone to clone, slashing and dispelling them. As he gained on the final clone, he crowed “Gotcha!!”

Kinaxan’s eyes bugged out as he slashed at the final clone. Hidden inside the clone he was so sure was real was a small mana-bomb. The blast wasn’t enough to hurt him, but it did knock him flat on his back. He opened his eyes just in time to see Ben grab the top of his head with a flaming hand.

Kinaxan snarled at the slight burn and gave Ben a crushing kick to the torso. Ben flew several yards and rolled to a stop. Before he could try to get back up, Kinaxan was standing over him. He cried out as he felt his legs shred. He grabbed at the wounds, crying as blood coated his hands. “Game over,” Kinaxan growled, and slashed Ben’s throat out.

The Demon raised his head and let out a triumphant roar, followed by mad cackling. He licked the blood off his claws, and looked back down at his prize. He flinched violently.

Ben’s body had turned to dust that blew away in the wind. Even the blood on Kinaxan’s fingers was now just a coating of dust.

Kinaxan jumped when someone cleared their throat behind him. He whirled around to see Ben standing before him, panting lightly but unharmed. He looked at the dust on his fingers again, then back at Ben. “How did you do that,” he growled. “I could taste your blood!”

Ben just gave him an aloof look and simply said: "Hypnosis." With that, Ben snapped his fingers, and the world around them shattered into dust and blew away. Soon they were standing in a pitch-black void, with themselves as the sole occupants.

Kinaxan's head whipped all around and he snarled. "Impossible! I have a *mind-shield!!*"

"Which is why I grabbed your head."

The tiger looked stunned.

"That's right. When I grabbed your head, I wasn't trying to burn you. I was probing your mind shield just long enough to slip in my 'Seed of Madness.' Now the seed has sprouted, and when it blooms?" Ben gave the tiger a wicked grin. "Your will lose your mind. *Literally.*"

For the first time, the tiger Demon looked very afraid. Ben's evil grin evaporated and he laughed. "Just kidding! Like I said, I don't have the guts to kill anyone myself. I'll just slap some enchanted bracers on your wrists, and..."

Ben's voice trailed off and he appeared to be looking at something that wasn't there. "Malcolm? What are you—hey, *wait!!*"

All at once, Kinaxan felt a sharp pain in his neck, and Ben vanished. The void slowly became filled with searing light...

Ben's gut was in upheaval. A little blood, he could handle. A headless, gushing neck? Not so much. Malcolm stood nearby, wiping the blood off his sword with a towel.

Ben looked up at him and spoke between coughs and hacks. "Dammit Malcolm, I had him! Was that really necessary?"

Malcolm just glared down at him. "That is the *proper* way to deal with Demons."

Ben stood up, still coughing and spitting bile. "You really need to lighten up, you know that?"

Malcolm spat at the Demon's severed head. "Never. These monsters need to be taught a lesson. In fact..." he said, brandishing his greatsword straight at Ben. "I've half a mind to give you the same, Buran. No *Being* has fur that color."

Ben stepped back and growled, "You're out of your mind."

Malcolm grunted and lowered his sword. "Fortunately for you, I've read your file. It seems you're 'officially' a Being. But, your mother..." he said, glaring straight into Ben's eyes. "I understand she's an Angel?"

Ben's hackles became erect in less than a second. "Touch her and I'll burn every inch of skin off your body," he snarled.

Malcolm just huffed and reached down to pick up Kinaxan's head by the hair. "Weren't you the squeamish one? But you're right, I can't just go around killing every Creature I come across. But..." He turned and began to walk. "One day, I will free Furrae from these monsters. I *swear* it. And if you actually do have a brain, you'll join me."

Ben stared a hole in the back of the panda's head as he walked away. "*Who's* the monster?" he muttered, and began to follow.

END