

43 – A Siren and its Song IV

Armen was working his healing magic to mend my stump, and had promised that he could regrow my lost hand, but said that it would take time. For some reason, the parts he regrew looked like charcoal, somehow similar to Seramosa’s Ifrit horns. He said not to worry.

The pain from the moment had been so overwhelming that I’d passed out immediately, which I was glad for, since I’d woken up to Armen’s voice, while his magic was closing the wound. I’d lost blood, but not as much as I should have, and whatever magic Armen used, it pushed the pain away.

In the end, Leopold had cut off just my right hand, leaving me with my left as a ‘mercy’. The shadowy eagle had disappeared, but I knew it would pop out if I tried anything, and the enormous frost-blue spider still clung to the trees directly above me, waiting to strike, while the two Pridelings were guarding me. The three familiars all had visible burn scars, no doubt thanks to Seramosa, with the spider having nearly half of its body blackened and melted like wax.

For some reason, Seramosa had not reappeared like Armen, once the eagle vanished, but while I wanted to tempt fate and tried to command her to set the Summoner ablaze, she refused to show up. It made me realise that I truly had no control over her.

“She is terrified of that Watcher,” Armen said, as though able to read her feelings.

Why?

“Fire cannot harm it, and they are some of the entities that make their hunting grounds within the in-between. If Seramosa has existed there for as long as I assume, then she has learnt to avoid them.”

But she charged right at it, I argued back.

“Perhaps she hoped she could slay it before it could attack. But do not worry about that now. Focus on the present.”

I looked over to Leopold and saw that he was working a sewing needle through my severed hand, while muttering something that sounded like a spell. He had said that he would make sure I would be obedient and I did not like what my mind was imagining.

Seramosa, please! Appear and burn this madman to ashes!

The Ifrit once again refused to obey.

“Give her time. Once the Summoner is properly distracted, perhaps she will be inclined to do as you ask.”

I learnt what Leopold had meant by ‘obedience’ when he finished his arcane work on the hand he had cut from me. My stump was already halfway to resembling a palm, though the joint was stiff and immovable for now.

“You are familiar with Voodoo Dolls,” he said, not waiting for me to answer. “This piece I took from you is now linked to your body through the Curse of the Excruciating Bond.”

I shuddered.

“I suppose a demonstration is in order, such that you understand your place *properly*.”

“No, that’s okay,” I started, not wanting to be shown what I knew he wanted to show.

He completely ignored my words and lifted the hand-doll into the air. Several stitches had been made in the skin and it was of an unhealthy brownish colour, like leather, and utterly unrecognisable as my former hand. He took a little pine needle from the ground and shoved it into the middle finger, the needle easily penetrating the leathery skin.

A jab of excruciating pain shot through my left thigh, as though a spear had gone straight through it, and I fell to the ground with a scream, despite knowing the pain was entirely in my mind as there was no hole in my thigh, nor even blood. Armen grunted in pain as well, somehow feeling the same agony that I was experiencing.

Then suddenly it was gone, and I heaved and groaned as I struggled to get back to my feet. I looked up and saw that Leopold had pulled the pine needle out again.

“You understand now the power I hold over you,” he said, his tone calm, which only made it more ominous. “There will be no more delays, or I will put you in a world of pain until your mind breaks and there is nothing but a husk left behind.”

I nodded eagerly, not wanting him to make good on that threat.

“I won’t try to escape, I promise.”

The dark carriage headed south through the rough terrain and forests, dragged by the massive spider, while I sat inside on the opposite side of Leopold. On his shoulder sat a smaller version of the shadowy harpy eagle, but its eyes were closed, and in his right hand was the voodoo doll he’d made.

He seemed to allow Armen to continue healing me, which I thought was odd, and my charcoal-black new hand now had a thumb and part of an index finger.

“Your Protector is a former Adventurer, is it not? A Priest, by the looks of it.”

There was no point in denying it, so I nodded.

“Fascinating. I have not heard of such a thing before. I am glad I let you live. Despite your difficulties with obedience, you are an enigma I’d like to solve.”

I couldn’t tell where this was leading, but my imagination was screaming, “*He want’s to experiment on you!*”

“Your choice to summon an Ifrit while on the run was peculiar as well. It is said they are uncontrollable, and yet, here you are, still living. Even with my Nirvah to herd unruly familiars, I would not attempt to subjugate such a Demon.”

“It sounds as if he would lose control of his familiars if his Soul-Pacted Envoy was to disappear.”

You yourself said that it would not be possible to banish it, since it is bound to him.

“Indeed, but it may be possible to disrupt their bond somehow.”

Leopold looked at the hand that was slowly growing back into something resembling the one he’d cut off, you know, apart from its disturbing texture and colour. “It seems that the nature of your Ifrit is affecting the healing touch of your Protector,” he mused. “I will be interested to see what traits it has once finished.”

Is that true? Is Seramosa affecting the healing process? Is that why my hand looks like charcoal!?

“I am afraid so. I did not know how to tell you.”

I frowned.

“If not for my Protector, I would’ve bled to death.”

“I was prepared to cauterise the wound,” Leopold replied nonchalantly. “Show me your Guild Card. I wish to see this new Pact you have formed.”

I gritted my teeth, but obliged, awkwardly using my left hand to pull it from my belt pouch on my right hip.

The Summoner nodded to himself. “It is as I thought.”

“It’s a forbidden pact,” I agreed.

“Is that what the Owl taught you *this* means?”

I blinked, confused.

Leopold sighed. “The question marks imply that the Pact was not formed with a specific task for the familiar.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your Protector is only listed as a Protector because that is the task you gave it when you formed the bond. You did not give the Ifrit a task when you formed your bond, thus there is no task listed on your Guild Card.”

“Wait, do you mean that I could give any familiar any task I want?”

“Within reason, yes. Pacts formed with a specific bond are easier to control, but limit the familiar’s power. For example, the task of Protector means a familiar can only act to guard you, or, in the rare cases where they possess magic, utilise their magic on you, such as with your Protector’s healing touch.”

“That means that all the types of familiars listed in the Encyclopaedia are wrong!”

“They are not wrong, you just misunderstood them,” Leopold replied. “They are meant to be viewed as recommendations for how to use a familiar. After all, were you to task a Guardian Wraith with being a Tracker, you would see poor results.”

“So my Pact with the Ifrit is not a forbidden one?”

“The Ifrit is a Demon sub-type, so no, it is very forbidden.”

I frowned. Although felt that I had learnt something very important at least.

The next two days we did not leave the carriage, while it moved south nonstop. Unlike with a horse-drawn carriage, there was no need to worry about the mount dragging the vehicle to become fatigue, and thus we covered a vast distance in a fraction of the time it would have taken.

At one point, during the second day, Armen remarked that we’d passed Helmstatter. The revelation made my chest hurt, but I knew I had to bide my time. In hindsight, my previous escape attempt had been foolish, since I didn’t have a proper plan in place for how to get away from the Summoner. I knew that if I wanted to truly escape him, then I need to kill him.

On the third day, we stopped in a village and I was forced to watch as Leopold unleashed his Pridelings, the giant Ethereal Spinner, and his Scenting Tongue on its inhabitants, brutally slaughtering them and leaving their remains for his familiars to gorge themselves on. Nirvah in her harpy eagle form never left his shoulder though.

After the village was emptied of life, Leopold picked the largest house and told me to enter with him. I had to keep myself from pulling out my small blade and lashing out at him, as I stepped over the bodies of the villagers, whose faces were frozen in abject horror.

Leopold pulled out a chair and sat down next to a simple round table that wobbled slightly, pouring himself a mugful of ale from a bottle he’d found.

“You will perform another Contain Spirit for me. But first, eat and drink, replenish your energy.”

I swallowed as I looked at the food that was brought in by the Pridelings, looted from storehouses and other homes. While we’d travelled by the carriage, the food had just been waterskins full of bitter wine and some strangely-sweet flaky biscuits. I’d developed a new fear: what would happen if I got a cavity? Armen had assured me he could heal my teeth as well, which had assuaged me slightly.

Even though I was reluctant, I sat down opposite Leopold, trying not to look at the shadowy bird on his shoulder, while grabbing a bit of everything to eat. There were fruits like pears and apples, as well as root vegetables like carrots and radishes. There was a bit of smoked ham and pork belly as well, which I got the feeling had been stored and kept for an important celebration, like those I’d heard happened around the end of Harvest season.

I washed it all down with some watered-down ale, which, while not exactly to my taste, was a preferable to me over the wine that Leopold fancied. Still, I would’ve given a gold coin just then for a nice hot cup of black tea with lemon.

After finishing the best, most indulgent, meal I’d had in what felt like weeks, Leopold pulled out a whistle that had been carved from a bone and scooted it across the table to me. Then, with an unspoken command, he called the Scenting Tongue into the room. It came crawling through the doorway and up on the ceiling of the wooden house we were in, its eyeless face moving around while its enormous tongue continually covered the nostril-holes that dotted its head with a fresh coat of slobber.

“Are you familiar with the Scenting Tongue?”

I nodded. “Master Owl had a similar Tracker.”

Leopold seemed surprised by this, but then composed himself and said, “Unlike the Prideling imp, it is not from a realm of incorporeal energy, nor is it the soul of something bygone, nor the product of fleshcraft or monstrosity rituals.”

“It is from the world of Merriddia,” I answered, remembering what Owl had told me.

Leopold narrowed his eyes and felt a pressure building on my body, squeezing the air from my lungs, as the hand-doll he held was squeezed in his grasp slightly. I took the hint and shut up. A moment later, he eased his grip and I sucked in a mouthful of air in relief.

“Its main trait is its ability to following scent trails in the air, which is what you will Contain within *this* bone whistle.”

I didn't see how a whistle would be able to be imbued with a scenting ability, but didn't want to argue the logic, as I, first off, had no clue how magic worked in this world, and, secondly, valued my life more than a pointless debate.

“Aside from its powerful tracking ability, the Scenting Tongue also has great tolerance towards extreme temperatures, and can store nutrients from the food it eats and slowly distribute it throughout its body, meaning it only requires feeding once every few weeks.”

Leopold cleared his throat and paused his rambling. He seemed prone to be carried off on tangents, which, if not for his depraved nature or total disregard for human life, might have been endearing, instead it just came off as the mutterings of an insane person. Like a serial killer talking about his favourite doll collection. There was no way it didn't come off creepy and weird. Although saying that, whenever he spoke about something in-depth, it made him slightly more tolerable, so I actually appreciated his ramblings.

“No more time wasted. Contain it within the whistle, then we leave for Harrlev.”

With another unspoken command, the Scenting Tongue released its grip on the ceiling and fell to the floor, spinning to land on its feet.

I got out of the chair and walked closer to the otherworldly creature. Closer than I really wanted to be. In my left hand I held the bone whistle, while I pointed my charcoal black-right hand at the Scenting Tongue. The hand was still immovable, like a fixed prosthetic, and Armen hadn't finished forming the pinkie yet, so it only had four fingers. Still, having something close to a real hand was a comfort. I couldn't stand staring at the stump my arm had become, but now it didn't feel as upsetting.

“What is its name?”

“Widerwärtig,” Leopold answered.

Once again, the Omniglot ability did not translate it. I suppose it made sense that names were not translated, since otherwise I would be introducing myself as ‘Fat Willow’ instead of ‘Ryūta’.

I looked at the Scenting Tongue and reached out with my soul, while intoning the Binding Litany:

*Widerwärtig, Scenting Tongue of Merriddia,
Obey mine desire and render thyself to mine design,
Hark mine words and kneel to mine command,
Lest thy soul be cleft in twain,*

My grasping soul pulled the creature's soul through me, while I went on to the second half.

*Widerwärtig, servant to mine will,
Offer me thy gift of smell,*

*Become one in bond with the object that I wield,
And until thy task has ended,
Obey mine whims and wishes.*

Light in a brownish-reddish hue glowed from the Scenting Tongue and the whistle in my hand, and then the Komodo-Dragon-looking creature vanished and the light from the whistle intensified, before dying down a moment later, when the magic subsided.

I couldn't help myself, and put the whistle to my lips, despite Leopold's angry glare that cleared stated that he wanted it, just like the glasses he had stolen from me.

As I blew the whistle, a bassy-deep sound reverberated, and it was like a thousand strands of floating light became visible to my eyes, each connecting to an object in the room or something that had been in the room but left. Each strand had a unique colour, though for some the variance was so slight that it was hard to distinguish. The sheer magnitude of information gave me an immediate headache, and a moment later, pressure squeezed the air from my lungs and forced me to the ground with a gasp.

Leopold thunder over and picked up the bone whistle that I'd dropped, squeezing the voodoo doll an extra time just to remind me of my place.

“We leave,” he then said and released his squeezing grip on the doll.

I scrambled after him.