

50 – Parasite Insidious I

Ritual requirements:

- *A fitting vessel (Corvids or Rodents are recommended)*
 - *Blood of the Invoker*
 - *Blood of a Stranger*
 - *Scent of Death*

The ritual to summon the Many did not specify if the vessel ought to be alive or not, but I was glad that Elye had killed the crow she brought me, since it felt unnecessarily cruel to summon an apparition into a body with a life still inside. I wasn’t sure how I felt about having a crow familiar, as they were ominous animals, but it was either that or a chubby fieldmouse that Elye had also found for me.

“I need a bit of your blood,” I told her.

Without hesitation she pulled out a little knife and nicked her finger, letting drops fall freely. I scrambled to catch the falling blood and ended up using a piece of bark that’d fallen off a building nearby as a makeshift bowl.

We were in a sort of alleyway near to the diseased tower that Imir had taken me to and I had already drawn out the simple diagram for the summoning using the Blood Chalk Owl had given me. It resembled a diamond with a triangle inside and erratic straight lines piercing from the triangle and out through the diamond. At the centre of this I placed the dead crow, which fit neatly within the triangle drawing. I placed the Black Tallow Candle behind it and laid the dead fieldmouse in front, which I poured Elye’s blood over.

“*Am I a stranger to you?*” she asked, sounding offended.

“We just met today,” I reminded her. “Until half an hour ago you didn’t even know my name.”

“*But our meeting was foretold!*” she insisted.

I just nodded, not knowing what to say to that.

“I’ll need silence for this next part.”

“*I can be silent!*”

Why does she remind me so much of Lukas? I contemplated. I knew it was mostly just the hyperactivity to blame, since personality-wise they weren’t truly that similar.

I pulled out my small blade and the staff hanging over my shoulder. Then realised that it would be too fiddly to hold both of them.

“You will be fine without the staff,” Armen assured me.

Then why do I even have it?? I hardly seem to use it.

Instead of putting the staff away, I used the small blade to cut open my index finger of my left hand and grasped the staff with my right hand, praying that I could keep my focus and prevent the Ifrit Claw from activation randomly. This was easier said than done, since it seemed to respond to Seramosa’s presence.

Try and reign in your powers, Sera.

The Ifrit grumbled, but I did feel a noticeable shift in how much I needed to use my own energy to quell the heat in my possessed hand.

I took a deep breath, then began the invocation.

“Formless and seeking of a vessel; the Many, I call upon thee!”

“Lay thy countless eyes upon the feast I have brought!”

I moved my left hand over the corpse of the fieldmouse and let eager drops of blood fall from my index finger and down onto its corpse.

“Now behold the fitting vessel I have prepared!”

“I ask only of a simple service in exchange.”

The candle lit up with a tall red flame dotted with black spots, and after only a moment, the fieldmouse, the so-called ‘scent of death’, was consumed by a thousand invisible mouths, until nothing was left, not even bone.

Apparently sated, the invisible presence took hold of the crow’s body and it started wriggling to life. From the advice written on the entry on the Many and its summoning, I knew that I should not waste a second, lest it try to multiply and flee.

I immediately flung out my spirit like grasping hands, and felt a sensation of thousands of eyes shifting their intense gaze to me as it connected with the entity inside the crow’s body.

Thou have taken up residence in the vessel I have prepared.

In exchange thou must act as mine Observer.

And for this purpose, I name thee:

Karasumany.

With a flap of its wings, the crow shot up out of the ritual diagram, before alighting on a branch that reached out of one of the buildings next to us in the ‘alley’.

CAW! it said, surprising me.

“**It seems you have yet another familiar that speaks,**” Armen said in a friendly-yet-mocking tone.

As long as it keeps to just sounding like a crow, then I’m okay with it.

CAW! Karasumany said again, before my eyes its form shimmered and then it had a twin on the branch.

“**What does its name mean?**”

Karasu means crow. It’s supposed to be a pun, although I doubt it makes sense when translated.

“**Your naming-sense is awful! The name you gave me is unspeakable!**” Seramosa complained. I rather fancied the name ‘Okuribi-Hime’ that I’d given her.

“*What have you brought to life?*” asked Elye, gaping in awe. Normally, people would probably view what I had just done as a form of vile Necromancy, which I suppose it probably was, but the Elfin seemed to revel in such displays.

With a gesture that played right into to her fascination, but made me blush a bit with embarrassment, I sent off the newly-formed copy with the simple command: *Travel North to the city of Helmstatter.*

The copy cawed again, then took off.

Before it had disappeared behind the towering buildings, another copy had already taken its place.

“*Can I eat one?*” Elye asked.

“Erm... I don’t think so?”

Or maybe this world doesn’t follow the Conservation of Mass law?

An arrow whistled through the air and struck the copy, making the original Karasu hop to the side with an outraged **CAW!** The copy disappeared with a poof, leaving no body behind for the voracious girl.

“Don’t do that!” I scolded the Elfin.

“*Aw...*” she complained.

“Alright, I have the familiar I need now, so let’s go find your father and the other warriors.”

Karasumany hopped off the branch and followed me from the air. I knew that within just a few hours there’d be two dozen crows flitting about the place.

“*Andasangare, why is there a murder of crows following you?*”

“It’s the new familiar I needed to summon,” I told him.

“*And this will allow you to see the Rotmaker?*”

“Hopefully.”

I had already spread many of the crow copies out around Skovslot Enclave, but I was having some difficulties connecting to them individually. Connecting my eyes and ears to the main body wasn't an issue, although its sight and hearing overlapped my own and made it impossible to hear what was going on around my body, which made it dangerous to use. That said, changing the Pact from the simple 'Watcher' type to 'Observer' was definitely a huge improvement over the information I could gather through the familiar, as one of the main issues I'd faced with Sumi, my Eye of the Observer, was that it did not convey the sounds around it.

But the issue with the Many was that each of the copies was like a cable connecting back to the one that had created them, and, as I had realised to my horror, the copies themselves could also make copies, meaning that it was like trees with branches sprouted from the original Karasumany, and mentally sorting through those was a great recipe for instant headaches.

Once I had some time to fully dive into my new familiar's powers, I was going to try and have the original body act as a sort of switch between the copies.

I returned my focus to the tall Elfin and the building he and his warrior fellows were standing in front of. Unlike the tower he had first show me, this building was four stories tall and though the disease had taken hold here, it was not as advanced.

“Have you been inside yet?” I asked them.

“No.”

I frowned.

Do you think I should go inside and have a look? Maybe I could find clues.

“If you do, I will protect you as best you can.”

That's not the kind of answer I was looking for.

With a gesture, I sent Karasu inside, and it was followed by a swarm of its copies. Like most, or perhaps all, Watcher familiars, it didn't seem that the Many possessed the ability to see auras like I could with my Spirit Sight, which meant they also wouldn't be able to see ectoplasmic trails or prints. But they should be able to see things that were hidden from my eyes.

I imagined that my essence swirled in my chest and then moved to my eyes and ears as I connected with the main body of Karasumany. With a loud *woosh* and *pop* my ears adjusted to the sounds heard by my crow familiar, and shortly after my eyes saw the interior of the wilted building through its eyes. While controlling Karasu and sharing its senses perfectly, it was as though I was standing in its place, which was an unnerving feeling.

I took a deep breath to steady my pounding heart, and it was hard not to be disturbed by the lack of sound from my real body, overshadowed by the senses of my Observer as they were. But at least I still had my sense of touch and could feel that someone was touching my forearm. I wondered if it was Elye.

“**The Elfin is saying that your eyes look like pits of darkness,**” Armen informed me, acting as my bodyguard while my mind was disconnected from my body.

As I moved Karasu through the interior of the diseased tower, I saw how the walls were drooping and mulch and gloopy decayed mass covered the floor. There were no bodies, thankfully, but from what Imir had informed me, it seemed that the first tower had been the only case where noncombatants had died to the ‘Rotmaker’ and its destruction.

The flock followed behind the main body as I manoeuvred it through the interior and up through curving tunnels that acted as stairwells to the floors above. The higher I ventured through the interior, the worse the decay and disease seemed to become. I had initially assumed that the Rotmaker would attack the buildings from the bottom, or perhaps even underneath it in the soil, feasting on the roots like a burrowing insect, but it seemed that it instead sought out the highest point and ruined the tree-grown edifices from there. I suppose that it might make sense, as consuming a building from the bottom would make it collapse faster, especially when the buildings in question were *this* tall.

I broke my connection to Karasu, returning my consciousness to my real body, and commanded it, *Alert me if you find anything of note.*

A loud and angry *CAW!* came from the inside of the building in response, and a sudden spike of pain shot through my head, making me gasp and drop to my knees.

“Argh!” I groaned, unable to keep the exclamation from coming out.

“**It is foolish to command a familiar to violate the terms of its Pact,**” Armen admonished me.

Elye, who had indeed been the one holding on to my forearm, helped me stand, with a confused look on her face.

“I’m okay,” I told her, even though it felt as though the spike was still in my head, making every thought painful.

I thought an Observer would be able to follow such a command, I replied.

“**It is an Observer. Implied in its duty is no mention of informing you of what it sees. It simple observes.**”

But you perform many tasks beyond the purview of a Protector.

“I am bending my duty to include such things, but I cannot perform a task that is not, in some way, related to protecting you.”

So if I asked you to assault someone, I would feel a similar spike lodge firm in my brain?

“Possibly, yes. I hope you will remember this pain you are feeling now, and understand that abusing or misusing your familiars hurts them as much as it hurts you. If you do it enough or to the wrong sort of familiar, it may prove fatal.”

I recalled Owl’s explanation of how he’d lost his eye. “...*she tore my eye out when I tried to ask her to do something not included in my Pact.*”

I’ll be more careful.

I tried to focus on my bond with Karasumany, then told it, *I am sorry. I am still learning. I will rephrase my command: if you spot something worthy of my attention, leave behind a copy in that area.*

This time no angry caw or painful spike assaulted me, so I knew it was a command that did not violate the Pact by asking it to do something an Observer couldn’t.

Thank you Armen, I don’t know what I’d do without you.

I turned to Imir and his men, who had simply been watching me.

“I have seen the interior and have come to a conclusion about the Rotmaker’s habits.”

The Elfin nodded seriously.

“I am confident that it starts its assault on a building at the very top, moving down as the building begins to collapse.”

“Why do you believe this? We have always encountered the Rotmaker on the lowest floor.”

“Look at the tower,” I said, gesturing towards it. “The top-half is slumped together and diseased, if it drained the life of your buildings from the bottom, we would be staring at a collapsed ruin.”

Imir considered this explanation for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

“What do you suggest we do?”

“If we want to find its current hideout, we should be looking at buildings that show signs of decay and disease at the top.”

Imir nodded and sent his men out. *“If we find such a place, we will send for you.”*

“I will stay here and try to use my familiars to find it as well.”

The Elfin nodded again and then he was off. Elye looked at me and then at her father who was quickly scaling the root-bridges and moving through the city.

“You can do the same as them, if you wish,” I told her.

—Patreon-exclusive Copy—
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka “Dosei”)—

She seemed tempted, but then lowered her head in determination and said, “*I stay with you, Andasangare Yuuta.*”