

42 – Consequences

Behind me, the dark forest was steadily burning and the black smoke darkened the sky above, making it seem as though night had fallen, despite it being close to noon. I silently cursed my Vitality as I heaved for air and my lungs felt like they might implode from the strain of maintaining a jog through the pine-needle-covered understory.

I had no idea where I was going, but I knew I just had to get away from Leopold. My soul energy was brought to a point where I expected to run out within the next minute, so while it physically hurt me all over, I just kept moving further and further away from the fire behind me, hoping that Okuribi-Hime would visit enough devastation on the Summoner that he’d lose my trail.

“You still carry the Encyclopaedia,” Armen warned. **“He will follow its trail.”**

I can’t just throw it away! I argued back internally, too worn-out to speak out loud.

“You would rather be caught again?”

If I get rid of that book, then I might as well give up trying to be an Exorcist!

“I thought you did not want to be an Exorcist,” Armen countered frustratingly.

What other role is there for me in this world!? It’s clear that my lot in life is to be an Exorcist, unless you know of some other way that I can use my powers! Even Mercenary work seems a folly for me to pursue alone! We only got the job to guard the Princess because of Rana, and now that we’ve been separated and I might never see her again, there are no one who will hire me! I’m a bad omen! Just look at this mess I’ve gotten involved in! Look at the mess I’ve dragged Rana and Lukas into!

I felt the last bit of energy get sucked out of me just then and the immediate exhaustion hit me so hard that my knees collapsed under me and I tumbled down a small hill, while the dead pine needles jabbed me in a thousand places and got stuck to my sweat-damp clothes.

With a groan, I pushed myself to my knees, brushing the needles out of my hair. The glasses had fallen off again and lay a metre away in the soft earth. I put them back on with an annoyed sigh. *Owl was right. Goggles are better...*

A scream emerged from the thin air in front of me as Hime emerged as a small flame that grew into her full body within seconds.

“Your soul is untrained and weak! I need more power to sustain me than what you provide!”

I wanted to yell back at her and tell her to screw off, but I didn’t, because I knew I had no defence.

“Why did you answer his beckoning call?” Armen asked the Ifrit, who was, like him, floating in the air in her incorporeal form, invisible to all eyes but mine and those of a Watcher.

With a frustrated snarl, she screamed her answer, ***“I thought he could render my vengeance!”***

“I too felt the same way,” Armen replied. **“Have faith in Ryūta. He is still young, but you understand his potential. It is why you answered his call.”**

I didn’t entirely comprehend what Armen was saying, but I got the ominous sense that spirits with unfinished business and strong personalities might be eager to seek me out somehow. After all, Owl had said that entities with strong personalities that weren’t Demons were quite rare. Although, if the Ifrits of this world were like those from earth, Hime was technically a subtype of Demon.

With wobbling legs, I got to my feet and tried to slowly continue walking. To distract myself from the soreness in my body and the overwhelming exhaustion, I asked my two familiars: *Have you been summoned before?*

“Yes,” answered Armen.

“No!” The Ifrit’s body exploded with fire as though to emphasise her answer. I suppose it made sense that she had never been summoned before, given that only someone as desperate and foolish as me would summon an uncontrollable entity like her.

How long is it since you died, Hime?

“In life, I was known as Seramosa! The title you have given me pains my ears, do not utter it again!”

My apologies, Seramosa.

“I do not know how much time has passed since I was burnt at the stake, but I spent a long time in the in-between, floating through the colourless veil with other souls like mine, as well as some that I hope never to see again.”

“In-between?” I asked out loud, my voice was raspy from the exhaustion. I was also parched and wondered if I might pass out from dehydration.

“I recall a place like it as well,” Armen said, **“though my memories become hazier with every moment I spend in the real world.”**

“It was like the purgatory that the Church always warns of!”

“Indeed. It is said that the souls of those who are not buried with proper rites end up in this in-between space, belonging neither to reality nor the afterlife.”

“The afterlife is nonsense the Church invented!”

“I hope it exists,” Armen replied.

The Ifrit gave him something like an appraising look, while I had to take a breather next to a tree. The roar of Seramosa’s fire was audible even from here, and the sky was covered in soot. I hoped she had managed to kill the Summoner, but knew the madman was probably more durable than that.

“You bear their stench! You were a Priest, weren’t you!”

“Like Ryūta, I was an Otherworlder. But yes, I had the Role of Priest.”

“Your Church caused more harm than good! Many like me were burnt to death for simply doing what you Priests could not!”

“In my time, the Church did not burn people at the stake,” he replied evenly.

“Liar!” she screamed and the tree I was leant against suddenly charred black under my touch, as though her rageful flame could burn through me.

Seramosa, calm yourself. You and Armen are no doubt from very different time periods. As far as I know, there are no stake burnings in this world either. The Church seems a force for good here.

The Ifrit floated up close to me, her beautiful-but-terrifying face radiating heat that made my skin flush red. ***“What land are we in, Exorcist?”***

We’re in the Principality of Arley.

“I do not know this place. My home was near the capital of Mourn. The Church and their Witch Hunters were infamous for their callousness and uncompromising ruthlessly! I was sentenced and punished merely for aiding those who sought out my aid as a Cursebreaker! The Church and its Priests did not have the talent I had, so they viewed me as heretical! I will visit untold devastation upon them!”

I have never heard of a place called Mourn, I replied. But I will find it, so your desire may be fulfilled.

“I have heard it mentioned once. It lies in the Heartland of Asra, the eastern continent.”

I need to see a world map, because I have no reference to understand how far that would be.

“A map, of the entire world? I have never seen such a thing. I do not imagine it would exist.”

Why not? In my world they had maps of every continent for hundreds of years before my time, back when only ships could traverse the vast oceans, before flight and satellite technology.

Seramosa looked at Armen, who, despite his blurry features, also looked lost.

Nevermind, it would be too complicated to explain.

“Your world sounds strange,” the Ifrit commented with no trace of irony.

A little bit of my energy had recouped after I’d continued slowly walking through the forest for another hour. No matter how far I went, however, the sky was still blackened by smoke above and the roar of fire sounded near enough that it might only be far enough away to be obscured by the dense trees.

I knew I would need more than just a few embers of energy if I wanted to make proper use of Armen and Seramosa, when Leopold eventually caught up to me, so, despite the paranoia and anxiety that never left me, I sat down on the ground and began to meditate. It took me some minutes to really find the rhythm, since my heart was still pounding and the adrenaline still coursed through me.

To ground myself, I forced my mind to focus on the immediate sensations I felt, such as Seramosa’s heat that radiated through me, the way that the pine-needles dug into the skin of my legs, and how it felt to exhale every breath.

The roar of fire was still there, but there were also sounds of the wind playing through the pine trees and shifting the dead needles around with a faint rustle. The sounds of birdsong were gone however, and so were the chirps of insects and small critters. I felt bad that I was responsible for setting the forest ablaze, but I’d had my reasons.

Then another sound filled my ears. Something like the flap of a bird’s wings, although from its volume, it had to belong to an enormous animal.

My eyes shot open, just in time to see something like an enormous shadowy harpy eagle descend down through the trees, its beak and eyes like the glowing white lights on a truck. I could not see its future actions with my Foresight glasses, which immediately filled me with dread.

With a scream, Seramosa shot up towards the enormous shadow bird, but it transfixed her with its eyes and froze her in place. It moved its head and shifted its left eye to stare at Armen who was hovering in front of me loyally, freezing him still as well. I was immediately reminded of when the Witch Hunters had done something similar.

“**Run!**” Armen yelled, and I didn’t waste a second.

As I tore up the ground with every panicked step, I heard a sound that sparked some familiarity, something like the slobbering huff of many nostrils working in symphony, and a second later I saw an outline of something reptilian leap from a tree towards me with its claws out. I threw myself forward, and an instant later, the creature performed the action of its preceding outline, barely missing me with its hooked claws.

With not a second to waste, I got back to my feet and kept running. The thing shuffled after me while a big tongue continuously coated its eyeless face with drool. I remembered it as the same creature Owl had used as a Tracker: a Scenting Tongue.

I saw more movement ahead with the glasses, but knew I could not react fast enough to avoid it, and a moment later I was hit by a spectral blue-glowing web and pulled from my feet and into the air, where I dangled below the front-most spiked legs of the enormous spider Leopold had used to catch me with the first time around.

I yelled and thrashed, but to no avail.

I was held above the ground of the forest for about half an hour, while the creepy shadowy harpy eagle stared at me with its huge glowing eyes. Armen and Seramosa were gone, but I didn't know if that was because they were still frozen in place or because the monster's gaze made it impossible for them to manifest.

The moment Leopold arrived, he parked himself next to the enormous bird. I wondered if it was his soul-pacted Nirvah wearing a different guise. After all, she gave off the impression she could change shape, given how she had those three obsidian masks.

With a wordless command, the silk that held me lowered me to the ground, then Leopold waved his hand and his two Pridelings appeared from next to him, before running over and seizing me in their powerful grasps that belied their diminutive child-like bodies.

Only when I was pinned to the ground by the two imps, did the silk slacken its hold on me and Leopold walked closer. I got the sense that he was terrified of how I might be able to hurt him, which I felt was warranted, since, without whatever magic was blocking my summoning, I could've turned him to ash with Seramosa fire.

“Nirvah says I should kill you,” Leopold said after stopping a few metres from where I was pinned to the ground. “But I am tired of looking for Exorcists to serve my desire. You will have to do, but I will make sure you are obedient henceforth.”

Only then did I notice what he was holding in his right hand. It was a large cleaver.

When one of the Pridelings forced my right arm out in front of me, I knew what he was planning and I started screaming at him to stop. Pleading with him to be lenient.

“Don't worry,” he said, as he lifted the cleaver into the air. “You don't need your hands to perform the Contain Spirit ability.”

Then he swung the cleaver down.