

41 – Escape

As I ran through the dark forest, where the dawn’s new light could scarcely reach, the outlines of the pine trees’ branches lagged ahead of the trees’ actual movements and produced a disorienting and migraine-inducing hallucination before my eyes. More than a few times I misjudged the movements of the branches that shifted in the wind and caught a face-full of stinging grey-green pine needles.

I was about to take off the Spirit Glasses that contained the newly-imbued Foresight of the Prideling Wertlos, when Armen halted me:

“Keep them on. Get used to what you are seeing. Their gift is too useful to discard.”

Another branch slapped me in the mouth and I had to spit out a few needles.

I hope you’re right.

Then a howl sounded from close-by.

The sudden sound made my heart skip a beat and I paused for a split-second, just enough time to settle my foot awkwardly on the mossy ground. A moment later I collapsed under my own weight as my right foot skidded away, thanks to the morning dew making the moss slick beneath my boots.

I tumbled and rolled for a few metres, before scrambling to get back to my feet. Another howl sounded from even closer and a second later I saw the creature that’d made the sound, as it broke through the thicket of moss-covered shrubs and saplings.

The strange ghostly outline preceded its motions by a couple seconds, and time seemed to slow and it charged for me. Of all the familiars I’d seen in Leopold’s roster, this was most normal-looking of the bunch, as it wore the simple appearance of a large black fox with orange spots dotted all over its body. Its lupine features were nonetheless terrifying, especially as I saw its outline lunged for me.

With a frantic motion, I crawled out of its path, and no sooner had its true body caught up to my Foresight than it landed on my previous location and skidded briefly after taking a bite the air.

A snarl escaped its maw and I quickly yelled to Armen, “Kill it! Quick!”

He did not reply, but instead got in front of me. As I saw its outline crash against Armen’s wraith body, I understood what fate awaited the fox-like creature. A moment passed and it lunged for me, but was caught by his powerful armoured hands, which grasped its upper and lower jaws firmly, before wrenching them apart.

I cringed as a violent *crack* and *tear* sounded from the beast, as well as a pained whimper that died in its throat as its body turned incorporeal and vanished. I had no idea if a familiar could die in

the traditional way, or if death was only temporary. Either way, I was not inclined to find out, so I got back up to my feet and pushed myself onward, even though the air felt like fire in my lungs and sweat coated every centimetre of my skin, soaking into my robes.

At some point, maybe after an hour or maybe even two, I found a part of the forest where the understory dipped down an incline, which was dotted with burrow holes of animals, as well as craters formed by partly-uprooted trees. Under the extensive umbrella-like root-system of one such tree, I hid myself away, hoping desperately that Leopold would not be able to find me.

“He will find you. You must keep moving.”

“I can’t! I physically can’t! Damn this body and my useless physique.”

Armen was hovering in place. Unlike with everything else, the Foresight granted by my glasses did not seem to work on him, but, then, it also did not work on my own body either, which was probably a good thing, since it’d be too disorienting otherwise.

“He will kill you when he captures you again,” Armen said coldly.

“Don’t you think I know that!”

“I am merely telling you what is at stake.”

I brought out my Encyclopaedia and started rifling through its pages in the second half.

“What are you doing?”

I didn’t want to tell him, because it was no doubt a bad idea. No, it was *definitely* a bad idea. Of the worst most self-destructive come-back-to-bite-you-in-the-ass kind.

After skimming through the entries for about two minutes, I found what I was looking for: a Fighter familiar that did not require an extensive summoning ritual, aside from a hexagram, the Black Candle, and Sinner’s Ash. Unfortunately, the choice I had landed on was one I’d already read about before and personally considered idiotic to ever try to summon. But desperate times call for desperate measures, or so they always say.

Several warnings on the pages stated the folly in summoning this entity as a familiar, since it was uncontrollable. As in, and I quote, *literally uncontrollable*. One of the previous owners of the book had written, *“Because of strong personality, perhaps?”* I wasn’t sure what that meant.

Armen looked over my shoulder. **“Ryūta, what you are planning is a bad idea.”**

“Do you have any better suggestions!?”

He paused for a moment, then answered, **“No.”**

“Then I’m doing it.”

I crawled out of the root system and found a decently-flat spot for my ritual to take place. A moment later I heard loud sounds in the air that sounded very much like huffing and sniffing, along with some incredibly-deep growls that made my very body shake.

“**It must be another Tracker,**” Armen guessed.

I gritted my teeth, trying to push the thought of being jumped by another demonic hound from my mind, as I knelt to the ground and brushed a thick layer of dead pine needles aside to lay bare the earth beneath. Using my simple knife, I carved the hexagram into the ground, then I made a small mound of Sinner’s Ash in the middle, before placing the Black Tallow Candle behind it.

Another deep growl made the ground beneath my feet quake. Whatever was on my scent was close now.

I took a deep breath as I pulled the crystal-tipped bamboo staff from my back and held my right palm pointed at the hexagram. I spent a couple seconds concentrating on shutting off outside stimuli, since messing up the invocation or pact-forming would have dire consequences.

“Make sure I am not interrupted,” I told Armen.

“**I cannot protect you from this thing you are summoning,**” he warned me.

I ignored him and started intoning the ritual:

O hateful and vindictive one!

Heed mine call!

O judged and punished one!

Observe mine plea!

O Condemned Ifrit!

Light these foes of mine aflame!

The small hexagram I’d made burst into fire alongside the wick atop the Black Candle, however, the heat was apparently of such intensity that the entire Candle was reduced to a waxy puddle in seconds. At the same time, a figure emerged from the little heap of Sinner’s Ash, as though birthed from the remains of a dead criminal. As it grew in size and its details became clearer, I saw that it was the body of a woman that was forming. Her arms and legs were long and slender, and her figure was lithe and dangerous. From atop her bald head grew two horns. The most unsettling thing was that her entire body, horns included, was charred black and looked like brittle charcoal that might fall apart with the slightest breeze.

Then, like a tinder was sparked, fire exploded out from the figure, coating her body in something like a summer dress of flames, giving her a flowing mass of hair that floated impossible from her

head, and giving a facsimile of life to her charred body by turning her coal-black and rugged face into a beautiful smooth-skinned face adorned with two steel-hard and dangerous eyes.

A scream emerged from her that physically pushed me back half a metre in the earth and hurt my ears, though not as much as what I had experienced from the enraged Weeping Widow. Still, at this rate I would lose my hearing before I turned twenty.

I sent my essence out to touch hers and it felt like her heat and fire flowed back along my reaching soul tendril, as though it was a trail of flammable oil. While my core temperature steadily climbed and sweat-pearls formed on my skin, tickling my skin as they ran down, I began speaking the Pact of the Familiar through the tenuous bond I’d formed with her body.

Terrifying Ifrit, whose fire scalds my soul,

Give yourself to me and become my—

“No! I will not become your plaything!”

I hadn’t expected her to be able to interrupt the Pact, much less be able to speak.

Let us make a trade then!

“I have a vengeance I must exact! I will lend you my strength if you bring me those who wronged me!”

I swear that I will bring your desire to fruition.

She did not interrupt me this time, so I didn’t waste a moment.

Thy hounding flames will leave nothing but ashes!

Okuribi-Hime, this is henceforth thy name!

With the Pact finalised, it was as though Okuribi-Hime was released from the hexagram, and she immediately shot into the air like a rocket, but paused as she hovered near the tops of the pine trees, which were slowly smouldering by her very presence.

Unlike with Kabanenoki, I could feel how every second of her being corporeal was draining my energy. I had no idea how long I’d be able to manifest her for, but as I stared in awe at the simple destruction she was causing to her mere surroundings, I figured that she was less like a single-target Fighter, and more like a carpet-bombing of napalm.

The growl of the Tracker sounded again, and I looked to the top of the incline, where it stood and sniffed the air with its alligator snout and eyeless face. It was the quill-covered monstrosity that Leopold had showed me before.

I didn’t even need to command Hime what to do, because she immediately flew towards the disturbing hound with a gut-wrenching scream, as though she was in gruesome pain. I wondered

bleakly if her flames hurt her as much as they hurt her surroundings. Given that a Condemned Ifrit was born as a result of someone being burnt to death, either in a failed Exorcism or as punishment for a crime, perceived or real, I doubted the entity had a healthy relationship with fire.

With a target for her wrath, the ambient heat that made the pine trees and moss crisp and smoulder became like a laser-beam, although I couldn't really see the difference, except in how suddenly the alligator hound burst into fire and started literally melting, skin, meat, and fat drooping from its body, while it let out a pained growl.

Then Hime came within reach of the hound and landed on the mossy earth before at the top of the incline. With a simple grasp, she pulled the head off the hound, which immediately became ashes in her hands.

As the hound disappeared in a bonfire of melted fat, blackened bones, ashes, and indestructible quills, the Ifrit let out another shriek and shot off back the way I'd run from.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “I can't believe that actually worked.”

“**Do not skin the bear before it is caught,**” Armen said.

“What?” I asked, not sure why the Omniglot ability had translated his words into such a strange sentence.

“**Prudence is warranted. The Ifrit may turn its devastating fire on you if you cannot assuage its desire.**”

I frowned, then pulled out my Guild Card just to make sure that a Pact had actually been formed. Armen looked at the card over my shoulder and simply said, “Fascinating.”

I suppose I should not have been surprised to see such a thing, but I now had another worry added to my growing list.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
<i>ROLE: Exorcist</i>		<i>RANK: Seeker</i>	
<i>GENDER: Male</i>		<i>AGE: 17</i>	
<i>ACUMEN: B</i>	<i>DEXTERITY: E</i>	<i>INTELLIGENCE: B</i>	<i>LUCK: F</i>
<i>PACT: A</i>	<i>SOUL: S</i>	<i>STRENGTH: E</i>	<i>VITALITY: F</i>

ABILITIES

‘Omniglot’

‘Exorcist I’

‘Pact (Greater Protector)’

‘Pact (????)’

