

38 – A Siren and its Song I

The air was punched out of my body as I landed on the ground next to the well, the sticky ethereal web releasing its hold on me. Rather than breaking apart, the silk simply vanished, as though a flame extinguished by a strong wind.

“Gather your tools. We’re leaving.”

I hurriedly took all my items that’d been looted by the ‘Prideling’ and placed them back into my belt pouches and bags. As I held the pouch with the expensive Sacred Corpse Ash, I dug out a small amount and spilled it on the ground. I knew it would not be moved by the wind and hoped it would be some manner of clue for Rana and Lukas to find. I just hoped they were safe and that the madman Leopold hadn’t already gotten to them. Despite his unhinged nature, he seemed very powerful.

After stuffing away my small blade and Focus, as well as hanging the Staff over the back of my soaked-throat robe-coat, I got up and followed after Leopold, who was watching me, while his enormous spider fidgeted restlessly and the impish Prideling made strange sounds, like a twisted monkey.

With a gesture from Leopold, the Prideling disappeared in a puff of aquamarine smoke.

“His imp just went invisible,” Armen told me, **“but it is still there. He wields several familiars that are not visible to your eyes. One of them is terrifying and it is watching me closely.”**

“What did you do to my Watcher?” I asked him, realising he must be the reason why I could no longer connect to it.

The question clearly annoyed him and he didn’t answer.

“I cannot tell if it is a Fighter, Protector, or Watcher, but the entity that is staring at me just leaned close and whispered something into his ear when you asked that.”

The thought that Leopold was being guided by some forbidden familiar made a pang of dread shoot through me.

Once I recover my energy, I’ll summon Kabanenoki and try to kill him. I can’t imagine he’ll leave me alive once I’ve performed the task he wants to use me for.

“What is it your want me to help you cast my Contain Spirit ability on?” I asked after we’d past the inn, wherein many corpses of the villagers no doubt lay. Dead by my actions or by those of my depraved captor.

“I seek to capture a Siren and its Song.”

“Why?”

“You don’t need to know that. Now be quiet. I don’t like the sound of your voice.”

I frowned, but stayed my tongue.

After leaving the village and its thawed-out fields behind, Leopold clapped his hands twice and three Pridelings appeared out of the thin air. It was hard to tell with my own familiars, but watching Leopold and how he handled his minions, I was starting to get the idea that familiars could exist in three stages: manifested but incorporeal, like what Armen existed as for most of the time; manifested and corporeal, like when Armen had to interact with the real world to protect me; and banished, which, depending on the way it was done, could be permanent or more as a way of dismissing a spirit to some separate dimension of existence where it was not visible even to its summoner’s eyes.

I was unsure what the benefits was from keeping familiars manifested when they were not utilised, but perhaps it required less energy than to resummon them from their banished state, with the downside being that someone with a Watcher familiar, or other means of observing spirits, could see them.

“**You are mostly correct,**” Armen commented on my speculation, while I watched the three imps work in sync to carve some large glyph into the soft earth.

The fact that Leopold could control three separate familiars to work with such coordinated precision spoke volumes of his skill, as I had not even seen Owl capable of such a feat.

“**When I am dismissed, I still follow behind you, but you can neither see nor hear me. It is a lonely form of existence.**”

Does that mean Kabanenoki is in that state right now?

“**I would assume so, yes.**”

I chewed my upper lip, wondering how I could perform the partial summon required to manifest my Corpse Tree familiar in its incorporeal state.

What’s his familiars doing?

“**He seems to be using them to draw out a summoning glyph. He must be very powerful, at least if he is doing what I believe he is doing.**”

Before I could ask Armen what he was talking about, the imps finished their work and Leopold stepped up to the edge of the large six-metre-in-diameter glyph and held his right hand out, palm pointed at the large symbol, while a mace-like black sceptre was held loosely in his left hand, its tip

adorned with large red crystal surrounded by dark metal flanges. As the Summoner’s power flowed into the glyph, the crystal on his sceptre began to pulse with a warm glow, before the lines craved by the three imps took on the same glow.

Then something appeared in the centre of the large glyph, just suddenly there from one moment to the next.

I looked at the thing that had been summoned. It was a fancy carriage made of a matte black steel that looked too elaborate to have been forged in Arley, but rather seemed to belong in eighteenth-century London streets. A sickly ghostly-green light seemed to emanate from it, even without me using my Spirit Sight. I wondered if the carriage was somehow possessed.

Did he just summon a carriage??

“I believe it is unlocked at Rank IV of the Summoner Role. It is known as Object Transference. It is not that he summoned the item from some other realm, but rather that he retrieved it from a pocket dimension where it had been previously stored.”

You can do that!? And could he do that with a house as well??

“Technically, yes. But it is rather impractical, as I understand it.”

Will I get an ability like that? I could already imagine many scenarios where it could come in handy.

“No. It is a unique ability of the Summoner Role. It is possible that you might access an Advanced Role with the ability, but I do not personally know of any.”

As soon as Leopold had summoned the steel carriage, he dismissed his imps, who each vanished in a puff of smoke, then the enormous spider moved in front of it and attached its ethereal threads to where horses would normally have been hitched.

He turned to face me and then said, “Get in.”

I remembered an old statistic I’d seen on television just then: the moment a kidnapping victim goes into a vehicle, their survival rate plummets...

Only faint embers of my energy had returned to me, but I knew I had no other choice. In a swift motion, I pulled the blade that I’d hid in my long sleeve and ran it across the palm of my left hand.

Kabanenoki, come forth and crush my foes!

From the ground emerged the hideously-twisted Revenant tree and it quickly began lumbering towards Leopold who stood only a few metres away. The Ethereal Spinner hitched to the carriage released its binding silk and began moving towards my Fighter familiar with rapid skittering movements of its eight legs, but before the two familiars could clash, I heard Leopold yell something.

“Banish Corpse Tree!”

As suddenly as my monstrosity had emerged from the ground it also vanished back into it, and a feeling of utter despair overtook me. I pulled out my Guild Card, fearing what I’d find, just as the three Pridelings manifested around me, ready to tear me apart. While Armen swatted away the first two that leapt for me with an animalistic fury in their eyes, I stared at my Card and felt as though a claw had seized a hold of my heart.

My hard work and effort had been wiped away... *just like that...*

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i>			

Leopold had somehow broken my Pact with the Corpse Tree, and no doubt done the same with my Watcher before sending his spider to fetch me from the well. It was then that I remembered what Owl had told me about the names you gave a familiar:

“...other Exorcists, Summoners, Spirit Callers, etc., can Banish your familiars for good if they know their names or even turn them against you if they’re skilled enough. You don’t want that to happen, trust me.”

As the third imp leapt for me, I knew I was once again exhausted of my energy and it soared through Armen who stood before me, his protection no longer capable of manifesting itself, before

landing on my face and bringing me to the ground. A moment later, the other two imps hopped onto my back and my legs, pinning me firmly in the soft dirt, their strength many times that of my own.

Leopold stalked over to me, while the giant spider followed close behind him.

“That was very foolish,” he told me in a mocking tone.

“How did you do that!?” I growled, struggling to move my head so I could glare up at him.

The three imps suddenly moved around and then began dragging me towards the carriage that the spider was returning to as well.

Leopold followed next to me as I was pulled along by the Pridelings.

“Few realise the power that Omniglot wields. Few realise that it allows for someone like your and I to banish everything with a certain name, so long as it is translated easily between languages. I knew you were foolish enough to not consider the importance of the names you gave your familiars, and thus it was easy for me to banish them.”

“**The powerful entity is whispering to him again,**” Armen warned. “**And she is looking at me.**”

“You were wise to name your Protector something other than a simple translation of its appearance or spirit-name in your mother-tongue, but I have heard its name nonetheless, which allows me to do this:”

Leopold pointed a finger at my Guardian Wraith, and I knew what he was about to say, so I screamed loudly in protest, only for one of the Prideling imps to wrap its disgusting hand around my mouth.

“Banish Armen!” he said.