

49 – Rotmaker

Despite her insistence that she found the Skovslot Enclave dull and boring, Elye was clearly in a good mood as she took me down winding streets and raised walkways, while telling me about various landmarks and places she enjoyed. There were some Elfin her age who jumped around all over the place, vaulting-and-climbing the root-formed bridges and organically-curving and winding buildings and houses, all the while keeping pace with me. She kept following their movements with her eyes, and had a look that suggested that she wished she could be parkouring with them instead of walking with me. Regardless, she stayed by my side.

“*That one,*” she started, pointing with her index and middle fingers at a bulbous-yet-tall building that stood at three-stories high making shorter than all the buildings around it, “*is where the aquifer-taps are rooted.*”

“So that’s how you get water?” I asked, wondering if I had understood her correctly.

“*Yes! You are very smart for an outsider.*”

“Do you not get a lot of visitors?”

“*No.*” There was a disappointment in her voice. Perhaps she was enjoying herself because she got to show off her home. After all, if you only ever hung out with the same people, the world could feel very small after a while.

“How do you get food around here?” I asked. “Do you grow and eat plants?”

“*No! We never eat the plants! Why, do you eat stones and bark? That would be strange.*”

“Never? Then what do you eat?”

“*We raise livestock for slaughter and our Scouts hunt, although they often have to fight with the Welin for prey. We also have a lake within our Enclave that we catch fish and harvest molluscs from.*”

“Are you carnivores?”

Elye nodded. “*Of course!*”

Not what I imagined, to be honest.

“With their homes and technology grown from plants, it perhaps is weird for them to consider eating plants.”

Suddenly Seramosa appeared next to me. Elye took a step back.

“*Your body is very warm again,*” she remarked.

“***This place is but a spark from conflagration,***” said the insane Ifrit.

Did you follow the Welin until just now?

“I wish to burn it to ashes, but I could call upon my flames at such a distance from you.”

Good to know. But please, do not let loose your powers within the Enclave or forest. You would kill thousands like Elye.

The Ifrit moved in front of me, and even though she was not physically there, I tensed up at the gaze she cast upon me. ***“I will not burn these people. They have done no evil.”***

I didn’t realise you were a righteous sort, I replied, but immediately regretted it, when the Ifrit took a step towards me and a flame sputtered to life in the palm of my right hand.

“My purpose is to burn those who harm the innocent! There is nothing more just than the flames I wield.”

I swallowed hard, but then said, defiantly, Then you must to learn control and precision. Your flames burn indiscriminately and have the potential to bring harm to many of those you seek to protect.

She took another step towards me, and I could tell that Elye was staring at my hand in fascination, while also backing away with every step I made. But then the Condemned Ifrit seemed to understand the wisdom in my words.

The flame in my palm died down and I breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

“Why is your hand like that?”

I thought about how to word it, but then said, “It was a gift from the spirits that cling to me.”

“Can I touch it?”

I frowned, but then nodded slowly, while imagining that the energy in my body came to a stop right before the wrist where my normal skin transitioned into the charcoal claw.

Gingerly, Elye put three of her fingers on the back of my hand.

“It is hot like a stone heated by the sun during Summar.”

“Summar?” I asked.

Elye nodded unhelpfully.

“It is their word for Harvest. Elfin view the year as divided into six seasons, and not three like the humans.”

Seramosa walked over to Elye and put a hand on her shoulder, even though she could not actually touch the girl. ***“Elfin seasons are based on the sun and the way trees change and plants growth and wither.”***

I looked at Elye and the Ifrit only I could see. Next to me floated Armen. The only thing missing was the melodic Siren who, thankfully, had remained quiet while imprisoned in the Music Box.

Were you an Elfin, Sera?

“Why do you insist on ruining my name!? But no, I was born of a union between man and Elfin, but belonged to neither. Half-kin are rarely tolerated. However, the Elfin of the Enclave I lived near were the only ones to accept me and seek me out for aid.”

As a Cursebreaker, right?

“You remember my talent but not my full name!” she grumbled.

In my world, it was seen as a sign of affection and familiarity to give abbreviated names.

“We are not intimate.”

“He bears a hand stained with your soul, so I would disagree,” Armen argued.

“He does not brutalise your name, so why only mine!?”

Armen looked at me with his glowing eyes.

“I am uncertain.”

Armen is already a short enough name, but Seramosa is too long to comfortably say.

“Why are you so quiet, Andasangare?” Elye asked, looking at me suspiciously. I didn’t realise that I’d just been staring at her all this time.

“I am conversing with my familiars. They are explaining your culture to me. One of them was very familiar with your people. Also, call me Ryūta.”

“Yuuta?” she asked, trying to mimic the sound.

“Close enough,” I replied, not feeling the desire to lecture her on Japanese pronunciation.

I looked around, the Elfin who had kept pace with us were gone, but down below on the ground, as well as on nearby root-bridges, were other Elfin going about their day, though all of them seemed unable not to stare at me.

The *thud* of a heavy landing came from just behind me, and Elye’s posture changed to defensive. I turned around and saw her father standing there.

“Andasangare. May we seek your aid?”

“Depends for what,” I replied, not wanting to get tossed into a fight I wouldn’t be able to deal with.

“A Rotmaker defiles Skovslot, but every time we find it and slay it, it returns soon after, wearing a new guise.”

I’ve never heard nor read about such a creature, I said internally.

“Nor I,” followed Armen.

“Rotmakers are what Elfin names any creature that harms their Enclaves.”

Thank you for the clarification, Sera.

The Ifrit grumbled and whirled around Elye, trying unsuccessfully to play with the girl’s hair.

“I am an Exorcist,” I reiterated. “I cannot fight something like you can, but if it is an entity that straddles the border between life and death, then I may be able to help, though I make no promises.”

The man curled his right hand into a fist and bumped it into his chest, loud enough to make a sound. “*I swear I will not allow harm to befall you.*”

I reached out my hand and said, “Well, then, my name is Ryūta. You can start by explaining it to me.”

“*Yuuta?*” he asked and my right eye twitched in response. “*I am Imir. I would show you the problem instead of talk.*”

I nodded. “Very well.”

Imir took me along the root-bridges that floated between the towering buildings far above the ground, setting a pace that was brisk but still possible for me to keep up with, though I could feel the strain in my calves and perspiration was beading on my forehead and trickling down my back below my white shirt. Or well, it used to be white, but now it was stained to hell and back.

I really need to get my hands on some of those Vitality potions. And a dry-cleaner...

We seemed to be heading towards the centre of the enormous city, although it was tough to tell exactly, as the tall plant-and-tree tower buildings obscured any references to the forest beyond at this point.

“I believe it would be a good idea to contract a Watcher before taking on an Exorcism Quest.”

Quite right. Although, taking a page out of Leopold’s repertoire, I am considering forming an Observer Pact, rather than solely a Watcher Pact.

“I know not the difference,” Armen admitted bluntly.

Well, if I understand it correctly, a Watcher is confined to merely its sight, while an Observer may transmit more than merely sight, such as sounds, scents, and so forth. Likewise, instead of a Tracker, Leopold had a Trapper Pact with his enormous spider, since that was its main purpose.

“He also had a Servant Pact with the Pridelings, it seemed.”

There are no doubt thousands of variations out there, but, like you told me when I made that bonfire for the assailants we met outside Ochre, it is the intentions that matters most.

“I bear none of those definitions!”

You defy definition, Sera.

The Ifrit giggled like a fluttering flame. I considered that, perhaps, her strangeness stemmed from her association with the peculiar Elfin.

“Have you decided what sort of familiar to summon?”

I haven’t had a lot of time to study the Encyclopaedia, but one I recall from reading it a while back, is a Shade by the name of ‘The Many’. It is a sort of hivemind of several entities, or a single entity which splits into many. It does have some downsides, like not being able to go incorporeal once summoned, but from the descriptions, it sounds like it often wears innocuous forms, like lizards, bugs, or birds.

“It may be that your mentor had a similar entity in his employ, given his ability to track so many people at once.”

I would not put it past him. Regardless, I am sure that whatever means by which he tracked me before became useless after Leopold abducted me, since Nirvah could dull such magic as tracking and possibly scrying.

“Perhaps he will pick up your scent when you go to Helmstatter.”

I’ll be ready for it by then, I hope.

Suddenly, Imir stopped on the root-bridge and I almost bumped into him, emerged in my thoughts as I were.

I blinked as I looked at the building in front of us. It was enormous. Easily seven or eight stories tall and thought it might once have resembled the other cocoon-shaped towers, formed of roots and trees and branches, it was now a deflated tilted edifice with clear signs of disease marring its façade. Where the other buildings and towers were naturally green and brown and the colours in-between, this rotten tower was pinkish-purple and reddish-brown. What’s more, large sections that were like discoloured bone jutted out at random, while a sticky-looking sap emerged from many open sores in the plant-mass and cast a pungent smell of decay into the air.

Part of me couldn’t help but recoil at the sight. It was a moment away from collapse, or so it seemed.

“Is this what you wanted to show me?”

“Yes. This is where it first emerged, but it has caused such rot to appear nearby as well. We believe it is a parasite that drains the vitality of our plants.”

It must be quite powerful to reduce one of the towers to this state, I mused ominously.

“You said you had slain it several times? Has it killed anyone while you fought it? And what does it look like?”

Imir pointed to the diseased tower with two fingers, “*It bears a likeness to the carcasses it leaves behind and seems to form its body from that which it consumes. When first we fought it, it bore a resemblance to a snake. The second time it was like a lizard. Then it was bear. But after that its visage became more incoherent and difficult to explain, with a sickening asymmetry and too many mouths and arms.*”

I frowned. The ability to return anew was troubling, although it reminded me of the description of the Welin that roamed beyond the clear of Skovslot Enclave, as the Encyclopaedia said they could only be killed once the effigy that bound to them to Unlife was purified with Sanctify and burnt, otherwise their bodies would regrow lost limbs and heal all wounds. However, the Welin possessed to unique abilities beyond that and their brutish power. This clearly was something else.

“And has it slain any of your warriors?”

“*Yes. Of our warriors, Eight have lost their lives, and fourteen of those who lived in the houses that it drained also succumbed to its greedy appetite.*”

Crap... if the Skinstealer was deemed a Perilous foe at Novitiate rank, then I’m willing to bet that something that has taken down several warriors, damaged a city significantly, and cannot be defeated would be Seeker rank or possibly Eminent, with a Perilous difficulty, at least if the Guild were to assign the quest.

“**Your estimation sounds accurate,**” Armen said. Unlike most times, I was unhappy to be praised by him for this guess.

Elye looked at me expectantly. Her father remained still like a statue, waiting to hear my answer.

I frowned. “I would need aid from your warriors,” I started.

Imir did the curled fist smack against his chest. It seemed like a gesture of affirmation or promise, or maybe both.

“And we will also need to discuss my payment for when I have eradicated this pest.”

Imir grinned, revealing rows of pearlescent carnivore teeth.