

39 – A Siren and its Song II

Leopold looked at his hand, confused, then at the floating wraith that he was somehow able to perceive despite him being incorporeal.

“Banish Armen!” he shouted again, and I instinctively flinched at the sound of his voice.

He grumbled, then made a gesture. One of the Pridelings that pinned me to the ground began rummaging through my bag until it found my Guild Card, which it brought to the Summoner.

With a single look at it, he tossed it to the ground before me and the two other imps eased off my back, allowing me to get to my knees. I quickly took my Guild Card and looked at it. It still said “*Pact (Greater Protector)*” on it.

For some reason, his banishment had not worked.

Why didn't it work? I asked Armen.

“Because Armen is not my true name.”

I didn't know whether to be happy that Armen was still here or upset that he had intentionally not revealed his true name to me.

Then a realisation hit me: He had not allowed me to name him, and since Armen was not his true name, it meant that he only served me because he wanted to. I had literally no control over him, which, with any other familiar, would no doubt be a death-sentence.

“I was worried your master or someone else would attempt to take control of me, so I misled you.”

But why me? Why did you even allow me to summon you? Why do you obey me if you don't have to!?

“Because I have seen your soul and deemed you worthy of following, and because there is something I want in return.”

You want me to do something for you?

“Yes, but now is not the time for that. I do not mind if I have to wait a decade for it to happen. My thoughts now are only on your survival such that the day may eventually come to pass.”

When that day comes, will you tell me your true name?

“Perhaps.”

“Maybe you’re not as foolish as I thought,” Leopold said dismissively. Then he pointed to the carriage. This time, the Pridelings had not been dismissed into their incorporeal state, but rather crowded around me, like prison guards. “Now, no more delays. Get in.”

I swallowed hard. I didn’t have a choice. In the back of my mind, *that statistic* about kidnapping victims played on repeat. The moment I got in, the odds of Rana ever finding me again were slim-to-none.

As I walked to the carriage, I put a hand in my bag and grabbed a pinch of the Sacred Ash. I intentionally slipped just before the carriage door, leaving a little bit of the ash on the ground. It was not enough to be immediately obvious, but still visible to anyone who knew what to look for. Although it was no doubt pointless, I planned to leave more of the ash along the route we took, if we made any stops on the way to our destination.

One of the imps crawled up onto the side of the carriage and opened the door, then the two behind me shoved me in. I landed on my knees on the wooden floor, then got up and sat down on the surprisingly-soft cushioned bench inside. The Pridelings entered after me, one sitting on my right and one on my left, the last one opposite me. Then Leopold entered and sat down on the bench opposite me as well, after closing the door.

A moment later, the carriage kicked into motion as the enormous frost-blue spider pulled it up-and-over a nearby hill. The speed was comparable to that of a car, but the carriage, which ought to have been jumping up-and-down, was unnervingly stable as we tore across the hilly landscape.

Some hours into our journey, I made the mistake of asking where we were going.

“Harrlev,” Leopold replied, annoyed.

“I don’t know where that is,” I replied.

“You don’t need to know. Now shut up.”

“It is the nation south of Arley. It is much smaller, but is well-known for its swamplands and meadows, as well as its capital that borders the coast. They are allied with Goldentide. In the past they were at war with Arley, but brokered a peace after losing substantial territory that now makes up Arley’s south.”

Isn’t that super far away?

“Yes. It is three times the distance from Ochre to Helmstatter.”

I frowned. I honestly wanted to cry. I was never going to see Rana again, and it was only a matter of time before this madman killed me.

I need to get away from this psycho before we get too far.

“Indeed. But I believe you must bide your time and wait for his guard to drop. You have some worth to him, but he might gravely injure you or put a curse on you to make you comply.”

A *curse*... I contemplated. I had entirely forgotten that Summoners possessed not only the power to break curses, but also to cast them. In many ways, they were an offensive and affliction-specialised variant of an Exorcist. I couldn't help but be a bit envious. Plus, someone like Leopold didn't have to deal with the veritable Sword of Damocles F-tier Luck that all Exorcists possessed.

It had been maybe eight hours by the time we finally made a stop. Due to the dark-tinted glass windows in the doors of the carriage, I had been unable to see the path we'd taken, but I was sure that we'd gone across the wilderness far away from civilisation, since the ride had never stopped being bumpy.

I wondered, as Leopold stepped out and the three Pridelings forced me to follow, what people who saw the spider-drawn carriage from afar might think. My assumption was that the creepy entity that Armen said spoke to the Summoner was somehow capable of warping the perception of reality, similar to the power that Owl seemingly possessed as an Adherent of the Observer. There was no way the Summoner was dumb enough not to have thought about how the Natives saw him, as his Role was as equally feared as mine.

The world outside the carriage was that of a dark forest, with a yellow moon the only light source, until one of the blue-skinned imps created and lit a fire. The trees were of a kind I had not seen in this world before, which were reminiscent to pines, but the needles were greyish-green with white edges and the air smelled strongly of their sap, as well as a heavy musty undertone of moss, which, given the fact that the understory was coated entirely in it, was little surprise. It was as though all the grass had been devoured by an invasion of moss, which carpeted everything from the ground below the trees, and clung to the the first half-metre of the tree trunks, stones, boulders, and anything else it could reach.

While the Pridelings worked in unison to set up some sort of tent, Leopold waved his hands through the air in a complex series of motions, then with a finishing gesture summoned a massive six-legged eyeless hound with a long snout like that of an alligator. It did not have the webbed feet of an alligator nor the paws of a wolf, but rather something that looked like oversized ape hands covered in scales and tipped with opaque claws. Instead of fur, the creature had quills that moved steadily up-and-down in waves as the Summoner regarded it, then, with an unspoken command, he

sent the beast off into the darkness. The loud huffing and sniffing sounds it made, indicated to me that it was a Tracker, though not one that I remembered seeing in the Encyclopaedia.

“It is possible to enslave the monstrosities made by flesh-smiths,” Leopold remarked, as though trying to teach me something. “That hound is one of a kind, but other monstrosities bear reproductive capabilities and thus have become plentiful and easier to obtain.”

I nodded eagerly, mostly just because I thought that appealing to his vanity might serve me in lowering his guard. Besides, even if he was dangerous, it was possible I could glean some useful knowledge from him. Owl had been dangerous too, just in a more cunning way that was less obvious.

I’d read the entries in the Encyclopaedia about Monstrosities, such as the ‘Welin’ born of an unholy ritual involving human sacrifice; the ‘Minotaurus’ that seemed identical in both name and appearance to a legendary creature of Greek Myth; and one that was very ominously just referred to as ‘The Visitor’, but which was a catch-all name used to refer to many unique and terrifying creatures that formed as a byproduct of very powerful rituals, and which were described as a melted-together union of several humans possessed by some alien consciousness that might take on an endless variety of shapes.

As I understood it, the term Monstrosity, at least in the Encyclopaedia, referred to entities formed from the bodies of humans, often combined with some other species or distorted far beyond their original visage. The connotations of what that meant for his strange hedgehog alligator hound were quite grim.

Leopold pointed at the tent that his Pridelings had finished setting up. It looked a lot like the kind of cheap tent you could buy anywhere back on earth, though the fabric was some sort of linen coated with a hydrophobic coating on the outside to keep rain out.

“Go to sleep. I will wake you in four hours.”

I blinked, confused.

“What about you?” I asked. I had assumed he’d want me to sleep on the ground, while he slept in the tent.

“I do not sleep.”

Of all the things he had said so far, this unsettled me the most.

Since I didn’t want to be thrown in by his Prideling familiars, I went into the tent willingly, though I doubted I would be able to find even a minute of rest.

“You have not slept in a long time,” Armen remarked. **“Try to lay down. Fear not, I will stand guard as you sleep.”**

I laid down, slightly assured by his confidence, even though I knew that I was dead as soon as Leopold wanted me to be.

I suppose I’ll just close my eyes for a moment.

I shot upright as a hand touched my shoulder, but saw that it was Armen who had touched me. I couldn’t remember him doing that before: touching me that is. I hadn’t even thought it was possible, truth be told.

“I assumed you would prefer to be awoken by me instead of the Summoner,” he said.

A moment later, the tent-flap that served as its door was pulled aside and the ugly impish face of a Prideling stared at me, before making a weird twisted monkey screech that hurt my ears.

“I’m already awake!” I complained loudly, as my ears rang.

The Prideling waited in the opening of the tent until I got up and made to leave it. I was surprised that I’d been able to actually fall asleep, and despite only getting a few hours of rest, I felt a lot better than I had for a while, given that the sleep in the well and the carriage prior to that had all been quite terrible. The grim irony that I slept better while being held captive was not lost on me.

It was still dark as I left the tent, but in the distant sky I saw a faint light that was spreading slowly as dawn was unfurling itself across the land.

“It’s time I teach you how to use your ‘Contain Spirit’ ability,” Leopold said.