

## 54 – Root of Evil

To my eyes, granted the Foresight by the Prideling trapped in the glasses I wore, it was as though the whole building was trembling, even though it was merely a mismatch of the future motion overlapping the current state. Still, it was off-putting to notice that the building was ‘breathing’. It was like watching bamboo grow before my own eyes. To make matters more unsettling, the miasma about my feet seemed to be pulsing according to this barely-perceptible movement, while the large cocoon occasionally rumbled.

Signs of the Parasite’s effect on the tower still had not manifest themselves, but I was surprised by how quickly it had formed its cocoon, unless these things were already scattered throughout the city, awaiting the host to come alive.

Imir and his men were taking a while to bring the blood I had requested, and with every moment that passed, I felt closer to another fight with the monster. I desperately did not want that to happen.

Elye put a hand on my shoulder. *“Your body is very tense. Like a bowstring.”*

“I’m just a bit apprehensive, that’s all,” I replied.

I had very little energy left, so I basically had no options if the cocoon broke and set loose the creature within. If that happened, my best course of action would perhaps be to nosedive out of the nearby window, after setting the tower ablaze.

I shook my head. It was clear I was letting my anxiety overwhelm me. With a deep breath, I tried to dispel the unease I felt. I hadn’t realised just how much I relied on the Encyclopaedia to feel competent against these apparitions. I was thankful that Aef, the ‘Heart’ of Skovslot, had provided me with instruction to follow, but it had reminded me that I was simply following the wisdom of past heroes, and had nothing particularly grand to separate myself from their achievements.

Once again, my mind returned to the fuck-up that had followed from trying to exorcise the Weeping Widow. Even if her manifestation was deliberately caused by Leopold, I was sure there was a way that I could have prevented undue deaths. Deaths like the man whom I’d killed with my Repel in an act of desperation. I was sure that, from the outside, the tragedy of Hearthshire would be attributed to me being an evil Exorcist, with all the minutiae disregarded in favour of a more compelling story.

*What if Rana and Lukas believe that I wasn’t kidnapped, but instead ran away to escape the crimes I committed??*

“*You are a foolish boy!*” Sera screeched. She was sitting atop the cocoon in her incorporeal form, as though waiting for the order to reduce it to cinders and ash. “*Negativity and self-doubt form a spiral of darkness. The more time you invest in such detrimental thoughts, the deeper the spiral travels, carrying you with it.*”

“**I concur,**” Armen said. “**Do not let your dark thoughts rule you.**”

*Aren’t you both spirits who were unable to pass on because of lingering regret and doubts and hate? Isn’t it hypocritical for you to judge me?*

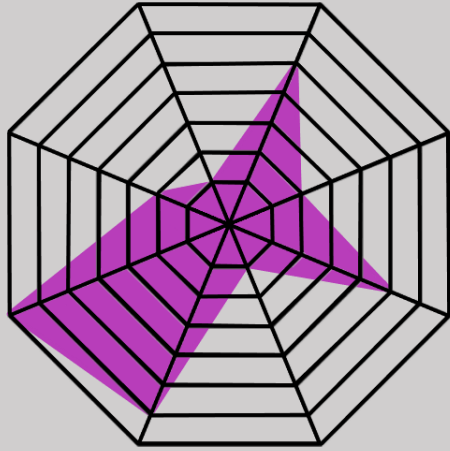
“**We are exactly that,**” Armen retorted with no malice in his voice. “**As such, we know best the place that such a path in life takes you.**”

I let out a sigh.

It was impossible to argue with that logic.

*Sorry guys. I know you’re just trying to help me.*

Seramosa grumbled like she always did, while Armen put his hand on my shoulder. Surprisingly, I actually felt its touch against my skin. I suddenly wondered if it was a result of my abilities ranking up, so I pulled out my Guild Card and tapped the Exorcist skill set to bring out the individual abilities:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
<b>ROLE:</b> <i>Exorcist</i>		<b>RANK:</b> <i>Seeker</i>	
<b>GENDER:</b> <i>Male</i>		<b>AGE:</b> <i>17</i>	
<b>ACUMEN:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>DEXTERITY:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>INTELLIGENCE:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>LUCK:</b> <i>F</i>
<b>PACT:</b> <i>A</i>	<b>SOUL:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>STRENGTH:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>VITALITY:</b> <i>F</i>
<b>ABILITIES</b> <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist II’</i> <i>‘Curse of the Excruciating Bond’</i> <i>‘Ifrit Claw Wielder’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i> <i>‘Pact (????)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Observer)’</i>			

## ABILITIES

*‘Omniglot’*

*‘Exorcist II’:*

- *Banish I*
- *Contain Spirit II*
- *Drain Spirit I*
- *Focus Wielder I*
- *Hymnal I*
- *Investigation II*
- *Invoke Ritual II*
- *Meditation II*
- *Offering I*
- *Pact of the Familiar III*
- *Possessed Weapon Wielder II*
- *Repel II*
- *Sanctify I*
- *Soul Barrier II*
- *Spirit Sight II*
- *Staff Wielder I*
- *Summon III*
- *Unleash I*
- *Ward Crafter II*
- *Worship I*

I was glad to see that the Pact with Karasumany was correctly registered as an Observer Pact, but, more excitingly, I now had two skills at rank three: Pact of the Familiar & Summon. From what I had been told, it usually took a while to level up the ranks, but some were easier than others. It was possible that Armen and Seramosa hanging around nonstop, as well as Seramosa’s repeated total draining of my energy were contributing to an explosive growth.

*Sera, come here.*

The Ifrit glared at me, but then floated down from the cocoon to land a couple metres in front of me. I reached out with my Claw to touch my fiery familiar.

Elye was watching me in *that* way that she always did when I fell silent.

As the tips of my blackened charcoal hand touched the incorporeal fire Demon, her flames coated my hand like a flashfire of superheated oil and I quickly pulled away, killing the fire as quickly as it started. However, for a moment, I had felt a sense of touch.

“*How did you do that?*” Elye asked. Instead of pulling away, she had leaned closer, as though to study my hand.

I was about reply, when the cocoon started bulging, as though something was pushing against it from within.

*Shit, did I just trigger some automatic response by creating a fire!?*

I swallowed hard as I stared at hole in the large cocoon, but, after a minute or maybe two, nothing happened.

A moment after that, sounds from below caught my attention, before Imir and his fellow warriors came striding up the stairs carrying heavy hide sacks, like enormous waterskins, which audibly sloshed with the contents within.

“*Andasangare,*” started Imir, pausing to catch his breath from carrying his burden up five stories, “*We have brought you blood.*”

I nodded my thanks and went over to the first.

*Explain to me again how this ability works,* I said to Armen.

After spending fifteen minutes Sanctifying the three bloated sacks of blood and my right arm coated in acrid-smelling gore up to my elbow, we were as ready as we would ever be.

The last man had carried several unlit torches with him, which were given to each of the warriors, as well as Elye. He had brought two flint pieces to work as a firestarter, but I decided to show-off my new ‘trick’.

While the warriors watched, Elye reached her torch out towards me and I put my left hand on Sera’s shoulder, causing a flame to spontaneously appear in my right palm. With a simple gesture, I lit the outstretched torch, after which the warriors, despite their apprehension towards fire, quickly reached out their torches to me as well.

“**Elfin are famous for their hatred of fire, but perhaps those belonging to this Enclave are more open-minded,**” Armen remarked.

*Or perhaps they simply want to join in because I’m an Andasangare?*

“***The enemies of the Elfin use fire to torture and slay them,***” Sera chimed in darkly.

*Didn't you just tell me that negativity is a bad idea.*

***“Don't hide from the truth, Exorcist!”***

*You're sending a lot of mixed messages, Sera.*

The Ifrit grumbled and floated off to sit atop the cocoon again.

With the torches lit in the hands of Elye, her father, and the warriors, there was nothing left to do but to begin the Exorcism.

I reread the entry and the notes I had written down after listening to Aef. In my mind's eye I plotted out the steps I would follow. First I'd douse it with the purified blood, but if it did not 'poison' the cocoon, I would try to somehow inject it into the roots directly. Then came the fire and the Ritual of Obsequy. I had taught it to the Elfin just in case, although Armen was doubtful that the ritual could be invoked by those without the prerequisite ability.

I gritted my teeth, then with a nod sent two of the warriors forward with a blood-sack, which they upturned over the cocoon, recolouring it in an unhealthy purple-ish-crimson. It ended up not looking too different from how the other cocoon had appeared in the decayed building Elye and I had ventured inside of.

*“Is it working, Yuuta?”* asked Imir.

I looked at the cocoon and the miasma around it. Although the noxious fog moved away from the blood, it did not dim in intensity.

“Let's try and pour it directly into the cocoon!” I decided, and Imir and another warrior moved forward, while the first two warriors made a hole near the top of the cocoon with their swords.

*I hope the type of blood does not matter... what if Mortl used the blood of Elfin to exorcise the Necrotic Parasite he dealt with?*

As Imir poured the purified prey-blood into the hole made by the other men, the effect was immediate. The cocoon started bulging as though several hands were pushing against it from within, and a rumble overcame the entire floor, producing a delirious blur of movements due to the Foresight of my glasses. To his credit, Imir did not leave the cocoon until every last bit of the blood was emptied into the hole.

*“What about the last blood?”* he asked as soon as he returned to where I stood.

“Let's not be too hasty with it,” I said. It had after all taken five minutes to Sanctify each of the three blood-sack, due to the monotonous way the ability had to be used. Basically, I just had to move my energy through the blood, but the duration depended entirely on the volume of blood, and the Elfin had been very diligent and collected more than ten litres' worth. Fortunately, the ability was not

as strenuous or draining as I had feared, and I still had just enough energy left that I could call upon Sera if needed, or have Armen absorb a few hits.

Although Aef had not specified how much time was supposed to pass between the poisoning of the gestating cocoon and the burning of it, I wanted to err on the side of caution and wait for irrefutable signs that the blood was truly working.

Imir and the four warriors were holding torches at the ready, alongside their swords. I stood behind them, which, although feeling cowardly, was exactly where I belonged in this formation. Elye, who only had her torch, was holding it in both hands like a baseball bat. I wondered what had happened to her bow, but guessed either her father or mother had taken it from her as a punishment for trying to run away.

The floor continued to shake and squirm, while the miasma about our feet condensed around the base of the large cocoon. It seemed to be evaporating into a barely-perceptible white smoke. From the way that all six Elfin around me were only looking at the cocoon itself, I knew that they could not see it.

**“The purified blood is cleansing the evil aura of the apparition,”** Armen commented.

*White is a pure aura here as well? That’s very similar to the religions in my own world.* Part of me had assumed it was different here, since their priests had beige auras, and paladins and crusaders were yellow and gold.

**“It is said that it is the colour of spirits that are about to pass to the afterlife.”**

With my Foresight, I saw one of the warriors, a man seemingly the same age as Elye, trip as the floor roiled suddenly. I reached out to steady him just as the movement in the floor happened as predetermined and he simply cast me a glance, not realising the favour I’d done for him.

*Foresight is a powerful ability,* I remarked.

**“I believe it prudent to keep this ability to yourself. The Church frowns on those who associate with Demons and their ilk, like Imps.”**

*Would they even know it is an ability gained from a Prideling?*

**“I cannot say.”**

*I get it: better safe than sorry.*

I saw the moment that the cocoon spasmed again through my glasses, and then the change flowed across the room like a localised earthquake.

*“Andasangare!?! Do we need the rest of the blood!?”*

I looked at the miasma and saw that it had been reduced by more than half in volume already, but the purification was too slow for my liking. Clearly the root-born vessel was trying to hastily break free of its cocoon.

“Do it! Pour the rest of it inside as well!”

Three of them hurried to where the hide sack had been left, then hurried over to the cocoon where they emptied it into the hole, eliciting more rumbling and tremors. More half a quarter of the purified blood spilled onto the floor, and then a sudden convulsive spasm made every last root in the ceiling, walls, and floor readjust themselves. Even though I saw it coming through my glasses, I had no way to save myself from falling over.

No sooner had I landed on the floor than I yelled, “Burn it! Put it to the torch!”

*Sera, make the last bit of energy I have left in me count!*

With a gleeful scream, the Ifrit materialised and flames started coating her entire body as she started hugging the cocoon. Steam and smoke hissed from where her charcoal body touched the root-formed womb of the evil Parasite, and the room continued to be gripped by spasmodic tremors.

Like drunkards, the warriors and I got to our feet, while Elye seemed to fare much better. With an overhand throw, she hurled her torch at the cocoon, where it hit the side with hollow *thunk* and plopped to the base beneath it, slowly beginning to char it from underneath.

I could feel my energy being siphoned away by Seramosa’s steady smouldering of the cocoon, but I knew that she was holding back to not hurt the Elfin whom she held dear.

The warriors all placed their torches next to where Elye’s had landed, and a small flame was already beginning to lick up the side of the cocoon from their combined fire.

“We need to get out of here so my familiar can finish the job!” I yelled to them.

The very next moment, divined to me through my glasses, an eruption of roots came from the front of the large cocoon, sending one final destructive ripple through the top floor of the tower.

“Watch out!” I yelled, but before the words had fully left my mouth, all of us were tossed to our backs and some hideously-malformed creature stood before us. It was akin to a man, as though imitating the Elfin it plagued, but it had five arms and its head looked like a melted candle. A maw was situated in its torso, and on the side of its lopsided head, while each of its arms were twice the length of a human arm and capped with too many fingers. The purified blood stained its malformed body and the noxious fumes of the evil conglomerated Parasite was steadily boiling away into white smoke.

I imagined that it would scream, since I felt that all monstrosities would roar and scream when near to death, but apart from the sounds of its burning and creaking root-formed body, it was silent.

As I was getting back to my feet, I saw Sera pivot away from the cocoon to grip onto the back of the root vessel, increasing the intensity of her flames and immediately doubling the temperature around her to a sweltering summer heat. The hiss of evaporating steam and rapidly-burning roots and wood deafened the sounds of the fire and creaking of the monster’s body.

“Get out of here!” I yelled to the Elfin as I was moving towards the exit as well.

While Elye stayed with me, Imir and his men vaulted out the window and no doubt scaled the outside. I hoped they would warn those waiting at the foot of the tower, since I doubted it would stand for long once the fires really took hold.

I more-or-less slid down the tunnel to the fourth floor, but no sooner had Elye helped me to my feet than the temperature doubled again and the ceiling nearby began to bulge and turn to ash. The monster puppeteered by the Necrotic Parasite broke through the ceiling, landing only five metres from the bottom of the tunnel to the fifth floor.

Although it had no eyes, I knew it was staring at me, and it suddenly began moving towards me, despite smouldering and smoking. The evil aura that hung about it was very small, but it seemed intent on taking me down.

I had only barely started moving towards one of the windows with Elye, when I felt the drain of my final bit of energy truly hit me. The strength fled from my body and time seemed to slow as I saw Elye vault out the nearby window without looking back, as though believing I was right behind her.

I tried to yell at her, but my voice was immediately deafened by the frustrated scream of Sera, who, in one final vengeful blast, let loose the last of her potent fire, just as she disappeared, banished by my lack of energy to fuel her.

With one glimpse back at the monster, I felt heat flush my skin and a piercing light blind me, before a warm wind lifted me and threw me out the window with such strength that I had no time to grasp at the curving walls of the bulbous floors beneath me.

Then I was in freefall.

I got to see the moment that the top two floors of the tower collapsed in on themselves.

Then I blacked out.



I gasped loudly as I sat up. Then immediately groaned in pain, tears forming in my eyes. It felt as though a thousand frigid needles were piercing my body all over and my muscles were so sore and aching that it felt as though they had each been torn apart meticulously.

“**Lay back down,**” Armen demanded, and I didn’t hesitate to obey.

“Fuck, this hurts!” I complained.

I heard footsteps from nearby, which were approaching quickly. Just then I took in my surroundings.

“Where am I?”

“*Yuuta!*” Elye exclaimed through the open doorway to my room, which, like all rooms in the Enclave, had no door for privacy.

Stars were suddenly all over and I realised that I didn’t have my glasses. I also then realised I wasn’t wearing my clothes. Then I saw the bandages of bark and silk and root-spun twine.

“Am I in a hospital!?”

Elye knelt down by my side and I realised I was lying on some kind of strange mattress on the floor. I tilted my head to look at the Elfin girl and saw that there were moss mattresses all over the room. I slowly started putting two-and-two together.

“What happened?” I asked her.

The Elfin looked at me with an intense stare. Her eyes were red-rimmed as though she had been crying a lot.

“*I thought you were going to die!*” she exclaimed and started bawling, putting her head on my chest, where a reinforcing vest-like thing of bark was wrapped around my torso.

I reached up to pat her head, though it hurt to move my arm.

“I’ll be okay,” I assured her.

“*The Menders said you were going to die!*” Elye insisted.

“Look at me,” I said. “Am I dead?”

She lifted her head and looked me in the eyes. Then she started bawling again, her whole body wracked with the effort. I hoped they were tears of happiness or relief.

“What happened after I was flung from the tower?” I asked softly.

Elye sniffed loudly. “*The tower... it collapsed. Then the Rotmaker emerged from the ruins, but father and his friends took it down, before tossing its body back onto the flames.*”

I grimaced. *What a total mess...*

“**You need to plan your escape routes better.**”

*It’s not like I planned to jump from a fourth-floor window... But, I’m guessing your healing magic is the reason I’m still alive.*

**“Indeed.”**

“Thank you,” I said out loud. Both to the girl and to my Protector.

“Has the Rotmaker been spotted anywhere else?” I asked.

*“No. Father and the scouts and warriors have all been watching for signs for the last many days.”*

“Wait, how long was I out?”

“Eleven days,” she answered.

“Eleven days!?”

**“You sustained a major concussion, broke several ribs and your right arm too. It took me a long time to heal it all. If your Pact of the Familiar had not evolved to rank three, I do not believe I would have been able to save you.”**

“Holy shit...” I muttered.

Elye hugged me tightly. It was nice to have someone care for me this way, but I couldn’t help but wish that it was Rana whose embrace I was held in.

“Ow!” I complained when she started squeezing even harder.

The Elfin did not care.

I patted her on the head again.

*I guess I won’t be leaving this bed for a while, huh?*

**“It would be inadvisable, yes.”**

*So much for hurrying to Helmstatter... this detour has really been a mess, hasn’t it?*

**“I believe I warned you on more than one occasion.”**

*You won’t ever let this go, will you?*

Armen let out a chuckle. It seemed even he was glad that I was still alive.