

40 – A Siren and its Song III

“Hand me the tome you possess,” Leopold demanded. He was sitting on a boulder next to the fireplace. I was sitting on the moss opposite him.

I wanted to object, but I knew that he would take it from me if I didn’t comply.

After handing him the Encyclopaedia, he skimmed through its pages, humming some melody to himself and totally absorbed by its entries.

I sat and watched him go through it from front-to-back over the next few minutes, before he broke out of his spellbound reverie and handed it back to me.

“Where are the rest?” he then asked.

“The rest? What do you mean?”

“It is incomplete,” he replied. “This one contains only the common entities found in Arley and Lacksmey. And there are only six Demons within. Demons are plentiful and abundant. There should be more pages about them.”

“You mean to tell me that there are way more entities than what this book describes?”

“Of course, weren’t you listening!?”

“This was the only tome Master Owl gave me.”

Leopold sighed in exasperation. “Those who worship the Watcher are often jealous with the knowledge they possess. And the true reason he gave you this tome was because of the spell held within.”

“Spell?”

“It allows for someone with a Tracker to always find you. It was how I followed you.”

I blinked. This was a lot to take in. I knew I shouldn’t be surprised, but the more time I spent with Leopold, the more I was starting to believe that Master Owl’s kindness had been smoke-and-mirrors. It wasn’t so much that I trusted Leopold’s words, since he was clearly unhinged, but his explanations were like missing puzzle-pieces that slotted perfectly into the holes that I’d felt existed in the things Owl had told me.

“Do other Encyclopaedias work the same way?” I asked.

“Doubtful. My Nirvah says that this tome has had many owners. The Owl uses it for his schemes.”

“Nirvah?” I asked confused about who he meant.

Leopold waved a hand and something became corporeal behind him. At the sight I scrambled back several metres, terrified of what I saw.

One of its four hands rested on Leopold's left shoulder, while its other three, on their double-jointed arms, held gleaming obsidian masks with different faces on them. Its body was stretched and overlong, with something like ribs poking-and-stretching the off-white plastic skin of its narrow torso in a disturbing manner. A long thin neck supported an egg-shaped bulb of a head, upon which a single enormous vertical eye was planted in the centre. Its eye watched me intently, and its pupil-less iris was like a reflection of the cosmos, with stars and rainbow-coloured dust and blue dwarfs and red quasars. Below its narrow torso, from which sprouted its four arms, was a narrow point where a pelvis would've been on a normal human, and it simply floated above the ground in a manner that seemed to suggest that gravity held no sway over it. Simply put: it was disturbing and alien, and it made the ethereal-blue spider seem normal by comparison.

The three arms holding masks moved forward, and the thin lips on the first, which depicted a sleeping beauty with her eyes closed, began moving as it said, “*I am Nirvah. I see you.*”

The second mask was like an angry troll and its fanged maw opened to grunt, “I SEE YOUR POTENTIAL AND JUDGE YOUR WORTH.”

The third-and-last mask was a charming lupine male face locked in an alluring grin, which moved its lips subtly and told me, “*I keep the secrets of the cosmos and hide the truth.*”

I swallowed hard. It was a familiar which spoke. *That* could only mean one thing.

“You have a Demon as your familiar?”

“Nirvah is an Envoy of the Absolutes, not a Demon,” he replied. “And she is not my familiar, she is my other half. I gave her half my soul to form a pact with her.”

“Why would you do *something like that*?”

Leopold narrowed his eyes as he looked at me. “You do not seem like you would ever understand my reasons, so I will not waste my time explaining it. Now, it is time for you to learn how to utilise your most powerful ability.”

I still had more questions, but as the terrifying ‘Envoy’ became incorporeal again, I knew that the moment had passed. I wondered how much of Leopold's unnerving behaviour and attitude could be attributed to his pact with this ‘Nirvah’.

Do you think I could banish Nirvah? Although maybe that is not her name.

“No. The sort of pact that he has formed with her means that she is intertwined with his soul. You would have to kill him, and even then, there is a chance she might possess his body,

meaning you would have to kill it a second time. He is what in my time was referred to as an ‘Incarnate’. They can be killed by anyone, not just an Exorcist. Some of the most dangerous Quests the Adventurers’ Guild hands out pertains to such monsters.”

Isn’t Incarnate one of the Roles that Owl said I could specialise in?? He said you had to form a pact with a Demon to become one.

“I believe the Role shares the name, though perhaps it allows for more control over the sorts of Soul Pacts you form. Most Incarnates are humans who have been possessed by Demons but retain parts of their original selves.”

They sound very dangerous.

“They are.”

Leopold moved from the boulder he had been sitting on. He was staring at Armen, as though he could see him. It wasn’t until then that I wondered if his Nirvah could listen to what Armen told me. Somehow that didn’t seem likely, but I was perhaps better off assuming that my conversations with the Wraith were not secure.

A realisation hit me then. If Owl had put a spell on the Encyclopaedia that allowed him to track its location, then he might come to my rescue.

“Are you not worried about the spell on my book?” I asked Leopold as I got up from the mossy ground and followed him to the other side of the clearing, away from the tent, campfire, and carriage.

“Nirvah blocks such spells while you are in her presence.”

Master Owl had wanted me to go to Helmstatter for a reason. If he had indeed pruned and prepped me for his ‘schemes’ then he would be upset to know that I suddenly vanished without trace. Or would he? I hoped he would, even if I was beginning to understand more-and-more how much he had played me for a fool.

In truth, I only have myself to blame.

When we came to the line of trees at the far end of the clearing, Leopold summoned one of the Pridelings. Then he said, “Since your tome does not mention Pridelings and their powers, I will explain them to you briefly. To most effectively utilise ‘Contain Spirit’, you must understand the entity that you are using it on.

“A Prideling is a minor Devil, of the Imp category. Other kindred Imps include Slothlings, Greedlings, Gluttons, Flaykin, Wrathlings, and Succubi & Incubi. Like most Devils, both minor and greater, they follow the Mortal Sins.”

I blinked in surprise. “Like from the Christian bible?”

“Yes. Now shut up. No interruptions or I’ll cut your tongue out.”

He continued, “The Pridelings are pale imitations of true Pride Devils, but they possess the ability to cast Shocking Touch, which works like a stun-gun.”

As he once again compared things to references from earth, I realised that Leopold must be from there as well, and in a similar time period as me, given that he knew what a stun-gun was. The fact that the most psychotic person I’d met thus far was someone from the same world and era as me was a sobering fact. Frode, who had been a literal Viking as far as I could tell, had been far more polite and good-natured. The dichotomy was unsettling, to say the least.

To show off the ‘Shocking Touch’, Leopold formed an upturned fist and the Prideling swiped its hand through the air before me, while a white-hot crackle formed around its claws and a tremendous *SNAP!* followed, almost like an explosion. My body involuntarily jumped back a step, in surprise.

I was pretty sure it was less like a stun-gun and more like putting a fork in a power outlet, and whoever was unfortunate enough to be hit by it would probably die from cardiac arrest.

“A simpleton would utilise *this* ability of the Prideling and Contain its essence within a weapon, in order to imbue it with that same lightning power. However, the true worth of Contain Spirit is the ability to make tools. In the case of the Prideling, one could take their core trait, ‘Arrogance’, and use it to create an impenetrable suit of armour. But, if they knew as much about the Prideling as I do, they would take its spirit and bind it to a pair of glasses, allowing one to see a glimpse of the future.”

“Like foresight?”

“Yes.” He handed me the glasses and I took them gingerly. Then he pointed at the Prideling in front of him and said, “Your first use of the Contain Spirit ability will be simple. I have already prepared *this one* to be bonded with the glasses. You must simply perform the ability while intoning the Binding Litany.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“No more interruptions. I am about to tell you.” For emphasis, he performed a gesture and the Prideling held out its crackling claw towards me.

I took in a deep breath. Leopold had taught me the Binding Litany, how to alter it for a given purpose, how to imagine the Contain Spirit when I used it, and what to be careful of when I attempted it. Apparently, the ability left you vulnerable to possession if done incorrectly, and I did not want to have my soul devoured by a Prideling’s spirit, just because I screwed up the wording or timing.

He had told me that for binding an unnamed entity or one which name was unknown, a ritual glyph had to be drawn, since the Binding Litany required the name of the entity.

The name of the Prideling before me, which dutifully awaited its bonding with the Spirit Glasses in my left hand, was named ‘Wertlos’. My Omniglot ability did not translate it, which I thought was strange, since I was fairly sure it was a German word.

Additionally, once a binding was successful, the contained spirit would become obedient to whoever wielded it, so long as it did not have a strong personality or intellect. That meant that containing a Demon, or something like Armen or Nirvah, would still require a proper Pact to be formed, otherwise the tool or weapon produced from the binding would become hostile and attempt to hurt the wielder.

I was starting to understand why Owl had not wanted to teach me this ability, as it seemed to come with a whole host of problems. But he also seemed averse to the thought of using possessed weapons and objects, so maybe to him it was not just the risk involved, but something else as well.

I took in another deep breath, then exhaled out my nose.

With my palm pointed at Wertlos the Prideling, I imagined the light within my body, that Harleigh had taught me to sense, and I used my imagination to move it from my core and up through my right arm and out through the palm like a grasping tendril. I felt a quake flow through my body as my soul connected with the Prideling’s spirit, as well as something like lightning rolling across my scalp.

While imagining that the soul-tendril from my palm wrapped itself around the soul of Wertlos and moved it through my body and towards the Spirit Glasses that lay in my other palm, I intoned the Binding Litany within my mind:

*Wertlos, devil imp of proud and fiendish origin,
Obey mine desire and render thyself to mine design,
Hark mine words and kneel to mine command,
Lest thy soul be cleft in twain,*

The light within me and the Prideling’s soul that it carried with it was moving through my core at this point, before making its way up through my left arm and towards its palm.

*Wertlos, servant to mine will,
Offer me thy gift of foresight,
Become one in bond with the object that I wield,
And until thy task has ended,
Obey mine whims and wishes.*

A bluish light glowed from the corporeal form of the Prideling, before it vanished, only for its light to briefly glow from the Spirit Glasses in my left palm.

A few metres away, Leopold was staring intently at the spectacles, lust and greed obvious in his pale eyes.

I wondered what exactly the change in the glasses would be, so I put them on, immediately met with the bouncing-and-excited purple aura of Leopold and he stormed towards me. Only, he wasn't moving, but rather, a ghostly replica was. A second later, Leopold perfectly matched the movements of the ghostly outline that preceded him, and when I saw it lash out, I quickly backpedalled, only for the real Leopold to swing and miss.

“Give me those!” he screeched.

I looked around, seeing that all his other familiars were either too far away or unsummoned, so I made a snap decision and fled into the line of trees, running as far away from the madman as I could.

“Come back here!” I heard him yell from afar, his voice muffled by the trees.

A moment later, a snarl rent the air and I knew that he'd sent one of his beasts after me.

I just kept on running.