

65 – Armour-Bound

Elye, Renji, and Lukas were off browsing the shops and vendors in the Market Quarter, while I sought out the Genius of the Helmstatter Adventurers’ Guild, accompanied by Rana. She had refused to leave my side, perhaps worried that I’d get kidnapped again or become embroiled in some huge conflict, which was fair.

We had split the six gold crowns from the quest completion yesterday evenly between us, despite Lukas arguing that he hadn’t done anything to receive a share. I was glad that Rana, Renji, and I had all insisted he take the money. Elye had taken her share too, but I was slightly worried that she didn’t fully comprehend the concept of currency. Fortunately, Renji had taken the Elfin and Rogue with him to the lower part of the city, hopefully to teach Elye about bartering and trade.

After asking one of the Guild Clerks for directions, Rana and I headed up to the second floor, where bookcases covered every available wall and even divided the floor into sections, at the very end of which we found the Genius seated on a couch with a large tome open in his lap and scribbling hastily into the journal in his hand.

Unlike Æmos in Lundia, the Helmstatter Genius was dressed in more formal attire, though he still had large spectacles resting on the bridge of his nose. The clothes he wore were of the Adventurers’ Guild style, with a green vest over a grey shirt and suit-pants with a scotch-pattern of green and grey. His hair was dark-brown and his eyes were amber. In terms of features, he was someone who could easily disappear in a crowd; neither ugly nor strikingly handsome.

“Exorcist Ryūta?” he said by way of greeting. “What brings you here?”

“Are you familiar with the ‘Contain Spirit’ ability and its applications?”

The Genius nodded slowly.

“Do you mind if I ask you some things about it? Perhaps somewhere more private?”

His name was ‘Bacchi’, according to Rana, who had apparently talked to the man before. As we followed him to the third floor, where we entered a small office, she told me that he was very miserly with knowledge, and would need some sort of repayment to reveal anything.

After sitting down on a soft couch next to Rana, I watched as the Genius pulled three pieces of paper from his journal and drew a unique sigil on each of them. The first was like an eye with two

snaking intertwined lines; the second was like a strange-looking highly-detailed ear; and the third was an optical illusion making it seem as though the drawing was a three-dimensional hole into the paper.

“What are those?” I asked.

He seemed to weigh the value of telling me, before demanding, “Tell me the name of Leopold’s Soul-Pacted familiar.”

I blinked in surprise, but then said, “Nirvah.”

He quickly scribbled it down into his journal, then pulled up the first sigil paper and explained, “This is the Tangled Eye.” He picked up the second one, “The Inverted Ear.” Then the last, “The Bottomless Well.”

“What are they for?”

“You wanted a private conversation. I am making this room impervious to scrying eyes and eavesdroppers.”

As though each page had glue on the back, he stuck them to three separate spots around the room. It took me a moment to realise they were equidistant from each other. I activated my Spirit Sight on a whim and saw how a faint white light emanated from the pages. The Genius had easily written the wards and imbued them with power, which was quite impressive, considering how draining it had been for me to make the two relatively-simple wards against the Siren’s song.

After Bacchi sat down, he immediately told me, “I will require knowledge in exchange for what I am going to gift you.”

“You didn’t ask for anything when you showed me your journal yesterday,” I pointed out.

“It was not knowledge that might be used for dangerous acts.”

“What if I show you my Guild Card?” I asked.

He considered it for a moment, then nodded.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Rana asked.

“I doubt he’s gonna tell anyone.”

“I do not make a habit of spreading my information freely,” Bacchi agreed.

After a couple minutes of looking over my Card, he asked, “This forbidden Pact, what type of familiar is it with?”

I cringed at the wording. “It’s with a Condemned Ifrit.”

“Fascinating. I was of the understanding that such a Pact was fatal.”

“So far, no.”

Seramosa was, for once, not floating around nearby, having instead decided to float off after Elye in her incorporeal form. I hadn't tried to stop her, mostly because I knew it was impossible to rein her in. Armen, on the other hand, was sitting next to the Genius, which I found rather ominous. But then again, he knew what I was going to ask about.

“And your Protector?”

“Guardian Wraith.” Before he could ask about my Observer, I pre-empted him and said, “My Observer is The Many offered up a crow body.”

“Good choice,” he commented. “The Many cannot go incorporeal, so they require inconspicuous forms. Although, I have heard some complaints among Guild staff and our members that they find the sudden influx of crows to be an ominous sign.”

“In hindsight, a crow was perhaps a bad choice.”

“Maybe you should've used a squirrel,” Rana remarked. She didn't know the exact details of how I'd summoned the familiar, but she seemed to catch on to the fact that it involved some sort of vessel. Sometimes I forgot that she had quite a lot of experience, perhaps because she didn't flaunt it like others did.

“A flying familiar for such a duty is more apt,” Bacchi argued.

“How about a flying squirrel?” I asked, jokingly.

“They do not actually fly, they glide,” he corrected me.

After a minute more, he handed me back my Card.

“Very well, I find this a sufficient trade.”

“But seriously, you're not gonna tell anyone, right?” Rana insisted to know.

“Although some would claim that a Pact with a Demon is a sign of malignancy in the invoker. I believe that it is what you do with your powers that matters. The Witch Hunters themselves often employ questionable weapons to take down their foes, so they ought to extend the same consideration to invokers, but alas.”

I thought about that for a moment, then just shook my head. It was no doubt one of those things where they got a pass for being on the side of justice, while anything an Exorcist or Summoner did was questioned, as though we strove to be evil.

“I hadn't thought about that before,” Rana commented.

“Alright,” I said, changing the subject to what I'd come here for. “I have two questions about ‘Contain Spirit’.”

“May I guess the first one?” asked Bacchi.

“Go for it.”

“You wish to know how to undo the spell.”

I nodded. “That’s right.”

“It is a complicated matter.”

“How so?”

“Depending on what you want to accomplish, there are different methods of releasing a Contained Spirit.”

I pulled the Music Box out of my bag and placed it on the table between our two couches. Rana looked at the device with some recognition, while Bacchi asked, “What is this?”

“It’s a music box,” I told him. “Within which is the soul of a Siren that I contained, on the orders of Leopold.”

Bacchi’s eyes widened and he briefly took off his spectacles to rub the lenses on the hem of his shirt, before putting them back on. He swallowed once, then asked, “May I?”

I gestured with a hand, as though to say ‘Be my guest’, and the Genius reached down to grab the box, before moving it around in his hands. I suddenly noticed how the lenses of his spectacles were changing the colour of his eyes.

“Are you using Spirit Sight?” I asked in surprise. “I thought that Geniuses couldn’t use Exorcist abilities.”

“I am not. However, these spectacles have a magic-sensing property to them, imbued by a talented craftsman, who is very skilled with working Soul Quartz into lenses.”

“I see. And what are they telling you?”

“I can more-or-less sense the form of the containment you performed. This one is without limitations it would seem. Quite a dangerous thing. Particularly for something like a Siren. They are not meant to exist on land for a reason. Even confined to the open seas they are a troublesome foe not worth sending Adventurers to deal with.”

“*I will eat your eyes!*” yelled the melodic voice of the Siren in the box. Rana jumped in her seat, while the Genius hardly reacted.

He nodded, “I am sure my eyes would be very tasty to you.”

“What the hell was *that?*” Rana whispered to me.

“The Siren I was telling you about.”

“I didn’t know she could speak!”

I shrugged, almost wanting to say, “It gets messy with so many voices in my head.” But I realised it would make me sound like a lunatic.

Bacchi lifted up the lid of the box, unperturbed by the voice he’d just heard. Without any prompting, Lyssalynne just started to hum. It was a simple melody, but with her melodic voice it sounded so serene and angelic. I was glad that there didn’t seem to be any sort of spell imbued in the song, except perhaps to make us all feel a bit calmer.

“This mechanism within, is it for generating music?” he asked.

“That is originally how a music box would work, yes, but I think it no longer works due to the Siren within.”

“Was it made in this world?”

“Possibly. Although I can’t say who made it, since it originally belonged to Leopold. I have an intact one if you want to buy it from me.”

Bacchi closed the lid, although the humming did no abate, then looked me in the eyes and said, “How much would you want for such an item?”

I pulled it from another bag and handed it to him, “Give it a look first.” I was mostly just glad to potentially get rid of it, since it was quite a lot to carry around on me. I’d thought about giving it to Renji, but if selling it was an option, I figured that was better. After all, I had tools to replace, and no idea how expensive such items would be.

Bacchi opened the lid of the normal music box and immediately a faint melody started to play. Within seconds, the Siren’s hum had changed to this melody and formed a guiding wordless voice for it. It was quite bizarre, but also very beautiful.

“I’ll pay eight gold,” Bacchi said.

“Give me ten and it’s a deal.”

He considered it for a moment, then got up from the couch, still holding the music box, before setting it down on a desk in the back of the room, from the top drawer of which he withdrew a pouch, counted out ten of the large coins, and then returned to us, placing them on the table.

I quickly grabbed the money, sharing a glance with Rana, who just shook her head, before stuffing them in my own pouch.

“I believe the mechanism will eventually stop,” I told Bacchi, “but you just need to twist it back on its spring to get it going again.”

“I may disassemble it to figure out how it works,” he commented, more to himself than to me. “Thank you for letting me purchase it.”

“Anyway, to return to the matter we were talking about,” I said, and immediate Lyssalynne’s singing died down, while the faint melody of Bacchi’s newly-purchased music box continued to play in the background.

The Genius looked to the Siren’s box, then said, “For a binding such as this, there are two methods of release that I can imagine: a full release of the spirit, thereby sending it to the afterlife, but potentially trapping it in the in-between as an errant apparition; or—”

“That sounds really bad,” I interrupted.

“It would be unwise,” he agreed, “but you can increase the odds of the former by releasing the binding while also performing a funerary rite.”

“Okay, but I want to return her to life, such as what she had before she became imprisoned in the box.”

“That would be the second method, although it too carries great risk.”

“Pray tell.”

“You would have to find a vessel that can accommodate the Siren’s spirit and then transfer her soul to it.”

“A vessel? You mean like a body or something?”

“A vessel ought to match the shape of the soul it contains, so the body of a siren would make the most sense.”

“When you say body, do you mean a corpse?”

“That would be preferable, I think, although you may also bind a soul to a body that already has one, and over time one soul will devour the other, such that equilibrium is reached.”

“Why do both methods sound so awful?”

“It is no simple thing to release a bound spirit,” he remarked.

“But the litany says ‘*Until thy task has ended*’.”

“Indeed, but did you specify the task?”

“No.”

“Then it never ends. It is a bit of contractual language that sounds better than it is. You would be unsurprised to know that Demons came up with it, cunning as they often are.”

“So if I had just worded the litany better, it would’ve been easier to release her from the music box?”

“Correct, although such a release is similar to the first method.”

“And what determines if they go to the afterlife or the in-between?”

“Just like any apparition, the bonds of life are what keep them from moving on.”

“I see...”

“Now, for my second question. It involves a familiar of mine.”

Although it had taken them almost a full day, the servants of the Bounty Hunter Guild Master had brought the armour I had selected as my compensation to the third floor of the building where Renji had his apartment. Rana had questioned if it was a good idea to perform a ritual there, but I was sure he wouldn't mind. Besides, it wasn't like I was going to summon anything.

Bacchi the Genius had supplied me with several pages detailing the types of sigils I'd need to properly perform the Contain Spirit to bind Armen to the heavy armour. After laying the entire armour out on the floor with Rana's help, I started drawing out the sigils on the various pieces of the armour: torso and skirt, shoulder-guards, helmet, upper-arms, forearms, gauntlets, thighs, calves, and greaves.

I had also been given a carefully-worded version of the Binding Litany for the exact purpose of the 'Contain Spirit' I was undertaking. After all, the Genius had said that for a precise bonding to take place, the choice of words had to leave no gaps.

“Why did you decide to pick this armour specifically?” Rana asked, breaking me from my spaced-out stare at the page in my hand.

I looked down at it again. I'd used Leopold's brush and ink to draw the various sigils, but they were nearly impossible to see unless the light reflected off their glossy surface, since the armour itself was quite dark.

“I chose it because it matches Armen perfectly.”

It was easily twice as heavy as the armour that Rana wore, and the helmet was an imposing 'frog-mouth' type that only had a tiny gap at the top of its odd shape for the eyes to peak out of, while the shoulder-guards were so large that they basically overlapped the already-thick armour of the upper-torso area. The whole thing was made to withstand countless blows, but it was clearly too heavy and unwieldy for anyone but a literal mountain of a warrior to carry on their body. Someone like Renji and Rana could probably wear it, but they were both very dynamic and agile fighters, so its heavy defence would end up being detrimental to their style of combat.

Armen, on the other hand, would have no such issue, at least that was the hope and why I had chosen it. Besides, his duty was one of a protector, so the defensive nature of the armour would only be a boon, as he would never have to actively chase down attackers, but instead just had to wait for them to get to him.

One last thing left, I said to the Wraith.

“You require my true name.”

That’s right.

“You can never say it out loud,” he demanded.

Of course. I have learnt my lesson, thanks to Leopold.

“Theodor Grey.”

I blinked in surprise, but did not say anything.

“Armen was the name of a friend I met in this world,” he explained.

“Don’t you need candles or something for this?” Rana suddenly asked, startling me.

“Erm... no. Not for this kind of spell. It is honestly quite simple to use. I just need the name of the spirit I am containing, and then there’s a litany I have to follow.”

“I see.”

I nodded, then said, “I think I’m ready now. You may want to step back a little.”

Rana retreated to the farthest wall, which made me chuckle, but then I released the grin from my face and let the tension drain from me. It was important to have a calm mind for this.

I held out my right hand, my Ifrit Claw, and Armen floated over to me, such that my palm was touching his torso, then I pointed my left palm at the armour on the floor before me, before beginning the invocation:

*Theodor Grey, Guardian Wraith and loyal Priest Crusader,
Obey mine desire and render thyself to mine design,
Hark mine words and kneel to mine command,
Lest thy service to me is ended,
Theodor Grey, dear Protector of mine,
Offer me thy entire soul and thy service,
Become one in bond with the armour that I have prepared,
And until thy Pact be dissolved,
Obey mine whims and wishes.*

I heard Rana gasp as she saw Armen briefly become visible to her eyes, not as the floating Guardian Wraith, but as a brief echo of the Priest Crusader he had once been, finery and all. Then, with a blue light, his visage disappeared, before his light began suffusing the entire assembled set of armour lain out on the floor, setting alight the carefully-drawn sigils I had made in the very same hue.

Rana quickly returned to my side to watch, pushing me back with a hand on my chest, as the pieces of the armour began to move, as though controlled by a Poltergeist or haunting Shade.

I put my hand around her waist, as we both stared the blue spirit of Armen take hold within the armour. The metal screeched and warped under his presence, changing form, while continuing to float up into the air, where each piece came together as prescribed by the Sigils that Bacchi had given me.

Then the greaves suddenly floated down to the floor, followed by the calf and thigh armour, then the torso with its skirt, then the upper-arm and forearm guards, then gauntlets, and, finally, the helmet. No longer was it a frog-mouth helmet, but instead it was completely smooth, with not a single aperture for eyes nor mouth. Overall, his transformed armour seemed less like a suit worn by a knight, and closer to something a robot might wear.

“I feel, strange,” he commented, his muffled and hollow voice said out through his helmet.

I glanced sidelong to Rana, she had stiffened slightly, and that’s how I knew:

It was no longer just me whom the familiar could converse with.