

## 127 – Wrought of Flesh

“A succubus?” I asked. I’d read about them in my Encyclopaedia, but they’d been described as a vague entity that could only become fully coherent in dreams. They were a type of Lust Demon that had been strongly warned against trying to summon, and yet, somehow, Ludwig had just such an entity as his familiar. Although...

I leaned in close and asked, “Is it soul-pacted to you?”

The Incarnate roared a laugh. “Are you mad!?! Even Demonologists wouldn’t bind themselves to a Demon like that!”

I was slightly taken aback by his reaction.

*Somehow, I feel like I shouldn’t tell him about you, Saoirse.*

*Then don’t. It is not necessary for him to know.*

“**I concur,**” Armen commented in my mind.

I frowned a bit. Not telling him felt kind of like lying, but, of course, keeping secrets about familiars and pacts was part of being an Exorcist, and he hadn’t told me about his Succubus until now.

Ludwig waved the metal wand and the female Demon vanished in a puff of mist, taking most of the pink mist with her.

As the Succubus’ magic dissipated, the kneeling captive came to and began yelling and roaring.

“We’ve gotten all we need out of him, so could someone finish him off?” Ludwig asked, looking around at us.

The man, who had been spellbound until now, had a yellow-ish aura like that of a Librarian, and as though pulled forward by the Singing Branch, which hadn’t left my hand all this time, I stepped towards him and said, “Drain Spirit.”

The light from my staff came out like tri-coloured tendrils spotted with darkness that lashed onto him, sucking his yellow aura back up through it like some horrific monster’s proboscis. The grey tendril was the weakest of the three, since it had come from two Native assassins.

“You’ve been busy,” Ludwig commented, as the Demonologist’s crony dried up and died, while those around us looked at me in the same way they’d been looking at him and his Demon pet.

“The Quest that Emily and I went on proved quite troublesome,” I replied in a way of explaining. Renji gave me a strange look. “You okay, Ryūta?”

“We need to talk about something,” I told him.

“I also have something for Emily,” Ludwig added, patting a bag hanging from his belt. Emily’s eyes widened a bit, as though she was seeing something the rest of us couldn’t.

The Expedition members who’d been with us moved around the marketplace, mostly aimless, though some of the Fortress guards began getting them to help with the cleanup. Sooner or later, they’d need to get some proper rest.

Ludwig, Renji, Elye, Armen, Emily, and I had found a mostly-intact silk and fabrics vendor where we sat down to get some simple privacy. I drew out some simple anti-snooping wards, which I’d learnt from watching Bacchi in Helmstatter.

The Incarnate watched me draw them out using one of Emily’s brushes. It was still quite draining of my energy to make them, but, like when I’d made the wards for the Redoubt, it wasn’t as taxing as it had been in the past.

“Where did you learn to do those?” he asked.

“I watched a Genius use them.”

“The Inverted Ear, the Tangled Eye, and the Bottomless Well,” he said, looking at the three I’d made. “A formidable combo I reckon, but not impervious. Some entities can still penetrate their obfuscation.”

“Like which?” I asked.

“Visitors, for one, though that’s mainly because they often operate outside of conventional senses, so what those three wards protect against won’t work on them.”

I nodded. “I will keep it in mind.”

“Attaboy.”

“Now, about what I wanted to talk about,” I said, pulling out the flier that Armen had brought me.

Ludwig scanned it quickly, then frowned. “I’ve heard of it. It’s a suicide mission, by all accounts.”

“I also heard that it’s best to avoid that area,” Renji said.

“Well... I went there.”

“Fool,” Ludwig commented immediately.

Emily and Armen were watching the exchange, while Elye was juggling arrows, clearly bored out of her mind.

“I found out what sort of entity it is,” I replied.

“It’s a Lich, isn’t it?” Ludwig said.

“How’d you know?”

“They might as well have written it on the Quest. Any Exorcist worth their title would know to avoid them. They are almost always a former Otherworlder who performed a forbidden ritual, meaning they are exceptionally dangerous, more so than any Demon. You are lucky to be alive.”

“There’s something else,” I said, the words struggling to come out.

Renji seemed to pick up on my hesitation. “What?”

“I know who the Lich used to be. It’s Inoue Kumi.”

Renji’s eyes widened. “...Holy shit.”

“Someone from your world?” Ludwig asked.

“She was our classmate,” Renji said.

“Three people who know each other who were transported to Mondus,” he remarked. “Rare, but not unusual.”

“Really?”

“Indeed. Ask Mortl about it sometime. She was transported here with three friends, and they all arrived together. You two were lucky to have arrived only a few years apart, but I take it this former friend of yours wasn’t as fortunate.”

“I think she arrived a century ago or longer,” I said.

Renji took the revelation poorly. “I should’ve checked,” he said, clearly blaming himself for never having thought of the possibility.

“It’s not your fault,” I told him.

“When I thought she gave up on searching for you, it might’ve actually been that she had disappeared too,” he said.

Ludwig clapped him on the back. “Don’t be so gloomy! You did well today, and ya got something to be excited about, right?”

He smiled a bit, but I could tell he was putting on a front.

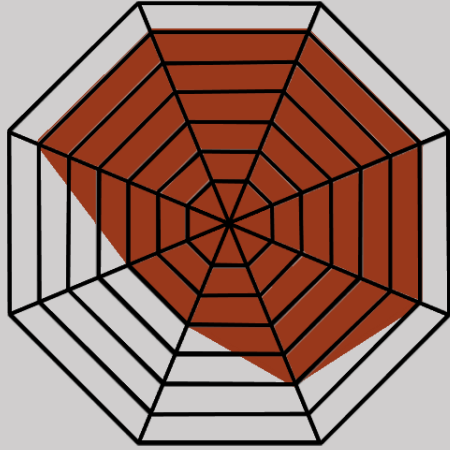
“I wasn’t able to exorcise her,” I said. “But I will go back and do it when I’m stronger.”

Ludwig frowned. “Bad idea, but, when you decide to do it, let me know and I’ll help ya.”

“Thank you. So, what are the good news?”

Renji pulled out his Guild Card and showed it to me:

<i>‘SKRALD’</i>	
<b>ROLE:</b> <i>Brawler</i>	<b>RANK:</b> <i>Eminent</i>

GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>20</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>A</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>A</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>A</i>	LUCK: <i>B</i>
PACT: <i>D</i>	SOUL: <i>D</i>	STRENGTH: <i>A</i>	VITALITY: <i>A</i>
<b>ABILITIES</b> <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Brawler V’</i> <i>‘Argonaut’</i> <i>‘Guiding Star’</i> <i>‘Thunder-fist’</i>			

“You hit Rank V!” I said in amazement.

“How do you get an Advanced Role?” Emily asked.

“It involves a thing at the Adventurers’ Guild in Evergreen,” Ludwig said.

“A thing?”

“Yeah, you know,” he said, waving his right hand vaguely. “It’s a special kind of ritual. Speaking of.”

He pulled out a strange-looking tome. It was covered in a spongy sort of beige and brown skin, with rusted iron clasps keeping it shut. Emily gave it a strange sort of looking.

*Karasumany, lend me a crow.*

One of the clones flew down out of the sky and landed on my shoulder. I borrowed its vision and watched the tome through its eyes. The Tome trailed a strange trail of blue, purple, violet, and aquamarine colours and radiated a hazy white aura.

“It’s a Possessed Item,” I realised, though I had never seen its like before.

“It’s called a Caged Spell-Tome,” Ludwig said. “The name refers to the fact that one or several Mages were used to craft it. It is, obviously, forbidden to possess. However! It is the strongest and most useful sort of Spell-Tome that a Spellhand can own, as it moulds itself to its wielded and unlocks their potential.”

“When you say ‘used to craft’, do you mean it is made from their actual bodies?”

“Yep.”

“That’s grim,” I said.

“But, in the right hands, it can be very powerful,” Renji added. Clearly, they had discussed this in advance.

“Where did you find it?”

“One of the Demonologist’s cronies was an Elementalist who had this on him. If we hadn’t taken it, the Witch Hunters would’ve.”

“And you want me to use it?” Emily asked, catching on to their thoughts.

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t harm you,” Ludwig promised.

I frowned, but I could hardly take a stance against the use of Possessed Items without seeming like a massive hypocrite.

“What happens if she’s found to possess it?”

“I’ll make sure she can get a permit,” the Incarnate said. “I’m well-versed in those, given the many Possessed Items I’ve made before.”

“Have you ever used Reforge Spirit to make a Possessed Item?” I asked him.

“What’s that? I’ve never heard of it before.”

*Should I show him?* I asked Saoirse.

*Do it only if you trust him.*

I pulled out my Guild Card. As I held it in my hand, the text morphed and shifted, hiding the Soul-Pact from him.

Ludwig took the Card and looked at my abilities.

“Ryūta... I’ve never seen this ability before. And what the hell is ‘*Unleash*’ and ‘*Infuse Spirit*’??”

Suddenly, I realised that my advancement as an Exorcist was taking quite a unique route.