

37 – Leopold

Warmth spread through my body as Armen’s healing spell repaired my torn eardrums, as well as a few scratches and bruised I’d sustained when I fell into the well.

“Thanks.”

“**What are you doing?**” he asked.

“I’m looking through the options for my next familiar,” I told him. “I’m thinking a Tracker would be useful. It would not only open up Tracking Quests for me at the Guild, but it also seems useful for locating apparitions.”

Armen hovered over to look at the entry I was reading.

“**Is that a slug?**”

“It’s something called a Euthiaphim. Apparently it uses psychometry to see the past to find tracks. Sounds pretty bizarre, but the comments on here seem to encourage it for a new Exorcist, as a starting Tracker.”

About a third of the entries had notes from past owners of the Encyclopaedia and I’d already made some additions of my own to the few apparitions I’d encountered. I’d taken the time while waiting to write a warning on the Weeping Widow about not trying to communicate with it, as it might enrage it.

Armen began reading a warning at the bottom: “**Do not ingest any of the slime it secretes from its body. It can produce a powerful sedative slime, a strong hallucinogenic slime that makes you think you’re floating through the air, and a type of mind-bending euphoric slime that I lack the words to describe.**”

I laughed. “Sounds like he sampled every type.”

I was slowly beginning to recognise some of the handwriting and art-styles, though I had no names to attribute them to, other than the few that were clearly done by Owl, who had a terrible eye for art and whose handwriting made even the worst doctor’s crow-marks seem legible by comparison.

The drawing of the Euthiaphim was neatly shaded but looked quite alien compared to anything else I’d seen, but then, I also could not imagine what a four-metre long ‘tall-as-a-horse’ sentient psychic slug would look like.

“**It seems a bad idea to summon this one.**”

“The other options I was looking at sound like they’re tough to handle, and the one that Master Owl used has some very strange summoning requirements, like ‘a dying man’s breath’ and ‘a desire strangled by necessity’, which I don’t have a clue about how to decipher.”

“There are ecclesiastical rituals with similarly-vague and indecipherable requirements. They are known as ‘Esoteric Tolls’.”

“Well, call them what you will, I don’t get them either way.”

It was just another reason to try and find a Summoner to learn from. Hopefully I could learn how to interpret vague summoning tolls, as well as gain a further insight into familiars. Granted, that was *if* I could find such a person and *if* they were willing to teach me... Somehow it seemed too much wishful thinking that such a person might exist.

I closed the tome and put it into its belt pouch, then leaned back against the wall of the cave with a sigh. Though my clothes were still soaked through and my robe-coat lay nearby to dry, I quickly found sleep overtake me.

I awoke to the sound of something splashing into the pool nearby, like chunks of stone breaking off from the well above. The light from the Energy Stone had dimmed significantly in the time since I’d dozed off, and I figured that it wouldn’t be long before the residual energy from the Haunter was completely gone and the Stone’s pulse slowed and its light faded entirely.

“Something is coming,” Armen warned.

“It might be Rana!” I said excitedly and got up, pulling the still-sopping-wet robe-coat from the ground and putting it on, feel its uncomfortable weight and the clammy fabric drape over me. But it didn’t matter, because I was finally getting out of this hellhole.

Sumi, show me what’s above the well.

Nothing happened.

Sumi, lend me your vision.

Still nothing.

“I can’t connect to my Watcher,” I said to Armen, confused.

Then something heavy splashed into the pool with a loud *crash* and a wave of droplets scattering all around.

I looked up towards the tunnel above, just as a sickly-pale blue glow flowed down. It took me a moment to understand what I was looking at, as the light came closer-and-closer, but then I saw the

tip of three incredibly long spindly legs emerge from the narrow opening, and the nature of the *thing* became clear to me.

I let out a cry of fear as it unfurled itself from the narrow tunnel and stuck impossibly to the ceiling above, its pale-blue-glowing body faintly illuminating the ceiling. I picked up my Energy Stone, as though its light could guard me, then pulled out my Focus and aimed it at the creature.

“Repel!” I yelled, but fear was overpowering me to the point that I could not concentrate on the image of the spell and thus nothing happened.

An echoing chitter came from the enormous spider as it sat on the ceiling of the cave, the pool below reflecting its hideous and disturbing figure. Then the bulbous abdomen behind its thorax moved up to the ceiling, anchoring a bit of frost-blue web, before it began crawling along the curving cave wall towards me.

“Whatever you do, don’t let it get to me!”

“Of course. Though we do not have anywhere to hide.”

“I don’t care, just protect me!”

“As you wish.”

The size of the spider really started sinking in when it was only a few metres away and I could see the minute details on its face: the clustered black eyes; the short arms next to its fangs; and the forearm-long hairs that covered every part of its body, quivering in some unseen wind.

Its beady eyes observed me as it closed in and I felt every muscle in my body tense up. But Armen had spoken the truth: there was nowhere to hide. I only had the little ‘shore’ to stand on, and I doubted the water would keep me safe, at least not for long.

In one sudden motion the enormous spider shot forth, only to be met by Armen’s impeccable defence, which repulsed it.

It moved its head slightly, as though appraising me, then it moved away a bit, and started rubbing two of its front legs’ claws against its spinneret at the end of its abdomen, wherefrom the frost-blue silk came. As it moved its legs back in front of its body, a line of silk connected the two claws.

“What’s it doing?”

“I’m sorry,” Armen started, as the spider came closer, **“but I do not think I can do anything about that silk. It seems to be of a sort of ethereal nature.”**

I didn’t get to ask what he meant, as the giant spider shot forth again, wrapping the line of silk around me so quickly that by the time I realised what was happening, I was suddenly upside-down. To his credit, Armen kept trying to push and slam the spider, but even though its body shuddered and

moved with every impact, the silk did not come loose from my body, and as it crawled back up the well, I had no more energy to fuel his defence.

“I have failed you. I’m sorry.”

I screamed and flailed as much as I could, but it did not matter, as I was dragged up through the tunnel, dangling below the enormous spider like a fly caught in a web.

By the time I was back outside, my throat was sore from all the pleading and yelling, and my eyes stung with the salty tears I’d cried in frustration and existential terror at the thought of being eaten alive by so abominable a monster.

“Shut up already,” a voice said.

The surprise caught me off-guard and I unintentionally obeyed the command.

“Finally.”

A sigh followed, then the spider spun me around so I dangled in the air in front of the man who had spoken. Below me, the well promised a swift fall to my death if the hideous monster let me go from the grasp of its claw and sticky ethereal web.

“Who are you?” I asked, my vocal cords so raw that it hurt to speak. Behind the man I noticed a body that’d been torn open, as though the spine had been pulled out and the insides had been feasted upon. I vaguely recognised the victim as the first person caught by the enraged Widow’s flash-freeze.

“I thought I told you to shut up.”

I didn’t reply, thinking it was probably a bad idea to anger a person who had a giant spider at their beck-and-call. I tried to discern his aura, but then realised my glasses had fallen off again.

Shit.

“It is the least of your worries at this moment,” Armen commented. **“But if it is of use to you, I believe this man is a Summoner.”**

Now I really wanted to see his aura.

It was then that I remembered that the Spirit Lenses did not enable my Spirit Vision, but rather, they made it easier to access the ability. Owl had said it took a lot of concentration to use it without the lenses, but it was obviously still possible.

I imagined the drained reserves of my energy pooling in my chest, before moving through the channels in my body to reach my eyes. For a second, I saw a faint light around the man before me, but then it vanished and was replaced by a painful headache in my right temple.

It had given me enough time to see the colour of his aura though.

His aura had been a deep purple, like a darker version of my own aura.

The man before me had dark-grey hair, a thick neatly-trimmed beard with sharp crisp edges, as though just recently shaved, which framed his angular features into something akin to an arrowhead. His eyebrows were likewise trimmed to perfection and his irises were white, giving him a disturbing fiendish stare. He was slightly taller than me, but rail-thin, almost to an unhealthy skeletal degree, and he wore a simple black hooded robe, the skirt of which stopped just below his knees and with loose overlong sleeves.

Next to the man hunched an impish creature with a single bone-yellow horn growing from the left side of its scalp, and which had dark-blue bumpy skin and jet-black eyes, similar to the spinner whose frost-blue web held me dangling above the well.

“Take his stuff from him,” the man told the dark-blue imp and it leapt from the ground to clutch onto me.

I yelped in fear of its greedy fingers, as well as the thought of the silk-thread snapping and letting me fall. Ignorant to my whimpers, the imp crawling around on my body, while pulling stuff out of my packs and pouches, tossing them to its master. I couldn’t help but grimace as my Focus, Staff, and the Encyclopaedia were thrown to the man as well.

When it was done, the man said, “Check below, he might have dropped something.”

“What do you want from me!?” I asked in terror.

He looked at me with annoyance, then said, “Someone like you is a rare thing to find: an Exorcist who doesn’t immediately perish, but who is too foolish to adequately protect themselves.

“What I want from you is the most powerful ability known to an Otherworlder: the Contain Spirit ability, which allows for untold power if used correctly.”

When I gave him a look of surprise in return, he said, “Of course you have no clue about its true worth. Woe be to those the Owl gets its claws in, but decent pickings for a vulture like me who doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Shush. Your comprehension is not required, only your obedience. Now, just do as I say and I won’t have to kill your friends.”

I swallowed hard. But a righteous anger was filling me at the thought of him trying to hurt Rana and Lukas, so I asked, “Did you follow me here?”

“Follow you!?! Hah! Give me more credit than that. I laid this whole elaborate trap, just for you. I had to make sure you weren’t some useless Exorcist that survived by good fortune alone, although I must say that your ‘methods’ leave a lot to be desired.

“But! It *was* deeply amusing to see you kill more than half the village when you angered the spirit.”

Wait...

My mind was spinning with the implications of what he’d revealed.

“You’re the reason the Weeping Widow appeared!?”

He sighed. “Of course. Were you not listening?”

Leaning down, he picked up the Encyclopaedia, then lazily leafed through its pages.

“You have this thing right here. Surely you must’ve understood how easy conjuring a Haunting is... or well, probably you haven’t thought that far ahead.”

“How long have you been planning this? Since when did you start following me!?”

“Enough! I’m not interested in talking about this. But, if you must know, I discovered you in Ochre, when the Owl dragged you there to play pretend for the Guild. I was surprised you survived the encounter with the Galleon Demon, but mostly I was happy, because I knew you’d be perfect for my plan. It wouldn’t work with too cunning an Exorcist after all, though resilience is required for what I have in mind.”

None of this was making sense to me.

If he’s been following me since Ochre, then...

“Did you send the Witch Hunters after me?”

“What? No. That’s stupid. The old Owl did that, obviously. Gah, you really are dim-witted. He’s been playing you like a fiddle, that man. A veritable pied piper he is, and all the wet-behind-the-ears Exorcists follow the sound of his flute. Most of them die of course, but it’s all part of his great schemes.”

He shook his head. “But enough. I don’t want to talk anymore. So be quiet or I’ll feed your tongue to my *Prideling*.”

Just then, the imp crawled up out of the well. It had found my glasses, as well as the pouch of Sacred Corpse Ash, which had apparently fallen out when the spider had picked me up.

The man picked up the glasses, turned them in his hands, then nodded to himself and muttered something I didn’t hear, before putting them on.

—Patreon-exclusive Copy—
—Kristoffer Pauly (aka “Dosei”)—

Wearing my stolen glasses, he looked at me and said, “My name is Leopold. You belong to me now. Don’t forget it.”