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SUMMONER

THE PREQUEL



THE OUTCAST

TARAN MATHARU

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FEIWEL AND FRIENDS

NEW YORK

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To my readers

CHAPTER

1

ARCTURUS SHRANK DEEPER INTO the stable's shadows, waiting for the dead of night. The clamor of the tavern next door had reduced to a gentle murmur, but it was not safe to come out yet.

If all went as planned, his master would ring the midnight bell soon, announcing to patrons that it was time to wend their drunken way home, or if they were lucky, to a room in the inn upstairs. Only then would Arcturus make his move.

It was a plan ten years in the making: almost two-thirds of his young life. He was going to escape the beatings, the endless hours of toil and the meager rations that were his only reward.

As an orphan, Arcturus's value was determined by the yield of his work, rather than the quality of his character. The ox in the stock next to him was fed better than he was; after all, it had been purchased at several times the price his master had paid for him at the local workhouse. He was worth less than a beast of burden.

The bell chimed, disturbing Arcturus from his thoughts. There was a creak as the tavern door swung open; then the crunch of gravel signaled the departure of the drinkers, their coarse laughter fading until silence reigned once again. Even so, it was a full ten minutes before Arcturus padded from the shadows and into the night air of the stables. He adjusted his pack and wondered if he had everything he needed.

Escaping was not as simple as running away, something that Arcturus had learned from bitter experience. In the early days, before he was sold to the innkeeper, children often ran away from the workhouse. They always returned a few days later, starving, beaten or worse.

There was no work for scrawny, uneducated children who had nowhere to go. Arcturus knew that if he ran away unprepared, he would end up begging for scraps before returning, hat in hand, to the inn. In all likelihood he would be sent back to the workhouse. Back to hell on earth.

Arcturus knelt in the straw and checked his pack one more time. Forty-two shillings: his life savings from tips, loose coins and charity. It would last him a few weeks, until he found a new source of income. A thick fur, discarded by a passing trader for the wine stain that adorned its center, but still fit for Arcturus's purposes; he would not freeze if he needed to camp overnight. A serrated knife, stolen from the tavern kitchen at great risk. Although it was not much of a weapon against a brigand, it gave him peace of mind. Two candles, some bread, salted pork and a few spare garments completed his supplies. Just enough to give him a fighting chance.

The neigh of a horse in the darkness reminded him why he had chosen that night. An opportunity unlike any he had seen before. A young noble had arrived only a few hours earlier, exhausted from a long day's riding. He had not even bothered to unpack his saddlebags, simply throwing the reins disdainfully to Arcturus and trudging into the inn to book a bed for that night. Rude enough that Arcturus only felt a twinge of guilt about robbing the young man.

Arcturus knew where the noble was going. When they came of age, firstborn noble children attended Vocans Academy, to learn the art of summoning demons. The academy was all the way in the capital city of Corcillum, on the other side of the Hominum Empire. With any luck, the saddlebags would contain everything Arcturus might need for a similar journey, not to mention the fact that the wealthy young noble's possessions might be extremely valuable.

He sidled up to the horse, clucking his tongue to calm it. As a stable boy, he had a way with horses. This one was no different, nuzzling his palm as if searching for a handful of feed. He stroked it on its muzzle and unclipped the saddlebags, letting them fall to the ground.

Arcturus searched through each pocket, his heart dropping as he discovered that the vast majority of them were empty. No wonder the noble had left without them.

Still, the noble's steed was the real prize. Many horses passed through here, but this was a fine stallion, with long legs, muscled haunches and clear, intelligent eyes. It could outpace any riders who might follow him, be they thieves, brigands or even Pinkertons—Hominum's police force. It was not unknown for them to chase down a runaway orphan if the reward was high enough.

Arcturus rummaged in the last pocket and smiled as he grasped something solid. It was hard to see in the dim light of the stable, but he could tell by touch it was a roll of leather. He unraveled it on the ground and felt the dry touch of a scroll within.

A thin stream of moonlight that cut through the slats in the roof allowed Arcturus to see printed black letters on the page. He held it up to the light and examined them more closely.

Arcturus's reading ability was poor; his education had been limited to the one year of learning at the workhouse. Fortunately, the books that travelers abandoned in their rooms often found their way into his possession, allowing him to practice over the years. His reading was now better than most, but he still had to sound the words out as he read.

"Do rah lo fah lo go..." He whispered the syllables. They made no sense, yet he could not stop, his eyes glued to the page. As he spoke, a strangely familiar sensation suffused his body, starting as a dull giddiness and gradually growing in intensity as word after word rolled off his tongue. The gray of the stable seemed to become brighter, the colors intensifying in his vision.

“Sai lo go mai nei go...” The words droned on. His eyes roved back and forth across the page.

Heart pounding, Arcturus felt something within him stir. There was a flicker in the darkness of the stable. Beneath his feet, the leather mat glimmered with violet light, patterns flaring along its surface. Out of the corner of his eye, Arcturus saw the outline of a pentacle, surrounded by symbols on each point of the star. The glow pulsed like a beating heart, accompanied by a low hum.

As he reached the last line of the page, a spinning ball of light formed in the air, growing into a brilliant orb that seared his vision. His ears popped as the humming turned into a roar, growing louder with every second.

Arcturus spoke the last words, then tore his eyes away and dove to the ground, clamping his hands over his ears. He could feel a fiery heat washing over him, as if he were lying beside a great bonfire. Then, as sudden as a lightning strike, Arcturus’s world went still.

The new silence fell upon the stable like a cloak, only broken by Arcturus’s deep, sobbing breaths. He shut his eyelids tightly, shrinking into a ball on the ground. He knew he should be moving, gathering his things and riding away before anyone arrived to investigate. Yet the ice of fear had taken hold, leaving him petrified on the cold soil of the stable.

There was a snap as the noble’s horse broke its tether, then the thunder of hooves as it bolted into the night. The light, heat and noise had been too much for the well-trained beast. Realizing his best chance at escape had just galloped out of the door, Arcturus’s terror turned to despair.

Straw rustled in the darkness, followed by a low growl. Arcturus froze and held his breath. He kept his eyes shut and remained perfectly still. If he played dead, perhaps whatever it was would move on in search of more interesting prey.

The noise intensified, moving closer and closer, until he could feel the hot, moist breath of the creature in his ear. A tongue slid across his face, leaving a trail of saliva as it tasted him. Arcturus tensed, knowing he would have to fight.

With a yell, he leaped to his feet, striking out with a clenched fist. It met a furry muzzle, rewarding him with a yelp as the creature fell back. Emboldened, Arcturus struck out again, sending the creature skittering into the shadows. It was clumsy, stumbling and tripping over itself as it ran.

Arcturus grabbed his pack and sprinted to the door. The inn was dark still, with no signs of movement. He grinned with relief, realizing he might still have a chance to escape. If he was lucky, the horse might not be far away.

But as he began to leave, a strange feeling came over him. Pain and ... betrayal. He shook his head and took another step, but the feeling intensified. On the edge of his consciousness, Arcturus felt something stir. The creature was connected to him somehow, as if by a mental umbilical cord. Suddenly, Arcturus was overcome with an immense feeling of loneliness and abandonment, emotions that were all too familiar to him.

He turned and stared into the darkness of the stables. In the light of the moon, the entrance yawned like a cave mouth, shrouded in shadow. The creature was whining, like a dog whose master had kicked it. He felt guilty, for the demon had only been licking his face. Of course ... a demon. The noble was on his way to Vocans Academy to learn the art of summoning them after all. Had Arcturus just done that? Summoned this demon? But that was something only nobles could do ... wasn't it?

As if it could sense his guilt, the demon tumbled out of the stable, blinking in the moonlight. It was not as huge as he had thought, only the size of a large dog. In fact, it had the head of a dog too, with a pair of large blue eyes, followed by a second, smaller pair behind them. It was entirely black, with a shaggy ridge of hair along its spine. This ridge continued on to a bushy, fox-like tail, though it swished back and forth much like an eager pet. Strangest of all was its body, muscled like a jungle cat with sharp, dangerous claws and powerful limbs.

"What are you?" Arcturus whispered, holding a calming hand out. He could feel the demon's fear dissipating, replaced with an eager desire to

please. The demon took a wary step forward, and licked his hand with a rough, wet tongue.

Arcturus examined it more closely, stroking its head. Despite its size, the creature looked young, with an overlarge head and clumsy, thick limbs that gave it a puppy-like mien.

“Do you want to come with me?” Arcturus asked, rubbing the creature under its chin. It closed its four eyes and nuzzled back, panting with pleasure. With each scratch Arcturus felt a keen sense of satisfaction on the edge of his consciousness.

“I bet any passing brigands would think twice before attacking us, eh?” Arcturus murmured, smiling. “Let’s just hope you don’t scare the horse too. We’re going to need him tonight.”

He turned, just in time to see a cudgel lashing toward his face.

Pain.

Then nothingness.

CHAPTER

2

ARCTURUS AWOKE IN DARKNESS. For several agonizing seconds, he thought the attack had blinded him. It was only the thin sliver of light at the end of the room that told him otherwise.

The air was stale and heavy, as if it had not been disturbed for some time. The stone underneath him was chilled, devoid of any warmth or comfort. Pain twinged through his skull with every turn of his head, and a tentative feel of his temple revealed a lump the size of a goose egg.

He lay in the gloom, bracing himself to stand and explore his confines. Perhaps if he crawled to the light, he could call for help. He tried to speak, but couldn't manage more than a raw croak. A thirst he had never known was raging inside him, leaving his swollen tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth like a slab of salt pork.

Footsteps, loud and purposeful, echoed from the source of light. The door, for that is what it was, swung open, blinding him with the glow of a torch. He blinked in the new light, shading his eyes with a hand.

"Awake already, are you?" a cold voice snapped, lifting the flame higher.

Arcturus squinted, revealing brass buttons on black cloth—the uniform of a Pinkerton. The man had a handsome face, but his eyes were cruel and devoid of empathy. He approached Arcturus and crouched down to examine him.

Arcturus spied a tankard of water in the man's hand and snatched it, all sense of decorum forgotten. He took deep, noisy gulps, filling his belly until

the liquid sloshed inside him as if in a half-empty gourd. The man chuckled and lifted him to his feet, his grip like a vise on Arcturus's shoulder.

"Thank you for the water," Arcturus gasped, dizzied from standing so suddenly.

"It wasn't for drinking. It was for throwing over you to rouse your lazy carcass. Two days you've been in and out of consciousness. That noble must have hit you something fierce." The Pinkerton laughed again, then pulled Arcturus out of the cell and down a narrow corridor.

"Where are we going?" Arcturus slurred, his gorge rising as a bout of nausea overcame him.

Forks of pain spread through his brain with every step, as if his skull were full of lightning. He felt the demon on the very edge of his consciousness, awash with confusion and terror.

Arcturus preferred the sensations in his own mind. Pain he was used to, for his master would knock him about when the mood took him. It was the demon's fear he could not abide, though he was getting flashes of his own as the Pinkerton ignored his question, dragging him up some stairs.

The stairs opened into a small hallway with a set of double doors at the end carved from dark oak and stamped with the insignia of a noble house. They spoke of wealth and power, the old kind that was passed from generation to generation. Paintings lined the walls: portraits of old men with beady eyes that seemed to follow him as they went by.

"You're to go in alone. Be quick about it. It doesn't do to keep a king waiting," the Pinkerton snapped, then grinned at the shock on Arcturus's face. "That's right, boy. You're in *that* much trouble."

He shoved Arcturus through the doors, then slammed them shut behind him.

Arcturus stumbled and collapsed to the floor, meeting the soft down of a bearskin rug. Bookshelves lined the walls, broken only by the door behind him and a crackling hearth in front. It was uncomfortably hot in the room, as if a sick man was being purged in a sweat lodge.

There were two armchairs and a stool by the fireplace. The young noble was in the smaller seat, eyeing Arcturus with trepidation. Behind him sat two middle-aged men, both with silver dusting their black hair at the temples. One appeared as the portraits did, his eyes beady with a hooked nose. He bore some resemblance to the young noble, and Arcturus guessed that he was his father.

The other wore a circlet around his head and a scowl, twisting an otherwise handsome face into a savage expression. He could only be King Alfric, ruler of Hominum. The three wore expensive clothing, all velvet, silk and silver lacing.

“Tell us exactly as it happened, Charles,” King Alfric growled at the young noble, his voice low and angry. “Leave nothing out.”

“I told you already. I left the summoning scroll and leather in my panniers and bedded down in a filthy inn just outside Boreas. I woke up to a great racket from outside, so I went to investigate. Next thing I see is this ... hoodlum ... petting my demon!” Charles pointed a wavering finger at Arcturus, spitting as he spoke. “I knocked him out with my blackjack and got the innkeeper to fetch the Pinkertons while I trapped the beast in the stable. It’s not me you should be questioning. Ask the delinquent.”

“You will speak to your king with respect!” the father bellowed, leaping to his feet and slapping Charles across the face. He lowered his head and bowed to the king, who waved a languorous hand in acceptance.

“Calm yourself, Royce. We have more important things to worry about than petty niceties.” The king turned to Arcturus and gave him a forced smile, trying to put him at ease. It had the opposite effect.

“Listen carefully, stable boy. You are the only witness to the theft of Lord Faversham’s demon ... or should I say, his son’s demon. The scroll and leather Charles mentioned are a way of transferring a demon from one noble to another, usually a parent to a child. Now, I want you to think very carefully. Who was it who took the items from the bag and summoned the demon in the stable? Did you see an insignia on their clothing, or perhaps a distinctive color?”

King Alfric turned back to Lord Faversham before Arcturus could answer, which was just as well. His mind was still reeling.

“Lord Lovett has been blessed with four adept children, rather than the usual firstborn. His youngest daughter is joining Vocans Academy this year, just like Charles. Providing a fourth demon for her would be difficult, especially for a weak summoner like him. You don’t think...?”

“My king, he would not dare. The Lovetts are rulers of Calgary, a poor fiefdom by all accounts. It is nothing more than a few farms and rivers. It would be too great a risk for him. If he was caught, my bodyguard would storm Calgary and take back what is ours, and more besides. With your permission, of course.” Lord Faversham inclined his head respectfully.

“Of course.” Alfric nodded, his eyes settling on Arcturus once again.

“Who was it, then?” Charles asked, his voice low and threatening, the imprint of his father’s hand blazing red across his face. “Who stole my demon from me?”

Arcturus was struck dumb, unable to answer. Lying seemed the best option. Blame it on a mysterious figure, some faceless noble who came in the dead of night. The question was, would they let him live, in light of what he knew? And even if they did, what then? Back to the workhouse, to starve with the other children that nobody loved.

Perhaps it would be better to roll the dice, see what the truth would bring. A commoner being able to summon a demon was unheard of—it could turn his life upside down. But when you’re at the bottom of the pile, it always makes sense to reshuffle the deck.

“It was me,” he announced, his voice as confident as he could make it. “I summoned the demon. I can feel it now.”

There was a pause, then a cackle as the king and Lord Faversham burst into laughter. Even Charles snorted, though the malice never left his eyes. Arcturus sat in silence, setting his jaw.

The king held up his hand, cutting the laughter short. His smile narrowed to a pursed slit.

“Charles, come here.” He beckoned the young noble over, then leaned in and whispered in his ear. Charles hesitated, then strode from the room, slamming the door behind him.

The king steepled his fingers, leveling his gaze at Arcturus. His gray eyes revealed nothing, but Lord Faversham drummed his fingers on the armrest, betraying a sudden nervousness. Despite the heat, Arcturus shuddered under the king’s scrutiny.

“You’re playing a dangerous game here,” Lord Faversham said, narrowing his eyes at Arcturus. “Did they pay you to feed us this cock-and-bull story? Because if you think for one moment that you’ll be able to lie and leave this castle alive, you are much mistaken.”

“It’s true,” Arcturus replied, cursing the quaver in his voice. “I read the scroll aloud and the demon appeared.”

“Commoners cannot summon demons,” the king snapped, impatience getting the better of him. “The gift is passed down in the blood, always for the firstborn and sometimes for the siblings. The noble houses have been the only summoners in Hominum for two thousand years. Now, I will give you one more chance. If you tell me the truth and identify the thief, I will give you four hundred shillings and transport to Corcillum. You can’t say fairer than that.”

But Arcturus could feel something new, screeching through him like nails on a chalkboard. It was pain, distant but fierce, emanating from the psychic thread that held him to the demon. A fresh throb made him fall to his knees, clutching at his skull. The dual sensation of this new pain and his earlier injuries was almost too much to bear.

“You’re hurting it!” he cried, burying his head in the fur of the bearskin rug.

“When will you end this farce?” Lord Faversham growled, kicking at Arcturus. But the king held up a bony finger, before pointing it at the entrance to the library.

“As we speak, your son is whipping the demon downstairs as I instructed him. I was hoping to merely cause the thief some discomfort. Instead, it

seems we have revealed him.” The king smiled as Arcturus whimpered in agony.

He was barely able to comprehend the king’s words, fresh waves of pain robbing him of all sense.

“Who are you, boy?” Lord Faversham growled, lifting Arcturus from the floor by the collar and holding him up in the air. “Your stable boy disguise has been found out; tell us which house you belong to now and perhaps your punishment will be less severe. Are you a Sinclair? A Fitzroy?”

“No ... house...,” Arcturus choked.

“Put him down, Royce,” the king ordered, tearing Arcturus from Lord Faversham’s grasp before his command could be obeyed. “This boy is no impostor. Can you not tell by his accent, his demeanor? His body odor alone reeks of a common upbringing.”

“What are you saying?” Lord Faversham asked, breathing heavily. “That this boy is telling the truth?”

“I am saying,” the king murmured, tapping his chin with a long finger, “that this boy is ... something new.”

CHAPTER

3

ARCTURUS WAS THROWN BACK into his dark cell, but this time with a bucket of water and some fresh bread. Arcturus devoured it, reveling in the warm chewy texture. On the other hand, the demon was given no such sustenance, and its thirst and hunger plagued Arcturus for hours on end. He banged on the door and demanded it be fed and watered, but received nothing but curses from the Pinkerton, then silence.

Finally, when the water bucket was empty and hunger began to gnaw at his stomach once again, Arcturus was dragged from his cell, then marched through a side door and into the courtyard.

Lord Faversham and his son were waiting for him, their faces dark and broody with ill humor. A large box lay on the ground beside them, with a strange leather harness wrapped around it.

As Arcturus trudged toward them, he took in his surroundings, scanning for an escape route. The courtyard was surrounded by a cobbled stone wall, thick with ivy. An elaborate archway curved over the entrance, and it was blocked by a heavy iron gate.

“Still alive, are you?” Charles said, kicking at the gravel on the ground moodily. “I had hoped you would have died in—”

“No, Charles,” Lord Faversham cut him off. “The king has made ... arrangements for the boy, as you well know. No harm will befall him whilst he is in our care, is that understood?”

“Yes, Father.” Charles sighed.

Arcturus remained silent, his eyes on his feet. Where were they taking him? Somehow, he didn't feel afraid. Anything was better than going back to the inn.

He could sense the demon now, so close he could almost smell it. The box beside him trembled. Arcturus turned his eyes toward it and gasped.

The demon—it was trapped inside. He kneeled and laid his hand against the wood, sending it feelings of calmness and safety, despite his own misgivings about the future. Slowly, the trembling stopped. The sound of lapping inside gave him some relief, as he realized they had finally given it some water. It seemed, for now, the Favershams wanted both of them alive.

"They're here," Charles said, pointing at the sky.

Two dots hovered in the heavens, like birds circling above a cornfield. Slowly but surely, they grew in size, until two winged beasts landed before them in a flash of feathers and fur.

Arcturus had to step back as they flapped and folded their enormous wings, the tawny feathers fluttering in the wind. They looked like winged, horse-sized stags, with majestic antlers branching from their foreheads. Their front legs ended in hooves, yet their back legs were clawed like a falcon's, complete with deadly talons that dug into the ground. Instead of the traditional bob that all deer had, the demons had long, elegant tail feathers.

Both were fitted with polished leather bridles and saddles, in which two riders sat, resplendent in navy-blue uniforms adorned with golden epaulets and shining gold buttons. They removed their leather caps and dark goggles and shook their hair out with audible sighs of relief.

One of the riders dismounted and embraced Charles, kissing him on the forehead. She was beautiful, with golden hair that fell about her face. Arcturus shuddered as he realized she was Charles's mother, Lady Faversham—renowned for her great beauty across all of Hominum.

Even so, as she turned to Arcturus, her expression was hard, the pretty face as cold and cruel as winter.

"He is the reason we are here?" She narrowed her eyes at him. "We flew through the night."

“The boy, and the fact that Charles couldn’t get half a day’s ride from here without losing his demon!” Lord Faversham growled. “He needs to be flown to Vocans since he can’t be trusted on his own, not to mention that he is already late starting the academic year as it is. You shall have to provide him with a new summoning scroll, or he won’t be allowed to attend.” He paused and tapped his chin. “It is a shame you need your Peryton demon for the Celestial Corps. It will have to be the other one.”

“You lost your Canid? Do you have any idea what your father risked to capture her for you?” Lady Faversham hissed, seizing Charles by the ear, her anger as sudden as her arrival. “Now I will have to give you my Arach, and I caught it only weeks ago.”

Charles wailed like a baby, pulling at his mother’s hand until she released him with a grunt of disgust.

Arcturus absorbed the information, taking note of the names of the various species of demon, and the fact that his own was female. It appeared that demons could somehow be gifted through scrolls, and had to be captured first. If he was to survive the coming weeks, he would need to learn all he could.

His understanding of the world of summoning was vague at best, given that he lived so far north of the jungles on Hominum’s southern border, where most of the skirmishes took place. Though they were not officially at war with the various orc tribes that inhabited it, the nobles, their retinues and the king’s army would patrol along their borders, keeping Hominum safe from the occasional orc raiding party. Boreas, the city in which Arcturus lived, was far to the north, near to the border with the elves.

The next rider dismounted, a brunette with long tresses that came down to her waist. She nodded respectfully at Lord Faversham, then went about attaching the box to a leather lead before securing it to the bottom of her mount. She grinned at Arcturus’s wary expression and gave him a wink. He responded with a hesitant smile, which was swiftly wiped away when Lady Faversham clicked her fingers at him.