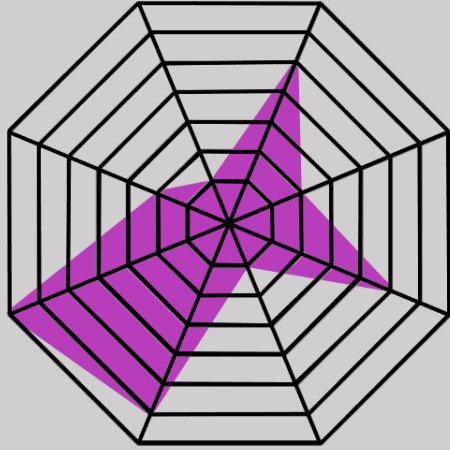


66 – Tin Can vs. Brawler

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>18</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist II’</i> <i>‘Curse of the Excruciating Bond’</i> <i>‘Ifrit Claw Wielder’</i> <i>‘Armour-Bound Wraith Wielder’</i> <i>‘Pact (????)’</i> <i>‘Pact (????)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Observer)’</i>			

Bacchi had told me exactly what to expect and what binding Armen to a suit of armour would lead to, but still, to see it written exactly as he had predicted was quite unsettling. Especially his prediction that the Pact would become a forbidden one as well, by fully releasing Armen from his duty as a Protector.

He had said that the system that governed the world couldn't distinguish properly between weapon and armour, so binding a familiar to armour was the same as binding it to a weapon, hence the 'wielder' addition to the 'Armour-Bound Wraith'.

I suppose they don't call them Genius for nothing.

“Their talent lies in aggregating knowledge. With enough information, estimations of future events become easy to perform,” Armen's voice replied in my mind, even though he now possessed the ability to speak to others than just me.

It was possible to change the name of a Possessed Weapon, but according to Bacchi it would require a Naming Ritual, and those were expensive to perform. Thus, I would probably be stuck with the 'default' names for my Ifrit Claw and Armen's armour. Unfortunately, the names gave away the

nature of the spirit tied to the item. It made me realised that Oliver Smile’s sword had to be worth a great fortune, since it had a unique name that made no mention of the entity within.

Rana was looking down over my head at the Card in my hands, resting her a *part* of her body atop my head. It was making it difficult for me to concentrate on my thoughts.

“You’re eighteen years old now,” she commented, surprised.

I looked back down and saw that she was right.

“That must mean we’re in September, or what amounts to it in this world.”

“September?” she asked.

“It’s one of our twelve months we use to count the year.”

“I see.” She seemed to get lost in thought for a moment, before saying, “I hope we can trust the Genius. The fact that he knew what your Guild Card would end up saying is quite frightening.”

“You’re the one who brought me to him,” I reminded her.

“I know, but I’m just saying.”

Just then the door to the apartment flung wide as Elye strode in ahead of Lukas and Renji, each of them carrying bags full of stuff. Behind them Sera came floating in as well. Most of their purchased goods were food and drinks, but there were clearly also things more akin to toys and trinkets, unsurprisingly all within Elye’s bag. For some reason she had bought several teddy-bear like plushies of crude craftsmanship.

She immediately pulled one out and handed it to me, “*This is for Yuuta!*”

I accepted it with a free hand, needing a moment to determine what it was supposed to look like.

“*It’s an owl,*” she explained, perhaps seeing my confusion. I wasn’t really sure I agreed with her description, but perhaps if I squinted really hard I could sort of see it.

“*This one is for Rana!*” she said as she shoved a hedgehog-looking thing into her embrace.

“...Thank you?” Rana replied.

“Yeah, thanks, Elye.”

“I got a snake-thing,” Renji commented.

Lukas had his gift hanging from his belt. It was a toad from the looks of it, with round buttons to represent the animal’s bulging eyes.

“**Do I not receive a gift as well?**” Armen asked.

Renji and Lukas immediately froze, and I could feel that Rana tensed up as well.

Elye rummaged through her overflowing bag and pulled out a necklace made from simple string and dry acorns, then she skipped across the floor to where Armen stood and hopped to reach around the neck of his flat-faced helmet, placing the necklace there.

“You look different than I remember,” she commented.

She had witnessed Armen only a couple of times, but it was true, his armour-bound visage was quite different from how he appeared as a wraith. Strangely, part of his spirit leaked out the back of his helmet, resembling a great mane of ethereal-blue hair. When observed through my Spirit Sight, blue light shone from many places, such as the gaps and seams in his armour, but only the ‘hair’ portion was visible to the naked eye.

“Ryūta, what did you do in my apartment while we were gone?”

“And why does it speak?” added Lukas.

Armen put a gauntleted hand on his torso, **“I am Armen, Ryūta’s Guardian Wraith. I have been bound to a suit of armour, such that I may have a semblance of my former life returned to me.”**

Left unsaid was also the fact that, as an Armour-Bound, his consumption of my energy was greatly reduced while defending me or using the abilities from his former life, though at the cost of losing his ability to fly and go through solid objects, as well as becoming, at least in function, bound to the laws of reality. I believed it was a worthwhile trade, especially since Armen had been a Crusader in his past life, although I had yet to see him fight, so it of course remained to be seen. But I had also just wanted to carry out my promise to him that I’d made back before Leopold found me.

Renji shook his head with a grin, then walked towards the suit of possessed armour and clapped it on the shoulder-guard. “Great to meet you, I guess.”

“When time permits, I would like to spar with you, Brawler.”

He paused for a moment, hand still on Armen’s shoulder, then started laughing.

“Bring it on, Tin Can!”

Armen’s helmet swivelled towards me. **“What does this comment mean?”** he asked through our private bond.

He’s saying you’re like a robot or a hollow shell.

“You have mentioned this word to me before, ‘Robot’, are they common in your world?”

Only in fiction. But don’t think too much about it, Renji is just having fun.

“I see.”

Renji glanced between Armen and me, and I noticed that Rana and Lukas shared a look as well. It was pretty clear that they weren't a fan of me stuffing my familiar into a suit of armour.

Metal grated against metal as Armen turned back to face Renji and placed a gauntlet on his shoulder.

“I will delight in our battle, Brawler.”

Renji grinned like a kid on his birthday after opening an amazing present. “So awesome,” he muttered.

“*Yuuta! Come see what else I bought!*” called Elye and I went over to have a look, while Lukas and Rana started talking amongst themselves, and Renji and Armen talked about what kind of sparring match they'd have.

Quite a crowd had formed in the training courtyard of the Adventurers' Guild and it consisted not just of Adventurers, but also Natives and people from other guilds, such as the currently-under-renovation Bounty Hunter Guild.

I was unsure how exactly word had gotten out about the sparring match, but already bets were being made, with most in the favour of Armen. To the untrained eye, he seemed far more imposing in his dark armour, wielding a shield and mace borrowed from the Guild, while Renji wore his simple combat attire and the gauntlets I'd seen him punch the Mimic Knight to death with.

Rana and I leant against a waist-high stone wall, which Elye and Lukas sat atop of, the Elfin kicking her legs absentmindedly as we waited for the match to start. A few of Karasumany's clones perched on nearby rooftops and walls, and Seramosa was hovering around behind Elye, as seemed her current obsession.

My focus was almost entirely honed in on two people who watched from the opposite side of the courtyard: the Brawler and Elementalist from Harleigh's party.

“Who do you think will win?” asked Rana.

“Hmm?” I asked, breaking my stare at the pair in the distance, before answering, “I think Armen will win.”

“Really?” she asked.

“Renji is super strong,” Lukas said.

“*Yuuta is right,*” Elye added.

“My main reason is that I think Renji is underestimating Armen. He may have been a wraith for a long time, but before that he was a very skilled Adventurer.”

“I guess we’ll see,” Rana replied, “but my money is on Renji.”

“Let’s make a bet of it then,” I countered.

She looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded with a smile, “This time I’ll win for sure.”

“How much are you betting,” Lukas wanted to know.

“How about one gold crown,” I said.

“That’s too much, isn’t it?”

“Deal,” Rana answered, ignoring his cautious words. “I’m gonna win back what I lost last time!”

We both pulled out one of the big coins and handed them to Lukas. “You’ll hold on to these for us,” I told him.

“Do I get a commission of the winnings?”

“No.”

Lukas smiled, “It was worth a try.”

“Aren’t we going to question the fact that we’re letting the Rogue hold the money?” Rana asked jokingly.

“I would never steal from you!” he insisted, his voice very sincere.

Armen and Renji were talking a bit back-and-forth, before their fight, but it gave the many wagers time to wrap up, so no one in the crowd complained. Then suddenly Armen’s voice broke into my mind, “**We have decided that you will give the signal.**”

How? Also, is it a good idea for me to stand out here?

“**I do believe this place is safe. As for the signal, you could utilise the whistle and your staff.**”

I grinned. *I suppose that it will get people’s attention.*

“Why are you smiling like that?” Rana asked curiously.

“Oh, no reason,” I replied evasively, then pulled the Singing Branch from my back and the Bone Whistle from my pouch.

“Yuuta, no! Not again!”

“I agree, once was enough,” Rana protested.

Lukas looked between the two women, confused.

I couldn’t keep the devious smile from my face, when I tapped the staff’s tip against the dry earthen floor and put the whistle to my lips.

The crowd of maybe three-dozen or more all fell eerily silent the moment the bass note left the tool in my hand. As the countless scent-trails of all the surrounding people and their possessions became visible to my eyes, I did a quick scan, just in case, before putting the whistle away again.

The only thing of note had been Armen’s scent, which was black and spotted like that of the Mimics’, except the red spots were in his case white-ish, perhaps because he was a possessing spirit. A part of my mind, one which neither the Wraith nor Ifrit could listen to, questioned the safety of allowing Armen to also be untethered by a proper binding duty, though at least I had his true name and could banish him if it came down to it.

But I really hoped it wouldn’t come to that. And, despite all the times that my naivety had been abused, I wanted to believe in him. I knew he had unfinished business in this world, but I believed he was a righteous soul. Likewise, even though Sera was a Demon, she was one caused by the transgressions of cruel men, and I believed she could be saved.

I hoped that my misfortune was unrelated to my innate gift of attracting spirits with lingering regrets and strong personalities.

Like a bell, Renji’s powerful fist collided with Armen’s shield and tore me from my reverie. The shield bowed inward from the impact, but while Armen moved with the blow, he also pivoted his body and swung his mace right at Renji’s face.

The Brawler moved like liquid and dodged out of the way, but Armen’s grip swivelled around and became a downward strike towards his centre mass, caught last moment by Renji’s palm, but still carrying enough strength to slam his body down into the earth and sending a surge of wind outward.

With a kick off the ground, Renji moved away from the follow-up slam of Armen’s shield, then flipped back onto his feet, before leaping back in with his knee first and arm cocked back. The Wraith caught the first impact with his shield easily, but, before he landed, the Brawler swung his right fist down with the word, “Overpower!”

The enormously-powerful strike hit the top of Armen’s helmet and slammed him into the ground, sending dust and tiny bits of earth out into the watching crowd, most of whom shielded their eyes.

“They’re not holding back at all,” Rana said, looking like she was on the verge of intervening.

“I think they agreed on this beforehand,” I replied, unable to keep my eyes off the two fighters. But she was right, this was far from a simple sparring match. This was closer to something you’d see in a brutal fight where only one man was expected to walk out alive. I suddenly realised that this was how Rana’s fights would’ve been in the Arena... the thought made me uncomfortable.

“**Repulse.**”

Renji, who had just been about to hammer both his fists down on Armen’s head, was sent flying back head-over-heels, before he landed on his feet, skidding a couple metres along the ground.

“...He just used a Paladin ability!” Rana mumbled incomprehendingly.

The Brawler launched back towards the Armour-Bound Wraith with a cocked-back arm, but when he swung down his gauntleted fist, it was stopped by something like a pane of glass that rebounded it before shattering.

“That was a Priest ability! He just used ‘Barrier’!” Rana exclaimed.

With a burst of speed belied by his heavy frame, Armen launched forward and caught the surprised Renji in the stomach with his shield, before swinging his mace at his head and saying, **“Judgement!”**

A burst of light, wind, and dust blew from the pair and both Lukas and Elye toppled off the wall they were seated atop of, while a lot of the onlookers tumbled into each other.

When the dust settled, I saw Armen’s mace hovered a finger’s breadth from Renji’s face. He was smiling excitedly, an expression I remembered from whenever he found a new challenging game to overcome.

“You owe me a gold coin,” I told Rana.

She gaped at the sight, then looked at me suspiciously, before exclaiming, “You knew! That’s so unfair! That last ability was a Crusader ability!”

I shrugged, trying not to smile in the face of her accusation, “Didn’t I tell you? Armen used to be a Priest Crusader.”

Elye popped her head up from behind the wall, the hood of her Spidersilk cloak blown back and revealing her horns, ears, and multi-hued hair. *“I knew he would win!”*

Lukas appeared next to her. “I’m glad he’s on our side.”