

## 104 – Saoirse’s Smile

I stared at the Guild Card in my hands. Sera’s Pact was gone, but maybe if I tried to resummon her, I could get her back. But would that even work?

Renji came closer, perhaps to look at my Card as well, but I didn’t want him knowing about the Soul-Pact yet, so I put it away, trying not to make it seem suspicious.

“Do you guys mind leaving me alone with Saoirse for a moment?” I asked my friends.

Emily gave the woman a strange look, but didn’t question me and took Elye by the arm and left. Renji glanced between me and the ginger woman. “Want me to go as well?”

I nodded. “It won’t be long.”

He gave the woman a scrutinising look, but then left. I could tell by his aura that he was curious but not suspicious, which probably meant his Magic Sense couldn’t pick up on Saoirse’s illusion.

When he closed the door behind him, the ginger-haired woman’s smile broadened. She twirled her index finger and *that* black smoke billowed out from her and coated the wooden floor and ceiling of the room, as well as the stone walls. It was similar to the orb she had trapped me in, and I realised that it also ejected Meigetsu, which was disconcerting. In many ways, it was similar to the Larder Keeper’s power, which obfuscated outside communication, and it probably also had the ability to prevent snooping ears from eavesdropping. Perhaps it was an effect inherent to a Shadow/Dark Affinity.

“Say what you wish to say,” she told me.

I gritted my teeth. “How are you able to perform illusions? From what I’ve read about Dullahans, you shouldn’t possess such a power.”

Saoirse’s voice had a slight lilt to it, which might’ve been charming if I didn’t know what hid beneath her façade. “My powers far exceed your knowledge. One does not live for as long as I have and not pick up tricks along the way.”

I put my hand into my pouch and fetched a tiny bit of Sinner’s Ash, which I tossed at her. Though none of it hit her, it should’ve been enough to dispel her magic. However, she remained unchanged, and her smile only seemed to grow more intense.

“I have met a few Exorcists in my travels. Those that attempted to exorcise me paid dearly for it. Your feeble tools cannot harm me.”

“*What* are you?”

“You said it yourself: I am a Dullahan. But you ask because you do not know for what purpose I exist nor how I came to be.”

“You can read my thoughts?”

“Of course. We are pacted by our very souls. It is thanks to this that I can stand before you with such a visage as this.”

“So it’s not an illusion that makes you look... normal?”

“It is not.”

“Then the Companion Pact is the cause?”

“Certainly.”

I considered this. I’d never heard nor read about such a Pact. Given that familiars were servants and tools for an invoker to utilise, any thought of egalitarian Pacts were probably dismissed inveterately. However, I had thought that an unspecified Pact, where no ‘duty’ was assigned, was the ultimate kind of equal partnership. But it was clear I was wrong. Because as Saoirse stood before me, she was corporeal and real, as real as me and any other living-breathing human.

“Once, Exorcists of this world relied on Companion Pacts. I met one such person in my travels long ago and learnt of the power of such a bond. A true companionship, forged in a grafting of souls.”

“So a Companion Pact only works when it is forged through a Soul-Pact?”

“Correct.”

“What if nothing was assigned during its formation? A so-called ‘loose’ Soul-Pact.”

“My soul would’ve consumed yours.”

I thought about it, the image in my mind’s eye not doing me any favours. It seemed that a designation was necessary for Soul-Pacts to limit the influence one soul had over the other. Though if Leopold’s example was anything to judge by, it still probably meant that I’d end up subservient to Saoirse over time.

“But why? Why choose to indemnify me in such a roundabout way?”

“*You* wished to retain your life. *I* wished to take a break from my never-ending duty.”

I blinked in surprise. “You... wanted to experience being human?”

“You take your mortality for granted, Ryūta. To someone who cannot experience true death, it is a luxury. All things must come to an end, save the reaper’s duty.”

“So your duty is to take the lives of people?”

“There are many whose lives are meant to end, and yet they continue to live on. A Dullahan rides across the land, finding those that have escaped Death’s embrace.”

“But that’s not why you came here, is it?”

“My true destination was far away, but I was careless, and a cunning man managed to steal my head. It was sealed in a box and brought here. I believe my head was meant to travel to the human settlement of Evergreen, where my other half would serve as an unstoppable calamity in its attempts to find my head. When my head and body are separated, I lose my full autonomy. The body rides in search of the head, while the head curses all that it sees, lighting a beacon for the body to follow.”

“...So that’s why I was cursed,” I said with a frustrated sigh.

“The flavour of your misfortune is a cruel one, but far from the worst I have seen.”

“Exorcists are doomed with bad Luck,” I replied.

“I am aware.”

A realisation entered my mind.

“You killed Sera for good, didn’t you?”

“Your familiar? Yes. I have delivered it true death.”

I ground my teeth in frustration of her callous remark.

“Do not hate me for it. A soul such as those that wander forever in-between deserve finality. They are not meant to linger. Exorcists utilise these wayward dead for their own gain, which is why they deserve their misfortune.”

I didn’t really have a comeback for that, because, despite her callousness, it was only truth she was speaking. There was a belief in Japan that dated back many centuries, which stated that those who worked with the dead were foul and tainted. It had caused the rise of so-called Black Books wherein descendants of Undertakers, Executioners, and other vocations revolving around death, were kept track of and barred from jobs and many other things based solely on their ancestry. These people had been grouped together by this discrimination and earned the name ‘Burakumin’. Perhaps Exorcists in this world were similar, although...

“If that’s the case, then what about Summoners? They don’t suffer misfortune.”

“Their misfortune is of a different kind,” she remarked ominously, though gave no clarification. Granted, I only knew two Summoners, and both could not exactly be described as having been fortunate, though Mortl seemed to be thriving despite her ‘functional’ immortality.

“This ‘cunning’ man who stole your head, was he a Demonologist?”

“I cannot say, but I have seen him and know his name: Carmine Anabello.”

I nodded. “That’s the one I was referring to.” It seemed this man had a hand in many calamities all over the continent and perhaps abroad as well.

“Something went wrong, right? You weren’t meant to ever come here, were you?”

“No. It seems that those hired to take me to Evergreen were misled by greed. I overheard their transaction. My head was sold to a collector, the first one who opened the box, for a sum of thirty gold coins.”

“I suppose if you want your evil plans to pan out, you ought to do them yourself.”

“If he is a Demonologist, then perhaps his misfortune lies therein.”

I thought about it and couldn’t help but grin. The big bad Demonologist might have his F-tier Luck manifest as terrible lackeys. It seemed almost cartoonish when I considered it, but might go some way to explaining why dealing with the Illusionist in Helmstatter hadn’t been too difficult. Almost as if the man had been careless in his preparations.

“Speaking of those who sold my head. We have to find them. They must die.”

“Good luck with that,” I said. “They’ll be long gone.”

“I am serious.”

I frowned. “I’m guessing you won’t be leaving my side, thanks to this Soul-Pact.”

“Indeed.”

“Well, then I will make it clear that I’m not going to help you kill some people, whose only crime was that they transported your head and were too incompetent to put it to use in a great plan to overthrow the capital of Lacksmey.”

Saoirse walked closer to my bedside, her eyes locked on mine.

“Ryūta. I do not wish to force you, so do not make me ask again.”

*Fuck.*

“All I know about them is that one guy was a Vanguard, while the other was a Native. I didn’t get to see their faces well, but I think I could recognise the Otherworlder at least.”

“We will inquire about them from the Tavernkeeper below,” she said, taking charge of the ‘investigation’.

*I don’t like this one bit...*

“You do not have to like it, Ryūta. But we are bonded by soul, so you must heed my desires as I must heed yours.”

Suddenly I understood what was so dangerous about a Soul-Pact and why Leopold had turned into a madman. Because, depending on the one you were bound to, they might make outrageous demands that the other had no choice but to follow, else they’d pay a price of some kind. I felt certain that Leopold’s insane undertaking to trap a Siren had been caused by Nirvah.

“Before we do anything, however,” I started, “We need to figure out what to tell my Party.”

“You could abandon them.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then tell them I am your new lover. Mortals will believe you easily enough.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, “I don’t think you understand anything about humans.”

“What is there to understand? You are simple creatures with blatant vices that are easy to exploit. Greed, lust, pride, and so forth, all of these your kind exhibit and let themselves be ruled by.”

“I think I’ll have to tell them that you’re my new familiar. I’m not sure how though.”

“What about this? I am a lost Otherworlder like yourself and you have decided to let me join you.”

“Renji will see through it in seconds. Plus, if you were an Otherworlder, what kind of Role would you have?” I asked, looking at her and the utter lack of aura she possessed.

“Once I crossed paths with a warrior, who had heard of my undefeatable nature and challenged me to a duel. He was skilled for a mortal, but, even then, he could not harm me. I believe he was a Blademaster.”

“Call yourself what you want, but you won’t be fooling the most observant people, so long as you don’t have an aura.”

“Do you mean Exorcists?”

“Not just them. Witch Hunters too.”

Saoirse reached over and took the glasses from my face, the string, which was supposed to stop them from falling off, dragging through my untidy hair. After looking at them for a moment, she put them on and studied me. I could see how her eyes shifted in hue, as though she could use my Spirit Sight.

“I think I understand now.”

She took off the glasses and handed them back to me. When I put them on, I saw that she now had an aura, which was burgundy in colour. I’d never seen an aura of that hue before, but, based on its reddish origin, I was sure it matched the Role she had decided upon, though I had no idea how she’d figured out which was the correct colour.

“Are you able to change anything else about yourself?” I asked, both impressed and worried.

“I can make myself taller, if you’d like. It seems your preference.”

“Don’t.”

“Do you think I could acquire a Card such as yours?”

“We’re not getting you one of those,” I said adamantly. “I don’t want to be hunted down if someone finds out I let a Demon infiltrate the Guild...”

“Do not lump me in with such creatures. They are worse than mortals, as they willingly allow themselves to exist in-between Life and Death.”

“Aren’t you created from a former human?”

“No.”

“Then how’d you come into existence?”

“I cannot speak for others of my kind, for I have never crossed paths with them, but I was called into being by the Absolutes. Through their word I was made to exist.”

I thought about that for a moment, then wondered aloud, “Would that make you a Visitor then?”

“These terms, ‘Demon’, ‘Visitor’, they are all just for your sake. You seek to name that which you do not understand.”

“I guess it’s just semantics to you, but I’d like to preserve knowledge about you, such that those who come after me have something to learn from.

“Speaking of, what sort of powers do you wield? My hand absorbed some of your essence, when I used my Drain Spirit on your head, but I’m worried about what it’ll do.” I lifted my now obsidian-black fuzzy hand up before her. The so-called ‘*Death’s Hand*’ as my Guild Card had named it.

Saoirse reached out and grabbed it between her fingers. Her touch made the phantom pain in my body flare up, like needles stung my skin lightly all over my body. I quickly pulled it out of her grasp.

“My domain is Death, but I possess a vast array of powers to aid in my duty, such as my trusty steed, as well as the smoke that lives in my veins and flesh. As for what powers your strange possessed limb contains, I cannot say for certain.”

“Would I be able to instantly kill someone?”

“No. This power of mine can only be used under specific circumstances.”

“Such as?”

“When dealing with those who are Marked for Death and in exchange for a remuneration.”

I thought about the first one. “Are apparitions considered Marked for Death?”

“They are not.”

“Then why could you use it on Sera!?”

“If someone Marked has tethered their soul to other beings, those beings are Marked as well.”

“...And what’s the other thing?” I asked.

“My power allows for a trade. A life for a life. But they must be of equal value. If you wished, I could take the life of one person you hold dear and bring back your lost friend Lukas.”

The suggestion infuriated me. “You really don’t know anything about humans,” I reiterated. “I’d never agree to something so heartless as trading one precious life for another.”

“Likewise, I could also take an offered life and slay another. The scales would allow this equilibrium to take place.”

“But that’s two deaths! That makes no sense! At least trading a life to bring someone else back has some logic behind it.”

“You say I do not understand your ways, but you also do not understand mine. It is the same trade, even if you do not believe it to be.”

I looked down at my black hand, which was coated in a layer of fuzzy shadow fur, just like the Dullahan’s mount. *If my hand does not imbue me with powers over death, I wonder what it does instead?*

“I will allow you to be my Deathbringer when we find the ones who brought my head here.”

“I’m not sure I want to, to be honest.”

“Anyway, let’s introduce you to my friends before we do anything else.”

Saoirse seemed to agree, as she lifted her hand and then closed her fist, pulling all the black smoke coating the room back into her body, before she went over and opened the door.

“What were you guys talking about?” Renji wondered as he wandered back into the room, looking between us.

I finally got out of the bed, landing on unsteady feet, but, as Emily and Elye entered as well, I gestured to Saoirse and said, “She will be joining our Party.”