

103 – Marked for Death

I let the black box drop from my hand and reached for the staff I’d slung back over my shoulder, while pushing Emily from her seat with my left hand. At the same time, the connection to my Observer’s clone vanished, either because of the surprise or the Dullahan’s approach. My reaction speed was too slow, however, and, as I watched certain death coming closer, the adrenaline and terror made the moment slow down to my eyes.

Emily immediately jumped off from the back of the horse, while Seramosa manifested on her own in front of us and let off so much heat that the mud below her became flash-dried in an instant, as she flew straight towards the Dullahan. I knew she was acting to protect Emily and not me, but the reason didn’t matter.

The Condemned Ifrit narrowly avoided the bone spear, then released a massive burst of condense fire that left a crater in the ground and punched the shadowy horse back. Its headless rider was flung out of the saddle, and I gasped as more than half my energy vanished in an instant.

Sera, stop! You’re draining all my energy!

I hopped down from the horse and followed after Emily who had taken off running towards the tavern.

“Emily! We need to leave the village!” I yelled, but she wasn’t listening. Our mare had also run away as soon as I’d gotten off, clearly spooked.

I cursed beneath my breath, then turned around and headed back for the box I’d dropped, just as Sera was about to light up again. This time it was something far heavier than before.

“Sera don’t!” I yelled, as I made it to the box. I flung open the lid, just as the Ifrit ignored my command and lit up like a sun, a pillar of bright incandescent fire connecting the ground to the sky with a bridge of incredible energy. The two nearest houses’ wax cover melted and charred, while the brickwork blackened and crisped, a flameless heat so intense assaulting them that there was no visible fire, just the aftermath.

My consciousness was fading as the light died away and I hurriedly shoved my Claw into the box, while watching as my Ifrit turned incorporeal, my eyes adjusting to see if she had actually managed to destroy the Dullahan.

The dust plume and light cleared away, but the black smoke carpet was still there, and I saw as the headless figure strode forward, its two-and-a-half-metre tall armoured body unharmed, with not even a blemish.

Something like a *snap* of a whip exploded the air and my eyes widened in horror as I saw my Ifrit fall apart into two pieces, caught by a bone whip that could apparently target an incorporeal entity. The two pieces went up in flames and disappeared with a contented sigh, almost like Sera was happy to be destroyed.

I felt as the Pact between us was torn apart, as though something was violently torn from my incorporeal soul.

I knew with utter certainty that she would not come back.

I yelled Seramosa’s name, then gripped the head in the box and used my Drain Spirit on it, feeling as the Dullahan’s energy was sucked into my right hand. As its potent essence flooded my body, it staved off the energy exhaustion Sera’s recklessness had inflicted on me. I saw as the approaching figure momentarily stumbled, but then it continued towards me a second later.

The black smoke billowing from the head, which I could normally only see through Karasu’s eyes, exploded out of the box and was sucked into my Ifrit Claw, which, as my connection to Seramosa vanished, became a normal human-looking hand for just a second, before the smoke stained it obsidian-black like the red-eyed steed.

ARMEN PLEASE! COME BACK!

I lifted my right hand at the approaching Demon, which had transformed its bone whip into an executioner’s axe.

“REPULSE!” I screamed, flinging most of its stolen energy back at it with as much force as I could manage. The energy that left my newly-transformed black hand was a bullet of dark smoke, which hit the Dullahan in the middle of its plate cuirass, piercing all the way through and leaving a small hole in its wake.

The headless rider stopped dead in its tracks before suddenly the carpet of black smoke condensed into a hollow orb around us, blocking out the world and preventing my escape. My Moonlight Dancer was expelled from the condensed dark orb, and I tried to invoke my Gravelight, but my commands fell on deaf ears.

I gasped, as the exhaustion crept up on me again, but I stayed conscious, if only to watch as I was slain.

I'm sorry Sera, I failed you. Your sacrifice was in vain. But at least you kept your promise. Emily will live.

I blinked and suddenly the Dullahan was in front of me, standing on the other side of the black box, the bone axe in its hand. It knelt down slowly, its shifting plates producing not a single sound, and retrieved the red-haired head from the container, which it settled on its severed neck, before regarding me coolly.

I HAVE NOT BEEN INJURED BY A MORTAL BEFORE. TO THINK THAT MY OWN POWERS MIGHT BE USED AGAINST ME...

The bone axe transformed back into a spine, then slithered up its right arm, before crawling through a gap in its dark plate armour and disappearing from sight.

YOU HAVE BEEN MARKED FOR DEATH, SO YOUR LIFE BELONGS TO ME. I WOULD LIKE TO THANK YOU FOR THIS LESSON HOWEVER.

It reached out with its right gauntleted hand, held down towards me almost like an invitation. Like a saving grace. A mercy extended by a merciless Demon.

“I can’t die yet!” I told the Dullahan. “I have so much work left to finish! I have plans I wish to carry out!”

Then a dark idea entered my mind.

“What if you don’t kill me today, but wait until I have lived a full life? Would my soul not be more potent by then and thus more delectable to someone like you?”

It was a gamble, and sure to be a Faustian Bargain if the Dullahan accepted it, but it was the only idea I could come up with.

A laughter emerged from the motionless lips of the ginger-haired Dullahan’s head.

I DO NOT EAT SOULS, BUT IT IS A SMALL REWARD I WOULD NOT MIND GIVING. YOUR LIVES ARE SO SHORT. I WILL NOT HAVE TO WAIT LONG.

An excruciatingly-tense beat of silence followed, where I neither blinked, moved, nor breathed.

VERY WELL. I WILL ALLOW YOU TO KEEP YOUR LIFE FOR A MOMENT LONGER

I let out a relieved sigh, but I was not out of the woods yet.

PLACE YOUR HAND IN MINE, WE SHALL FORM A PACT. IT WILL BE MY FIRST, BUT I KNOW THE WORDS.

I swallowed hard.

Fuck... not good. But what choice do I have? If I fight back I am dead. If I try to cheat her, I am dead.

If only you were here, Armen...

With my entire body tingling from a spreading numbness, I touched my right hand to her extended gauntleted palm. As soon as we connected, it felt as though my soul was forcefully yanked out of my body through my arm, almost like what I would do myself when forming a Pact of the Familiar.

Will she make me her servant??

What followed was the worst pain I’ve ever felt. It was like steel brushes were dragged down through every vein of my body at the same time, while my skin was hammered with thousands of needles, each pinprick distinctly painful. My eyes felt as though they were boiling in my skull, while my brain seemed to enlarge as though it was about to explode my cranium from within.

Then I heard the words in my very soul:

***Temaru Ryūta, Otherworlder Exorcist,
Intertwine thy desires with mine and let us conjoin our designs,
Heed mine words as I shall heed thine, becoming mine equal,
Until thy life comes to its eventual end,
We are companions and partners of souls amalgamated,
Thou be mine link to mortality and I thy link to inescapable death,
The First Light and the Void, even they share this bond,
Mortal and Immortal, we too shall imitate those Absolutes,
From now until death parts us,
We are Pacted of Soul.***

I shot upright, the blanket covering me falling off my body and down onto the floor.

“Ryūta! Are you okay??” Renji asked, coming over to my side. As though drawn by his voice, Emily and Elye were quickly by my side as well, though I wasn’t sure if they’d been in the room or had waited outside.

I blinked. The pain of the Dullahan’s touch was like a phantom sensation in my skin and deep within, which, coupled with the incredible soreness from having Seramosa starve me of energy made for the worst hangover feeling ever, far worse than anything I’d ever experienced.

With a groan, I asked, “Where are we?”

“We’re still in Sacramento,” he told me. “You’ve been asleep for about ten hours.”

I looked at Emily, who avoided my gaze, perhaps out of shame for running away and leaving me for dead, but I was just happy that she was alive.

“How did I get here? Did you carry me?”

He shook his head. “Elye and I only got back a few hours ago, since we were stuck in deep fighting the Black Hound Matriarch’s brood. It was a total mess, but still sounds like you guys had it much worse. What really happened though? I can’t make much sense of what Emily said and why you’re alive.”

I didn’t answer his question, and asked insistently, “If you didn’t bring me here? Then who did? There’s no way Emily brought me either.”

“It was a woman,” Emily answered. “She carried you here. She is waiting outside.”

“Call her in,” I said, having a bad feeling.

The Spellhand left my bedside and walked out of the room, returning a second later with a ginger-haired woman who was shorter than Rana but taller than me. She was wearing a simple green summer’s dress and her body was a pale-golden hue, voluptuous, and alluring like a succubus’. Plus, the smile on her face had a sinister quality.

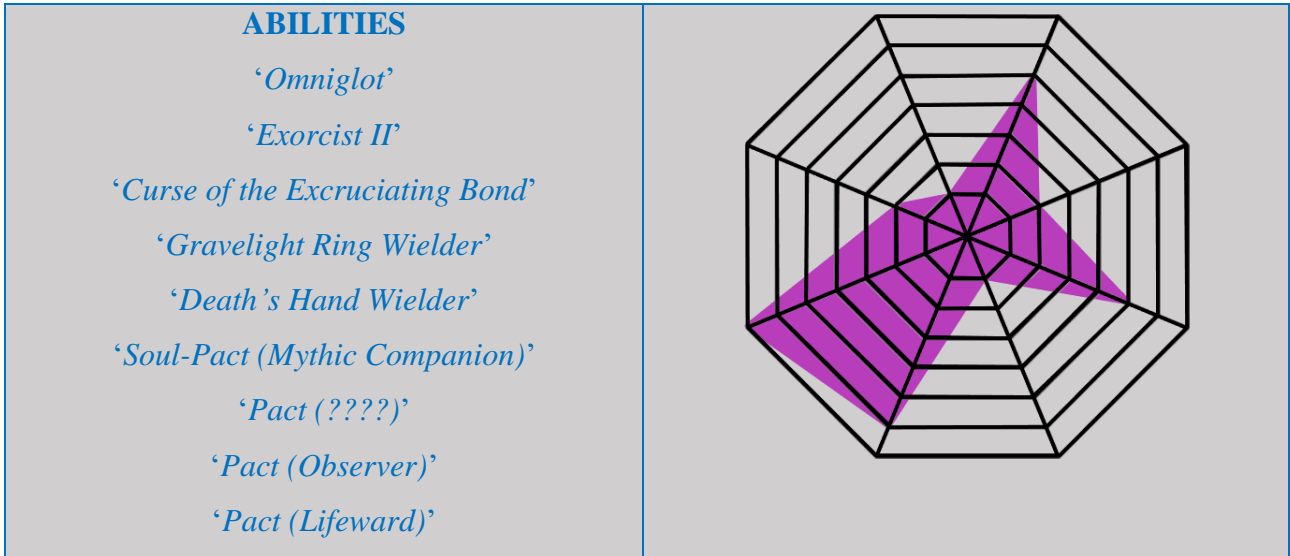
“You can call me Saoirse,” she said and her voice reminded me of the pain I’d felt and brought a realisation to my mind, as I took in her appearance. Renji and Emily both seemed very confused by my focused glare at the woman, while Elye was looking around in the air as though searching for something that wasn’t there anymore.

Without lifting my eyes from the ginger woman, I said, “The Dullahan killed Sera. She’s gone for good.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Renji said, as though it wasn’t a great loss. But he didn’t understand that it wasn’t just some tool I’d lost, it was a friend and a companion.

I gritted my teeth, as I took my belt bag from the nightstand next to me, where it’d been left. It took only a moment to locate my Guild Card, and, when I looked at it, I couldn’t help but notice Saoirse’s self-satisfied smile.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Eminent</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>



The ‘Marked for Death’ is gone, but in its place is a Soul-Pact...