

102 – I Will Find You

I was heaving for air as we made it to the foot of the four-storey brick tower coated in white wax. I lifted my hand and aimed at the front door.

“Repel!” I said, and my energy condensed in the crystal of my staff, before flying forward like a blurry fireball, which hit the door and utterly obliterated it.

“Stay close behind me!” I told Emily.

Seramosa, I need you here.

As I ran up the three steps to the door I’d blown open, my Ifrit flashed into existence in front of me, hovering in the air.

“Exorcist. There is a darkness here I do not like.”

I know. I’m worried it might be related to a Demon.

The Spellhand was right behind me as we entered into the ground floor, where a kitchen was located. A small tornado was orbiting her and picking up loose bits of trash and paper, as well as utensils, quickly turning the air around her into a deadly storm.

I looked back at her as I made it to the spiralling stairs leading up, and made a snap decision.

“Emily, stay here with Sera. I’m gonna grab the box from the second floor!”

“Hurry!” she yelled, “I think it’s coming closer!”

Sure enough, the sound of echoing hooves seemed to grow louder. Though I was already exhausted, I took the steps up two at a time, reaching the first floor where a lounge of sorts was located, before storming up the next set of steps. I’d only reached halfway up the staircase, when someone came down towards me in a hurry, the black box in his arms. My Lifeward flung out in front of me, redirecting the man’s trajectory and saving me from a head-on collision, but the surprise still made me misstep and start slipping, leading to us both tumbling down to the first floor.

A heavy *clunk* sounded from the open black box, and *something* fell out from within and rolled across the floor, before settling some metres away next to a bookcase shoved full of large tomes. I rubbed my shoulder which I’d slammed into the floor, then quickly got up and retrieved the staff I’d dropped. The other man slowly got up as well. He was wearing a dirty and threadbare light-brown shirt and black shorts, and his feet were muddy, as though he’d run around outside without shoes on. His brown eyes had a crazed look about them and his dark hair was a dishevelled mess.

“This isn’t right,” he muttered, before pulling a knife from his belt and levelling it at me.

I lifted my right hand, which held the staff, then charged it with a minimal bit of energy and released an incantationless Repel. Before he could lunge at me, my spell hit him right in the stomach and flung him into the nearby wall with enough force to knock him out. He would probably have a concussion as a result, but I was confident I hadn't killed him.

“Ryūta, hurry!” Emily yelled from below.

“It is coming.”

I hurried over to the black metal box, looking inside to find it empty, then scanned the floor and noticed the *thing* that had fallen out.

It was a head. A woman's head.

A milky-white iris ringed with a faint grey outline observed me, while a flowing mane of ginger hair spread out around it. It had landed on the stump of its severed neck and the fact that it was still ‘alive’, alongside its pale-grey skin and purple lips, made me immediately suspect some kind of Necromancy was at play. Without knowing why, I knew it was bad to allow it to see its surroundings, so I ran over, picked it up, then shoved it into the box. Before I could close the door, the head said, without moving its lips and staring intently at me:

I SEE YOU.

I WILL FIND YOU.

My blood froze in my veins at the sound of her voice, and I quickly slammed the door shut on the black box, then closed the simple bolt to prevent it from swinging open. But I knew it was too late.

This wasn't a Possessed Item like I'd assumed. No. It was something far, far worse. Because I remembered a particular entity from the tome I'd taken from Owl. I remembered the Trident Mark, the note that said *‘If you are marked by this entity, there is no escape’*, and I remembered its name:

‘Dullahan’.

With the box in my arms, and my thoughts moving at the speed of light, I hurtled down the steps to the ground floor, where I found Emily surrounded by a storm of objects. The air was thrumming like the sound of a plane propeller and my hair was buffeted with the gusts that spilled from the cyclone around her.

“I've got the Box, let's get out of here!”

She moved through the door first, most of the orbiting projectiles and objects falling away as they impacted the doorframe, though a few became lodged in the stone bricks, but the wind around her

retained much of its power. Whatever she targeted with its released potential would be sent flying for hundreds of metres, no doubt about it.

But it is not enough to combat a Dullahan. The notes specifically say it cannot be Exorcised nor defeated by any known means.

A Dullahan was, insofar as I understood it, a creature much akin to a Reaper. Its listed types were Revenant and Demon, and it was always depicted as a horse-rider holding its own head. I remembered seeing similar imagery once in the past while browsing the Internet, but I had no idea if it was the same thing I’d be dealing with here, since, despite the written description, there was no drawing on the entry.

As I followed Emily out through the broken-open door of the tower, the sound of hooves was so loud that I couldn’t even hear the woosh of the air circling her. Around us, people were coming out of their homes and shops to see what the commotion was about, but I quickly yelled at them, “Get back inside! It’s not safe out here! A Dullahan is coming!”

Some of them, like the female Alchemist who I spotted a few doors down, seemed to recognise the word, while others just looked around at the growing carpet of black smoke that obscured everything up to our ankles.

“Exorcist!” the Alchemist yelled, waving us over. “Come here!”

I ran over to her, with Emily and Seramosa sticking close. The Ifrit was still incorporeal as I didn’t want to waste my energy on manifesting her until I had an actual target to aim her at.

“What happened??” the Alchemist asked, “What’s in the box?”

“It’s a Dullahan’s head,” I told her. “I saw the guy in that tower buy it from some people at the tavern.”

“You need to return it!” she urged me. “If you return the Dullahan’s head, maybe it’ll spare us!”
It’s too late. It has already seen my face...

“I’ll try, but I’m gonna lead it out of the village. Tell everyone to get inside.”

The woman looked on the verge of saying, “Every man for themselves”, but then nodded seriously. “Get going then!”

Sera, do you think you can carry the box?

“Absolutely not! I will not touch so foul a thing!”

I grimaced.

“Emily, let’s go, we need to get to our horses!”

“Do you need me to carry the box?” she asked.

“It’s fine, just run ahead of me and prepare our mount.”

She nodded, letting the wind around her dissipate. Although her blue aura was wavering and terrified, she took off running, leaving me to awkwardly jog after her with the heavy burden in my arms. The air was burning in my lungs and my spit tasted of blood, but my sweat ran cold.

I need to get me a familiar to carry my things...

As Emily quickly disappeared past the next row of houses, I trudged through the soft earth of the street, while the sound of hooves seemed to continually grow louder. I just about rounded the corner, when I saw something black down the end of the street, in the direction of the tower we had just left. It was a figure approaching fast on horseback.

The sound of hooves seemed to reach a volume so loud that it overwrote my thoughts and I couldn’t avoid halting in my step to just stare as it charged right for the tower.

The horse itself was like a red-eyed shadowy steed, with fur that looked like it was formed from smoke, while the headless rider atop it wore an ancient set of dark-grey and dull plate armour, with frayed and torn black cloth poking out from gaps between the shoulder-plates and neck-guard. In the rider’s right hand was something like a long spine without a head, and, as it neared the tower, it lifted it and transformed the long flexible bone into a greatsword. It dropped from the saddle of its shadow steed, then moved with an almost leisurely walk in through the open doorway, each of its steps ringing out in the same way as the hooves had moments prior.

A muffled voice came from within the box.

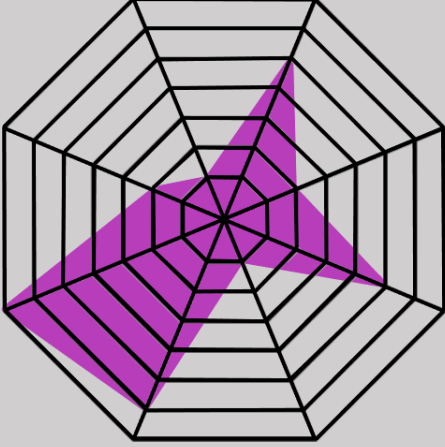
YOU ARE CLOSE NOW.

I WILL FIND YOU.

I suddenly remembered that I was planning on running away and hurried around the corner, just as a terrified scream came from the tower. It was clear that the man who had bought the box with the head had been killed.

While I ran to reach the tavern where Emily awaited me, I fumbled with my bag and pulled out my Guild Card.

<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>
<p>ABILITIES</p> <p>‘<i>Omniglot</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Exorcist II</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Curse of the Excruciating Bond</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Marked for Death</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Ifrit Claw Wielder</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Gravelight Ring Wielder</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Pact (????)</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Pact (????)</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Pact (Observer)</i>’</p> <p>‘<i>Pact (Lifeward)</i>’</p>			

I’m doomed... why did I get involved? Such a colossal mistake!

ARMEN! COME BACK TO ME!

“***The Wraith is not returning!***” the Ifrit yelled in a scolding tone. “***Lift your legs and run!***”

I gritted my teeth and pushed myself beyond my exhaustion, even though the taste of blood in my mouth only intensified and I felt how sweat soaked my hair and the shirt under my robe-coat.

Karasumany, connect me with your clone watching Renji.

From ahead of me came the sound of hooves, while the ominous footsteps rang out across all of Sacramento, and just as my right eye and ear was overtaken by my Observer’s clone, Emily came to a halt in front of me on one of the horses. She reached down and I handed her the handle of the black box, before crawling up onto the back of the horse. I retrieved the box from her grip and was just about to tell her where to go, when a loud high-pitched neigh made the air thrum.

“Emily! We need to—!”

Loud steps came from behind the nearby houses, before suddenly the black headless rider and its horse came at us with sudden speed, the spine transformed into a spear and ramming straight for us.

FOUND YOU.