

105 – Those Who Run...

“She’s what?”

“I’m joining your ‘Party’,” Saoirse replied.

Renji looked very confused, Elye was uninterested as usual, and Emily was the first one to speak up, “Is she an Otherworlder too?”

I nodded. “That’s how she saved me.”

My best friend narrowed his eyes, looking at me. He clearly wasn’t buying it. “Did she arrive here instead of Lundia, like with Emily?”

“No.”

“I’m a Blademaster,” she explained.

Renji gave her a long appraising look, then asked, “Where’s your weapon? And your armour?”

“I didn’t bring it with me,” Saoirse lied. I could tell by her faux aura that she was having fun as it even imitated the motions of a real one. It worried me greatly that she had been able to give herself an aura *just like that*. It really brought a lot of uncomfortable questions to mind, chief among which was whether I could truly trust my Spirit Sight.

“And what happened with the monster?”

“It was a Dullahan,” I said. “Someone had stolen its head and sold it to a collector in Sacramento. Emily and I witnessed the deal take place.”

The Spellhand nodded, verifying my story.

“The people who brought the head here were supposed to take it to Evergreen, where the Dullahan was meant to go on a rampage as it tried to get it back. We were fortunate that the two transporting the box with the head were greedy, otherwise a lot of people would’ve died.”

“Did the Dullahan kill anyone here?” asked Renji.

“The collector,” answered Saoirse immediately.

“What happened to you then? You said it killed your Ifrit.”

“Sera died to protect Emily and I, before I was able to return the head to the Dullahan and get it to leave.”

He looked to the ginger-haired woman. “And that’s when you came in?”

“Yes. I brought him here after he collapsed.”

Renji’s expression adopted a pensive look, one which I couldn’t help but fear was a sign that he didn’t buy the story. I would reveal the truth to him eventually, but not here and not now. If we were going to meet back up with Ludwig, it was paramount that Renji didn’t know. Because he was too sincere and a terrible liar.

So was I, once...

I am having fun with this little game, Saoirse’s voice said in my thoughts unbidden.

Oh god, I don’t even have my thoughts to myself now?

We are bound of soul, which includes our minds and dreams.

“But why are you joining our Party? I don’t understand that part.”

“Because our interests are aligned,” I quickly answered before Saoirse could say something that’d tip him off. “She is hunting the men who brought the box here, since they have ties to Carmine Anabello, the Demonologist mastermind behind the Helmstatter Calamity.”

Elye suddenly seemed to pay attention. “*We will help her find them, right Yuuta??*”

I nodded. “Emily and I saw them, and we might be able to figure out where they’re going next if we ask the Tavernkeeper.”

“I got a good look at them both, but only from behind,” the Spellhand said. “What will you do when you find them though? Is this Demonologist guy someone evil?”

“I suppose we ought to tell you what went down before we found you in Troll Root village,” Renji considered. “But normally hunting people is for Mercenaries or Bounty Hunters.”

“I’m a member of the Mercenary Guild,” I said.

“Really? I never joined them myself.”

“To be fair, I only ever did one Contract with them.”

“Are you okay to travel?” Emily asked me.

“I’m used to it,” I told her.

“I’ll lend him my shoulder,” Saoirse answered.

Renji cast her a curious glance and I knew he was onto us, but I didn’t let my emotions show. I began putting on my belt and bags, as well as my robe-coat, before slinging my Singing Branch over my shoulder on its simple carrying string.

“You know, it’s bad manners to ask about other guests,” the Tavernkeeper told me.

“The two men we’re inquiring about are responsible for what went down yesterday.”

The revelation seemed to make the man reconsider his stance. “I heard Leander died because of it, but the Alchemist says you’re the reason no one else was killed. Alright, I’ll tell you what I know.”

We left the tavern and I saw that someone had gotten our runaway horse back after it’d been spooked by the Dullahan, but there was now a logistical issue.

“Do you have a horse of your own?” Renji asked Saoirse, when he also realised that two horses wouldn’t fit five people.

“Yes. I will go retrieve it.”

Uh oh...

I followed after her, worried just what kind of ‘horse’ she would bring out, and I could just feel Renji’s stare in my back the entire time.

Saoirse led me down past a couple buildings and then down an alley between the next two. I looked around, noticing that Karasumany had returned to spreading its flock around, as many crows sat on the buildings around us. Meigetsu was floating around me as well, but without Armen and Seramosa, it felt lonely.

I just had a thought. Can you control my familiars since we are soul-pacted?

As the shadows of the alley enveloped us, she held out a hand and one of the crows flew down from the rooftops above and alighted on her index finger.

“They are industrious little beings, The Many.”

“You know them?”

“My knowledge is broad. One does not live a long life and not learn the intricacies of the world they inhabit.”

Saoirse let the crow clone fly away, before twirling her finger and summoning the black smoke again, which immediately filled me with dread. If anyone saw, I would be branded a heretic Exorcist.

“Do not worry, the little ones are keeping a lookout for me. I will not be noticed so easily.”

“You’re really enjoying yourself, aren’t you?” I asked, as the black smoke fell to the ground and started taking the shape of a steed. It was not the same imposing red-eyed one I had seen her headless body ride, though it was similar in a lot of ways, but passable as a normal steed.

“I have not experienced existence from a human perspective. It has a quaint allure to it. I hope you will show me the joys of living.”

I swallowed, not sure exactly what she meant, but feeling that she was probably misusing the word ‘joy’ to describe things that most people would consider nightmarish.

“You should probably change your attire to something more suited for riding. Maybe something that fits your pretend Role.”

Without a word, the black smoke spread from her hand and began running down her body, replacing the airy and soft green summer dress with dark plate armour, until her head was the only part of her body not obscured by dark fabric and metal.

I sighed. It wouldn't take a lot for anyone to recognise her as the Dullahan if they'd seen the headless rider.

“Can't you change the colour or design of your armour?”

“I prefer it this way.”

I frowned.

“What about your weapon? You're supposed to be a Blademaster, so you ought to have a sword or something.”

Saoirse seemed to think about it for a moment, then she held her arm out and a second later *something* began slithering out through her shoulder plate, before coiling about her upper arm and slowly making its way down to her hand. It was the spine she had transformed into a whip to kill Sera.

“...Is that *your* spine?” I asked, as the long series of bone segments began transforming into a weapon in her hand.

“Yes.”

“And it's a weapon?”

“Yes. It is very obedient and well-mannered.”

Oh god, it's actually alive...

“You also wield a living weapon,” she said matter-of-factly.

“You mean my Singing Branch?”

“Yes. But it looks hungry. Do you not feed it often?”

“Hungry? What do you mean?”

Just then Renji came around the corner. He paused as he saw us and the armour Saoirse was wearing, as well as the greatsword, the pommel of which she rested her hand on.

I could tell by his aura that he had been worried.

“We're ready now,” I told him, walking out the alley while Saoirse began mounting the steed behind me.

When I came up next to him, he leaned in and whispered, “I thought maybe you were in trouble.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know, it just seemed fishy how she suddenly wanted to join our Party. You’re not being threatened, right?”

If only you knew... I thought but didn’t say.

“It’s fine. She’s not threatening me.”

Anymore...

“Alright, but just let me know if she tries anything. I still don’t trust her entirely. Anyway, I wanted to ask if you still have that Bone Whistle. I realised we could use it to track the people we’re after.”

“Good idea,” I said. I’d already entirely forgotten that I had such a tool at my disposal.

After congregating in front of the tavern with our now three horses, Saoirse insisted that I ride with her, while Renji rode alone, and Emily and Elye shared one. I was seated in front of Saoirse on an actual saddle that adorned her steed’s back, while my friends were still stuck with the makeshift ones from Troll Root. In my black hand was the Singing Branch, while in my other was the Bone Whistle.

“Are you ready?” I asked my Party.

“We are,” said Emily, the only one who hadn’t experienced what I was about to do.

Elye was covering her ears and Renji was grinning in anticipation.

I smiled, then put the whistle to my lips and blew a tone, which, thanks to the amplifying effect of my staff, sent a pulse outward that was felt by anyone who heard it, deep in their soul. To my eyes, coloured floating ribbons became revealed, and I quickly found the red-stained one that marked the passing of a Vanguard. It was still fresh enough to track.

Do you see what I’m seeing or do I need to guide you?

I see it.

Follow the red trail, it belongs to one of the two men who brought the black box to Sacramento.

With a simple tug of the reins, our black steed started moving, quickly leaving my friends’ mares to catch up.