

98 – Moonlight Dancer

We followed Ludwig through a small gate that sat in the wall near the Guild section of Altar. After passing through it we went to a copse of trees with a small clearing in the centre, where a large round slab of stone was buried in the earth. If I didn’t know any better, it seemed the perfect place for a coven of witches to work their magic.

Renji and Emily carried torches with them, while Seramosa swirled around above Elye like a human torch that only Emily and I could see. Far above circled a flock of Karasumany’s clones with him at its centre. I’d been looking at the ritual drawing required and it was far more elaborate than the one for the Gjenganger, but I was confident I could replicate it.

While Ludwig pulled the ingredients out of the sack he had brought, I used the stone platform to draw the sigil with my Blood Chalk. As I made the linework according to the summoning instructions, I thought about what to name the Moonlight Dancer, as well as the peculiarity of its invocation, as it mentioned an Old God I had not heard about before.

In the dark sky above, a waxing moon cast a sparse amount of silver illumination onto the copse of trees. I hadn’t considered it until now, but it was peculiar that Mondus had, like Earth, just one moon and which seemed to follow a near-identical cycle. I wondered if it was a commonality between all inhabited worlds, since the constellations were definitely not the same as the ones I knew. It also made me wonder if I was even in the same galaxy or somewhere far removed, or if Mondus was meant to be Earth in an alternate dimension.

“Emily?” I started, while continuing my drawing with the oily red chalk.

“Yes?” she asked, coming closer.

“Does your world of Oblus have just one moon as well?”

“Oblus has two. One that shows up every night and one that appears only once per week.”

“Do they go through the phases of waxing and waning as well?”

She nodded.

“Midrealm has several, I believe,” Ludwig added from nearby, where he was cutting up *something* that had stained his hands purple. “Why? Something on your mind?”

“I was just thinking,” I replied. “Earth has the same kind of moon as Mondus, so I was wondering if it was a commonality between all our worlds.”

“Not the exact same, actually. Unlike Earth, Mondus doesn’t get total eclipses, only partial ones. Something to do with the moon’s orbit and distance from the planet, I think,” he explained.

“In Oblus, each era is started and ended with a double solar eclipse. I have never witnessed it myself, but the paintings of it are beautiful,” said Emily.

“Fascinating,” I replied, though I had no idea what such a thing would look like.

“Alright, I’m done with the drawing, what now?” I asked, after I put the finishing touches on the sigil.

“Place your candle in *that* outer ring,” he said, pointing with his purple-dyed hand to the corner of the large sigil that I’d drawn. The design was quite peculiar, starting with the ring he had indicated, before tracing a crescent line from it, followed by a straight line that was given three parallel lines of diminishing length below and a triangle above with a circle half-way through it. There were a bunch of seemingly-random flourishes around this main pattern, and though they were deliberate, they seemed unimportant.

After placing the Black Tallow Candle in the ring, Ludwig came over with thin slices of some kind of beetroot that dripped purple juice. He placed each of them at various spots on the lines, but I couldn’t tell what the overarching pattern was meant to resemble. It seemed that the beetroot-like vegetable was the thing that’d been responsible for staining the floor of the Guild Hall, and if it was anything like beetroot juice, it’d be a pain for Samael to clean up.

Next he brought a silver bowl and a flask of what smelled like rubbing alcohol, placing it directly where the other circle cut the triangle in half, before pouring the alcohol into the bowl.

“What is that?”

“Moonshine, or, well, Mondus’ equivalent. It’s great for cleaning up blood or removing paint. Not so much for drinking, unless you like going blind.”

Lastly, he brought a box that he shoved into my hand. I almost opened it but he immediately stopped me.

“Don’t open it, it’ll ruin the ritual.”

“What’s inside?” I asked, horrified as my mind ran away with speculations.

“The ritual has four requirements: Moonlight, Moon Water, Moon Root, and a Hidden Wish. The box contains the hidden wish.”

“I’m sensing a theme,” Renji joked.

“Oh, it’s a theme alright. The ritual sigil is an abstract drawing of a moon’s orbit through the cosmos. The Old God that we are beseeching is known as the Masked Courtesan, whose domain is Orbits and Attraction.”

“Is this everything?” I asked.

“Yes. Now it’s all up to you. And remember, a Lifeward Pact is what you want. Also, don’t name it something obvious, but that goes without saying.”

I nodded. “Alright, then I’m ready.”

“Excellent,” he replied, then gestured for Emily and Renji to step away from the platform. Elye was sitting on the grassy ground of the clearing already, as though soaking-in the tiny bit of moonlight.

I pulled the Singing Branch from my back and held it in my right hand, with the box resting on my left palm, then I took a deep breath, held it for a moment, and exhaled slowly.

With a *tap* of my staff-tip against the stone platform, which echoed through the small clearing, I began the invocation:

“Thou who dances in the void, flitting around thy chosen partner;”

“Thou who circles in the void, locked in a waltz with gravity’s pull;”

“O alluring Masked Courtesan, I ask to partake in thy ball;”

“Gift to me thy Moonlight Dancer, so that we may orbit one another, as thou orbit thy chosen partner.”

As the last syllable rang out across the clearing, the moonlight seemed to grow brighter and target me specifically, as though a stage light was shone onto the ritual sigil from the waxing moon. I felt the weight of the box vanish from my left hand as it was offered up as a toll, and saw how a narrow and tall pinkish-red flame was burning from the wick of the Black Candle. The slices of Moon Root disappeared into motes of silvery light, and the bowl with the moonshine was drained as though a hole had formed in the bottom.

Then, from the pillar of light trained directly on the ritual, floated a dancing silky veil, as though travelling all the way from the moon’s surface and down to earth. As it reached the stone platform, it began to swirl around me, much to the intense fascination of Elye, whose wide eyes took in the scene with glee.

I reached out with my soul, though it was easier said than done, given that the Moonlight Dancer remained in constant motion. Suddenly, I felt my breath drawn out of my lungs as my reaching tendrils of energy collided with the Visitor Wraith.

Moonlight Dancer, thou have accepted mine offerings and in return I seek a Lifeward in thee. Protect me from all who wish me harm, even if thy life become forfeit in the act.

I name thee Meigetsu-no-Hana.

The Moonlight Dancer paused for a second, then swirled around me super-fast before moving out and away, floating through the air like a silken scarf caught on the wind. It sparkled in the sparse moonlight, which had returned to normal upon the rituals completion, and actually seemed to visibly grow as it absorbed the light.

Ludwig immediately pointed his palm at the floating Wraith-Visitor and yelled, in quick succession, “Banish Moonlight Dancer! Banish Moonlight! Banish Dancer!”

My eyes widened. “Stop! What the hell are you doing!?”

Nothing happened though and he cast me a grin.

“Just checking you aren’t a lazy name-picker.”

“You don’t trust me?” I asked, offended, as I stepped off the platform.

“Words and actions are two different things, Ryūta. I’d be remiss if I let you get away with putting yourself in danger due to choosing some obvious name that anyone would be able to guess.”

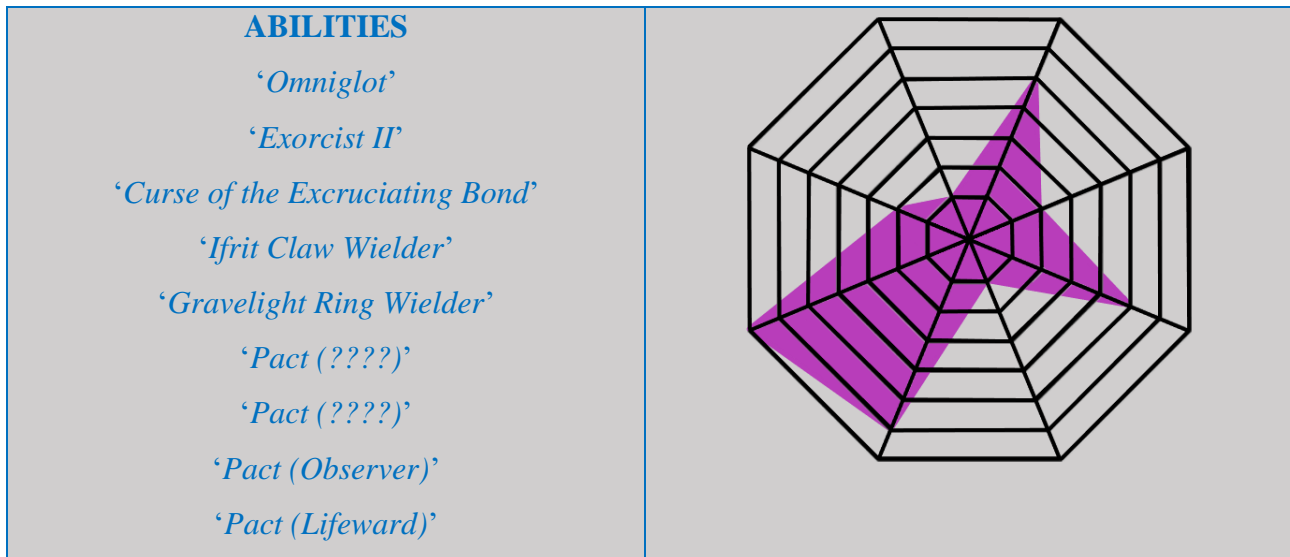
“I’ve already learnt that lesson,” I told him, lifting up my right hand as proof.

He nodded. “You’re right. My bad.”

Elye was running after Meigetsu, trying to catch a hold of the glimmering floating silk, but her hands kept passing through its body. Although it seemed that the Moonlight Dancer was moving far away from me, I began to notice that its movements were still orbiting me, as it swirled around where I stood, just very slowly.

I pulled out my Guild Card to check that it had worked like intended:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
<i>ROLE: Exorcist</i>		<i>RANK: Eminent</i>	
<i>GENDER: Male</i>		<i>AGE: 18</i>	
<i>ACUMEN: B</i>	<i>DEXTERITY: E</i>	<i>INTELLIGENCE: B</i>	<i>LUCK: F</i>
<i>PACT: A</i>	<i>SOUL: S</i>	<i>STRENGTH: E</i>	<i>VITALITY: F</i>



“This might sound dumb,” I started, “But can you help me test that it actually works as a Lifeward?”

No sooner had the words left my mouth than both Renji and Ludwig threw stones and dead branches at me. Though I was too surprised to react in time to block their projectiles, the Moonlight Dancer suddenly flew in front of me, like a streak of oily moonlight, intercepting everything aimed at me, while skilfully ignoring those things that missed their mark.

I held up my hands, “Enough! Enough! It works! Stop throwing stuff!”

Renji and Ludwig both relented with smiles on their faces, then Emily suddenly hurled a dead acorn at my forehead, which was also intercepted by my Lifeward.

“...Sorry,” she said meekly when I turned to look at her.

Ludwig clapped his hands together, then said, “Let’s clean up and head back to Altar, you guys are leaving tomorrow, aren’t you?”

“Did any of you find a place to stay?” Emily asked, looking between Renji and I.

“...No,” I replied, realising the oversight.

“I’ll go find a place while you clean up,” Renji said and immediately ran back towards the city. Upon seeing him running across the clearing, Elye immediately followed after him.

“Bastards running away from the clean-up...” Ludwig grumbled.

“I’ll help!” Emily said immediately.

The three of us quickly wiped the stone platform clean, then we headed back towards the city, with Seramosa and Meigetsu in tow, as well as the ever-present Karasumany in the sky above.