

72 – Helmstatter Overrun

The air burnt in my lungs as I ran to catch up to Renji and Rana, who were clearing the way through a narrow alleyway, where we’d been ambushed by a pack of roaming Flayed Ones. Armen held both Lukas and Elye in his arms, such that the two fighters could lay into the monsters without worrying about our unconscious friends.

I skidded to a stop, then spun around with the Singing Branch in my left hand and the Focus in my right. As my energy flowed into my right hand to feed the Focus, causing its internal bell to chime and its outer glass torus to spin, fire bloomed to life in my Ifrit Claw, before it was sucked into the tool as well.

With an unsteady aim that bobbed up-and-down with my heavy panting, I released the energy by shouting, “Repel!”

Like a concussive *boom* formed by a sudden implosion, my spell fired from my Focus, boosted beyond its normal power by my Singing Branch and augmented by the Ifrit’s flames. It was shaped like a whirling orb of crimson and orange bright light that connected with the nearest Flayed One on my heels and then exploded like heavy ordnance, flinging nearby monsters into the walls of the alleyway with such force that it broke their bodies and smeared blood all over the surrounding stones. The target I’d hit was utterly evaporated from waist up.

“We’re almost there!” I heard Rana yell from up ahead. The few creatures that’d engaged us from *that* direction now lay dead around her.

The pursuers I’d hit were already starting to get back up, while more came from further up the street that fed into the alleyway. Anything except the destruction or decapitation of their heads was only a momentary setback for the Flayed Ones. I now understood why Owl had said they were troublesome to deal with.

“It’s like we’re in some kind of zombie apocalypse!” Renji said excitedly as he came back to join me. Without warning, he lifted me up by my legs and carried me in a ‘princess hold’, before running back the way he’d come.

“Armen!” I yelled to my familiar as I passed by him, “Drop a Consecration at the mouth of the alley!”

The Armour-Bound Wraith handed Lukas off to Rana, then used his free hand to cast the ability, creating a field of golden holy energy that the monstrosities dared not cross, and which cauterised and burnt the already-dead creatures within the field.

We broke from the narrow path between two tall buildings and immediately the Guild Quarter came into view. Ahead of us on the cobblestones lay scores of dead Flayed Ones, but there were also quite a number of Natives and Otherworlders amongst them. Still, it did not compare to what we’d seen when we traversed over the wall between Noble and Artisan Quarter. It had been an absolute bloodbath and we’d been running for our lives ever since.

Two Paladins, a Crusader, a Priest, and several Vanguarders came up to meet us, all of them spattered in blood and looking exhausted. I immediately recognised the Crusader.

“Set me down,” I told Renji, feeling it was undignified to be held in such a way before these people.

“Ryūta!” Harleigh said as he came forward, then he noticed Lukas who lay in Rana’s arms. “What happened?”

Bring them inside the Adventurers’ Guild, it should be safe in this Quarter.

Armen acknowledged the command and took Elye off to the Guild, with Rana following behind him, while Renji stayed by my side.

“We were following the trail of Charlatan Charles’ dead fox and it brought us to a mansion in Noble Quarter, where we found an evil Illusionist.”

“An Illusionist?” he asked, recognition visible in his aura, though his face revealed nothing.

“You might have known him as Hamel,” I continued. “We dealt with him and made the obscuring fog go away.”

“He was the reason for the fog?”

I nodded.

“Did you see Gilliam and Zelser? They were friends with him. I’ve been trying to find them, but they disappeared earlier.”

I shared a look with Renji, then said, “They are dead.”

“...Dead?” he asked, his voice tiny. I saw how his aura was in a sudden flurry of motion, though his body remained painfully still.

Renji put a hand on my shoulder. “The Flayed Noble killed them,” he said, hiding the truth from the Crusader.

I nodded slowly. Perhaps it would only bring pain for Harleigh to know that his companions had been part of the massacre and hordes of Flayed Ones. I watched as grief washed over his aura, along with pain and frustration. Then his aura evened out and became utterly still apart from a barely-visible vibration.

“Tell me where the Flayed Noble is.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

Harleigh put his hands on my shoulders, gripping so tightly that I winced in pain. Renji was just about to intervene, when I whispered to the Crusader, “She is seeking the Royal Family. If you find them, you’ll find the Flayed Noble.”

His vice-grip eased up, then he took a step back. His eyes had a terrifying look to them. Without a word, he brushed past us and started walking towards the alleyway that we’d all just emerged from.

“Harleigh, where are you going!?” shouted one of the people who’d been with him.

“Was *that* a good idea,” Renji asked, giving me a worried look.

“He’s powerful,” I replied, “and besides, he’s wasted playing defence here.”

“He’ll probably die.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think so.”

The light from Armen’s consecration vanished shortly after Harleigh went into the narrow alleyway, and soon after the sounds of fighting came.

“Should we help him!?” asked one of the Vanguard, looking at his fellows for guidance.

“Best to probably leave him alone,” I told them as Renji and I walked past them and headed for the Guild Hall where Rana and Armen had gone.

Bacchi finished drawing out symbols on a slip of crisp paper, before holding it in front of the two unconscious figures lain on the large table within the Guild Hall, around which we all stood. The ink on the paper started glowing a faint purple and then he said, out loud, “Spellbreak!”

With a flash, the paper-slip in his hand turned to smoke and ash, falling from his grip and staining the floor. Moments later, Elye and Lukas started blinking rapidly, before they both shot upright, the Rogue letting out a loud gasp.

In the split-second I saw his eyes, I made a terrible discovery. I immediately walked over and gripped his face, forcing him to look at me.

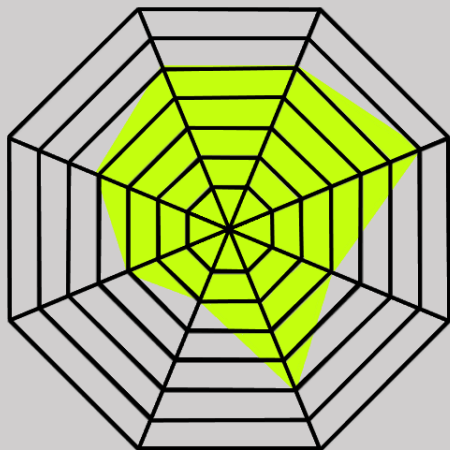
“Did they force you to drink something!?”

“...Ryūta. I don’t... I don’t know.”

“Where’s your Guild Card!?” I demanded, looking at his belt bags.

“What’s wrong?” Rana asked. Renji stood behind her and had a knowing look on his face. When our eyes met, he smiled sadly.

Lukas brought out his Guild Card and handed it to me.

<i>‘LUKAS’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Rogue</i>		RANK: <i>Novitiate</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>14</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>A</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>A</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>E</i>	LUCK: <i>E</i>
PACT: <i>E</i>	SOUL: <i>E</i>	STRENGTH: <i>A</i>	VITALITY: <i>A</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Rogue I’</i> <i>‘Fleetfooted’</i> <i>‘Guardian Angel’</i> <i>‘Mark of the Flayed Lord’</i>			

I looked at the soul-stone Card in my hands, gripping the edges so tightly that the tips of my fingers turned white. He had been cursed, just like Gilliam and Zelser. What’s more, his attributes had changed completely, as though the initial stage of his transformation into a Flayed One.

Lukas stared up at me, realisation setting in on his young face. I saw how fear was changing the rhythm of his aura.

Check the Elfin, I told Armen coldly and he walked over and scrutinised her eyes. She seemed very confused by it, but did not protest.

“She is untainted.”

“Am I going to become a monster?” Lukas asked, sounding like he was on the verge of crying.

I took a deep breath, before answering, “I don’t know.”

“There may be a cure,” Bacchi suddenly commented, looking over my shoulder at Lukas’ Card.

“A curse of blood may be undone with the blood of the curse-giver.”

Rana came over and put a hand on Lukas’ shoulder. “Do you remember anything?” she asked, she sounded almost pleading. I’d never seen *that* look on her face before. No doubt the fear of what could happen to Lukas was bringing back bad memories.

He shook his head.

“Once the line marking his eyes crosses from one end to the other, the transformation will be complete,” Bacchi added.

I frowned. The red line in Lukas’ eyes was maybe only a quarter of the way there, but according to Armen and Sera, a Flayed Noble could manifest the transformation immediately, although there had to be a reason why she hadn’t done that yet. It was possible that the Illusionist had just fed Lukas the Noble’s blood and cursed him that way.

“We’re dealing with a Flayed Noble,” I said.

Bacchi nodded. “The Branch Master did not believe my estimation of this, but I am glad to hear that we now have confirmation.”

“Also, I’m fairly sure the Flayed Noble’s name is Myrabelle Gyldenrose,” I said.

I saw a pulse of uncertainty and apprehension flow across Bacchi’s normally-placid aura at the mention of the name.

“I see... *that* complicates matters.”

“**It is doubtful she is the orchestrator of this,**” Armen suddenly commented. When I considered the timeline of events, it was hard not to agree with him. She had after all been in Ochre for a while, landlocked by the Demon infestation. It was likely that the curse on her had been a way to get her to return to Helmstatter, where she then became a vessel for someone else’s hatred, by turning her into a Flayed Noble. Granted, this speculation was merely based on my guess that the ‘Noble’ part of the creature description was literal and not figurative.

The Guild Genius looked at the suit of armour that housed my familiar, a spark of realisation crossing his aura, probably realising this was the result of his aid with the Contain Spirit spell. He said nothing though, which I appreciated, considering the fact that dozens of people stood, sat, or lay near the table around which we were having our discussion.

“For a couple months now there have been reports of all manner of things in Helmstatter. Reports such as: the ‘Haunting’ that was revealed to be a Mimic infestation in the Bounty Hunter Guild; visions of Ghosts inside the catacombs of the Church; a murderous traitor within the Witch Hunter’s Order; Goblins in the sewers; and some kind of nightmare Apparition in the Guard Barracks.

“You may not be surprised to discover that all these reports turned into major issues shortly before the obscuring fog rolled across the city.”

“They must’ve been planning this for months,” I told him.

He nodded, agreeing with my assessment. “It would take quite a lot of preparation to undermine the security of our city to such an extent.”

“But why now?” Rana asked, a question I hadn’t even considered.

Renji was the one to answer. “Because Prince Torvalder just returned from Lacksmey a week ago.”

Her eyes widened as realisation dawned on her. “I’d completely forgotten about the parade they held!”

This would’ve been a sealed and shut case if I’d had that nugget of information...

“The Mimic and Goblin infestations could possibly have been created by the Illusionist,” I said, “but apparitions and ghosts are more like things a Summoner would be able to manifest.”

“Forget about the causes!” Rana said. “How do we cure Lukas!?”

“We’ll need the blood of the Flayed Noble,” Renji said, determination on his face. “If I’m interpreting all this correctly, she will no doubt be assaulting the Castle in Noble Quarter as we speak.”

“Reports from that part of the city are sparse,” Bacchi replied, unable to confirm or deny the guess.

“Let’s gather a group and head there,” Renji continued. “The Flayed Ones are weak to the magic that Paladins, Priests, and Crusaders possess, so if we gather all of the ones we have, they can be the core of our group, with the rest of us on clean-up duty.”

“A Flayed Noble is not to be underestimated. It may take a small army to kill one.”

“Good thing the Prince brought just such a thing with him,” the Brawler replied with a grin.

Suddenly the Branch Master was next to me, also looking at the Guild Card.

“Ryūta,” he started and I could already tell where it was going by the tone of his voice. “I hope I can convince you to deal with the entity haunting the Guard Barracks. Whatever it is, it has killed over fourteen people and more than twenty are still trapped somewhere inside. Since the Necromancer is dealing with the ghosts in the Church Catacombs, you’re the only Exorcist we have to rely on right now and time is of the essence.”

Shit...

I shared a glance with my Party, then said the words I’d hoped I never had to say. “I think we should split up.”