

79 – The Flayed Noble I

People were hugging and laughing with tears of joy in their eyes, when I finally left the basement and came out into the daylight. Armen had aided the evacuations it seemed and through his actions I’d earned a bit of additional goodwill, as I was associated with him, though only Holm knew that the Priest Crusader was my familiar.

Immediately the Branch Master came over with his entourage and Armen. He shook my left hand vigorously after deciding to avoid touching my charred Ifrit Claw. I suppose he had seen it literally combust without warning, so it was a prudent move.

“Ryūta! Excellent job! I knew I picked the right person for the task!”

I nodded lamely.

“**Enjoy the celebration,**” Armen advised me through our secret connection. “**They are rare and though they often reveal the duplicity and two-faced nature of people, it is better to be celebrated than scorned.**”

I suppose so. Although I can’t help feeling like I’m just some pawn to bolster this guy’s promotion.

“**Everyone has ambitions, particularly those in the Guilds. There is much for them to gain.**”

After the Branch Master let go of my hand, I had a brief realisation.

I don’t even know this guy’s name...

“**I overheard it from somewhere. I believe they call him Shain.**”

“...Would you like the payment right away?” the man asked, his voice lowered to not be overheard by too many.

“I’m not unreasonable,” I replied, surprised that he thought I’d ask for the reward right away. I honestly felt it rather disrespectful that he assumed I would. “I need to make my way to Noble Quarter right away, so if you can find me a horse somewhere I’d appreciate it. We can sort the money later.”

With a curt gesture, one of Shain’s people ran off to fulfil my request.

“What’s that thing in your hands?” he asked, noticing the ball I was holding.

“It’s the core of the ‘Larder Keeper’,” I said. “It has been cleansed, but it’s proof that the Haunter was intentionally planted.”

“Larder Keeper?”

“That’s what I’ve decided to name it.”

“**An apt name,**” Armen concurred, startling the people nearby with his booming voice.

The sound of hooves came from down the street in the direction of the city gates and I turned to see Holm come riding on a spirited steed, while holding the reins of another that followed close behind.

“You’re going to Noble Quarter, right?” he called from where he sat, slowing his steed down right in front of us.

“Are you coming with me?”

“Of course.”

I nodded.

“Armen, let’s go.”

“Is there anything else I can do?” asked the Branch Master quickly, perhaps wanting to prove his willingness to help, even though that he himself was no stronger than the average Native.

I tossed him the inert Larder Keeper core and he caught it clumsily in his hands. “Keep that safe until I come back. And tell the Captain that his men are sorely needed where the fighting is thickest near the Castle.”

While Shain looked at the bone-white ball full of deep holes with something like disgust and apprehension, I got onto the awaiting horse. Armen climbed up behind me and took the reins before I could.

Thanks. I don’t actually know how to ride a horse.

“Ready?” asked Holm.

“Let’s go.”

Armen and the Paladin stirred the horses into action and within moments we were galloping down the main thoroughfare of Helmstatter. The Barracks and the many people nearby disappeared behind buildings quickly, while we hurried down the cobbles, passing the ruined marketplace and the many veiled bodies that Armen and I had helped lay to rest.

Bodies of the dead were everywhere as we moved into the Guild Quarter, forcing us to steer the horses carefully with how they lay all across the road. Nevertheless, Armen and Holm both kept the mounts moving as fast as possible, pushing the animals to their limits.

I connected my mind to Karasumany to see how the fighting fared, but also to avoid having to look at the destruction and incredible loss of life that lay all around. Even by modest estimates, more than five thousand people must’ve died during just the first hours of the unleashed tide of Flayed Ones. The thought that some Otherworlders had been in on this plan disgusted me and I wondered if perhaps our punishment of the Illusionist had been too merciful.

From up high where a clone of my crow familiar soared, I saw that the party which Harleigh, Rana, and Renji had led was locked in an insane battle amongst themselves and I felt my pulse quicken, when I realised that whatever trap Lukas had referred to had already been sprung. Though it was hard to tell, it seemed as though nearly a fifth of the Otherworlders had become like Gilliam and Zelser, turning into half-transformed Flayed Ones.

Fear shot through my system at a thought that naturally followed this revelation.

“**Are you okay?**” asked Armen, “**Your heartrate is unnaturally high.**”

Karasu, show me Lukas and Elye!

My view from up high shifted as I was pulled into the body of a crow that perched on the corner of a great plaza, where dead Flayed Ones were piled high. In the distance was a veritable army of strange-looking knights in foreign armour, working together to decapitate every last one of the monsters that were trying to overwhelm the plaza. A man with light-grey hair and a porcelain mask oversaw their fighting, occasionally lifting an ancient lantern in his hands to cast some sort of magic.

Closer to where the crow perched was Elye, hugging the unconscious body of Lukas.

No.

He’s not unconscious, I realised.

“Armen, go faster.”

I felt the life drain from me as the truth of what I’d seen sunk in. I gritted my teeth and cut off the connection with my familiar.

“Faster!” I yelled.

The minutes passed by in excruciating agony, as my mind raced with the possibilities of what I’d witnessed. I wanted to reconnect with my familiar to ascertain the truth, but I was also terrified to discover that my fears were justified.

Armen was leading our steed in the right direction, while Holm followed behind, not knowing what we were heading towards, but seemingly prepared for anything.

We came around a corner in the Noble Quarter and almost rode straight into two rows of knights blocking the entry into a large plaza. The very same I’d seen through my familiar’s eyes.

“Get out of the way!” I yelled, but they didn’t heed my words.

As my eyes ran across their heads, trying to find some sort of officer, I realised something was wrong with them. Every single one of the men carried foreign-looking ancient suits of armour and every last one of them lacked an aura like that of a person.

“**They’re undead,**” Armen stated.

I got off the horse and pushed past the knights, who for some reason allowed me through, but prevented our mounts. My Armour-Bound Wraith and Holm hopped off and followed behind me. After making my way through their ranks, I saw where Elye sat and ran to her side.

Seramosa already sat next to the Elfin in her incorporeal form, as though to comfort the girl in spirit.

My legs suddenly seemed to grow heavy and a painful hole formed in my lungs as I drew close. Without warning I collapsed to my knees before where Lukas lay in Elye’s embrace. His eyes, arms, and lower jaw were covered in blood, as though the skin itself had burnt away to reveal the flesh underneath. There was a single narrow stab-wound in his torso.

I turned away from the sight of his still body and vomited water and bile onto the stones.

“Yuuta. I killed him. He gave me his weapon and I killed him.”

I threw up again.

“I could not understand what he was saying, but I understood the meaning. He did not want to turn into a monster. I freed him.”

My mind raced so fast I couldn’t hold on to any of the thoughts that flew through my head, until suddenly one sinister idea made its way to the front.

“Give me your necklace!” I demanded, reaching out for the amethyst jewellery that Lukas had given Elye sometime yesterday, before all of this began. Before the world set on fire and monsters filled the streets. “His aura isn’t fully gone! I can save him! I can put his soul into your necklace!”

A heavy metal hand landed on my shoulder.

“**Do not betray his sacrifice,**” Armen said.

“But he sacrificed himself in vain!” I yelled. “He didn’t get there in time!”

Tears flowed down my cheeks and my glasses fogged up. With a frustrated yell I pulled them off and threw them away.

“It was in vain...” I repeated, my tears dropping down on my hands.

Elye looked like she was barely holding on, but she was maintaining a brave façade, though her aura was a jumbled mess.

A charred hand reached down and wiped a bit a blood from Lukas’ cheek, I realised that it belonged to Sera, who had manifested herself without warning. But while she was normally consumed by fire in her active state, she was now like a dead piece of coal, naught but a ember to be found in her body, except for her burning eyes.

“The Flayed Noble must be burnt.”

Elye looked at the Ifrit that was knelt next to her in solidarity. *“Yuuta, I will stay with him.”*

I nodded, wiping the back of my hand over my running nose and dabbing my eyes on my sleeve. Holm came over with the glasses that I’d thrown away, handing them to me.

“I’ll stay with them,” he said. “I’ll make sure they get back to the Guild Quarter safely.”

I bit my lower lip, trying to stem the overwhelming tide of emotions.

“There is another Andasangare here,” said Elye, surprising me with a word I hadn’t heard since Skovslot Enclave. *“He saved us, but then Lukas... then...”*

Reaching over the body of our dear friend, I touched her shoulder. “It’s okay, you don’t have to say it. Holm here will help you back to the Guild. We left some horses nearby you can take.”

I looked down at Lukas, whose face, while on the border of being disfigured, looked peaceful and content. Perhaps he was glad to have died before becoming a monster, but that didn’t change the facts.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t fast enough to stop you,” I whispered as I leaned down and hugged his body. I hadn’t known him long, but I’d always felt responsible for him. Part of me regretted that I’d helped him become an Adventurer. Another part of me regretted that I hadn’t allowed him to accompany a party that was more his speed and less involved in dangerous quests. It was clear that wherever I went, darkness and malice followed. Even when I avoided its jaws, it wasn’t a certainty that my companions would be so lucky.

“Stop that,” Armen said. **“Do not taint your friend’s memory in such a way.”**

But it’s clearly my fault. If I hadn’t pulled him from the Margraves retinue, he would’ve been able to live a normal life.

“You fulfilled his dream and gave his life meaning. I do not believe he would blame you for his death.”

I let out a gut-wrenching sob, my vision clouding with tears again.

“What are we gonna do...? What am I gonna tell Rana...? He was like a little brother to her...”

“We will tell her the truth.”

After I’d managed to recover some, I allowed Holm and Elye to take him away. The Paladin had asked if he should carry his body, but the Elfin had insisted on doing it herself. Even though she was small, she seemed so large when compared to Lukas, whose lifeless body drooped in her arms, his blood dripping on the stones as she walked to the horses.

The sight made tears well forth in my eyes again and I furiously wiped my face on my sleeve.

“Condolences about your friend,” said a crackly and unfamiliar voice.

I spun around and saw the man that’d approached us with silent steps. Armen was on guard but hadn’t drawn his weapons.

“There was nothing I could do for him, alas such a curse cannot be broken. All I managed was to keep your friends safe in his final moments.”

“You must be the Andasangare that Elye mentioned,” I said, sniffing slightly, though there was little point trying to hide my emotions, when he’d no doubt already saw my earlier outburst.

“I have not been called by that title in quite some time, but I suppose that it is true. However, my real name is Mortl, and I am a Necromancer.”