

70 – Flaykin

“I’m assuming we can’t fight back, right!?” Rana said as we hurried along the stone wall, our pounding steps on the cobblestones underfoot resounding loudly down the street. I was already huffing-and-puffing from exhaustion, but the adrenaline and fear in my system was keeping me going.

“It would be inadvisable,” Armen commented, keeping up with us while seemingly just jogging.

“What about fire? Would Sera’s flames work?”

“Who’s Sera?” asked Rana. I frowned as I realised I’d let that slip. It was hard to focus on my internal dialogue when Armen could speak out loud.

“Perhaps. Though the Cleansing Fire would be best.”

“Like what they use at Churches for cremations?” she said.

“Indeed.”

Can you produce such a flame? I asked Sera.

“My fire is not holy, but it burns all the same!”

Suddenly an ornate iron gate appeared in the wall and Rana paused just long enough to kick it open, shearing the locking bolt in half with pure strength. “In here!” she said and I followed behind her into the courtyard of the mansion.

I could tell that she was running low on Sinner’s Ash, so I took over the role of spreading it around us.

“Do you think this is the place?” I asked.

“I don’t think so, but it’s impossible to see how far we’ve gone. Plus, the two guards said it would be abandoned and this place looks well-kept.”

“Speaking of which, there were no guards by the gate...”

“They’ve probably run away.”

“They might also have been turned.”

“Do you think they could spread the curse that quickly?” I asked.

“It would normally take days to incubate within a human before the change overcame them.”

“But?”

“If the Ifrit is correct in assuming a Flayed Noble is here, then the rules are different. They can manifest the curse transformation at will.”

“Shit...”

The wet footsteps that’d been following us suddenly resounded from just on the other side of the wall, out in the street, as though they were waiting to hop over and attack us. Wet growling came from the distant part of the street as well. I had no idea if these monstrosities had a great sense of smell or what, but figured that likely had some way of tracking people through the dense fog, otherwise the ambush strategy seemed poorly planned.

“What if we group them up and attack them all at once?” I asked my Armour-Bound familiar.

“If they remain stationary, I might be able to grievously injure them with ‘Consecration’ and ‘Smite’.”

I nodded. “Alright, I’m going to lure them here so we can deal with them all at once.”

“Ryūta, that’s a terrible idea...”

“I know,” I replied, “But it will hopefully make it safer for Elye, Lukas, and Renji, wherever they are.”

She frowned slightly, but pulled her sword and shield out, preparing for what I was about to do.

“I will lend my fire to the conflagration!”

Just don’t steal all my energy! I told her.

I took a deep breath, feeling the ache in my lungs from running. Before us, visible thanks to the bubble made from spreading the Sinner’s Ash around, were the large flagstones of the courtyard we were in, the three-metre-tall stone wall leading to the street, and the wide-open ornately-made iron gate. The fog was so dense that I couldn’t see the mansion behind me, nor more than a metre in any direction where I hadn’t tossed out Sinner’s Ash to clear away the spell.

Despite my adrenaline surging through me enough to make my body jitter and my hands shake, I reached into my bag and pulled out the box of incense, drawing three sticks out, before storing it away.

Like before, I used my Ifrit Claw as a lighter and lit the sticks, immediately producing a powerful cloying scent of vanilla, which was way stronger than ever before, given that I’d lit three at once. I tossed the sticks against the stone wall in front of us, hoping that it would make it easier for Armen to cast his damaging spells without allowing the creatures an easy escape.

In response to the powerful scent that quickly rose into the air and dispersed with the wind above, dozens of loud growls emerged from around us, some further up the street and many from back the way we’d come.

I swallowed hard, dreading what fate I’d just brought upon us.

Rana, perhaps sensing my anxiety, put a hand on my shoulder, then ruffled my hair like Renji often did. I swiped her hand away with a smile, feeling slightly better.

From the street on the other side of the wall came the overlapping sounds of wet feet clapping against the cobblestones, as the monsters came running at full tilt towards the scent of the incense.

“A fascinating thing, this incense,” Armen suddenly remarked. **“I feel drawn towards it in a way, as though a light wind tugging on my shoulder.”**

“What about when I rang the Bell, how did that feel?” I asked, engaging him on the subject, despite the imminent horde descending upon us.

“It is like a loud piercing tone that fills me with the urge to leave. It seems less powerful against me, perhaps because of my Pact with you.”

“Here they come,” Rana said, interrupting us.

I took a deep breath, but immediately released it with a gasp, as I saw the first creature to come running around the corner and through the open gateway. Bloody footprints showed the path it had taken to get here, and it still wore shredded remnants of clothes on its lower half, though its footwear was gone, thanks to the claws that adorned its hideous malformed feet.

The most distinct part of its visage however, was the very same thing that had made the image in the Encyclopaedia lodge firmly in my mind: from scalp to navel, its skin was shorn off, dangling from its waist like a fucked-up zipped-down onesie. The face, ears, hair, and all other distinguishing features of the person whose body had been turned was just dangling there and moved around like rubber as the monster thundered across the flagstones to reach the incense by the wall. The skin yet remained on the lower half of its body and had a white-grey pallor to it, with dark prominent veins crisscrossing the skin, as though they suffered from varicose veins.

Where the skin had been flayed from was a crimson vaguely-humanoid figure, though the exposed meat was pulsing and shifting, as though belonging to an alien creature. The hands were transformed into claws tipped with needle-like nails; the teeth were elongated and filed to points; the jaw itself had a protruding overbite; the ears were reduced to just holes in the side of the head and so were the nostrils; and the eyes were like black ponds with a single glowing red dot in the centre.

I heard Rana inhale sharply at the sight, and no sooner had the first Flayed One fallen upon the incense than three more appeared through the gate, followed a moment later by four climbing over the wall.

“Do it!” I yelled at Armen, but he remained put.

“There are more to come.”

I took a step back, only able to watch as the eight monstrosities swung at each other with their clawed hands or flensed the meat from each other’s bodies with their teeth, all the while attempting to grasp the incense sticks I’d thrown.

More wet footsteps sounding from around us, with one even come from behind me. I spun around just as the creature leapt over me, splattering fine droplets of blood into my face. I quickly wiped it off with my sleeve, fretting that their blood could infect me.

“They carry diseases, that much is certain, but only the blood of the Flayed Noble carries the curse.”

“If they weren’t so disgusting to look at, then they would almost remind me of vampires,” I said.

Rana nodded, making me wonder if her world also had myths around vampires. Given that Midrealm had magic and dragons, vampires were perhaps real there too.

The number of Flayed Ones fighting over the incense grew to fourteen and Armen immediately moved forward, swinging his mace out and producing a bright golden light that suffused his entire right arm. Something like a pillar emerged around the group of infighting monsters and quickly lit up the flagstones, wall, and surrounding dense fog with golden energy.

The growls turned to high-pitched screeching as the light burnt the exposed meat of the creatures, billowing plumes of white smoke into the air. It was similar to the Consecration that I’d seen the Paladins use aboard the Demon Galleon, but it was much more powerful and seemed to prevent the Flayed Ones from escaping its boundaries, as they were clawing against an invisible barrier, much like the one that I’d seen Armen use against Renji in their match.

Rana stared in awe at the display, “He’s using Barrier and Consecration at the same time! I didn’t even know it was possible.”

While the display continued and the creatures within the pillar of light writhed in pain as smoke billowed from their burning bodies, and their exposed meat became ash, my Armour-Bound former Crusader began invoking a spell.

I felt a tug on my essence as it was being depleted by whatever he was about to cast.

“First Light, primogenitor of the soul,”

“Spark of Creation, crafter of life,”

“Judge of the Tainted Spawn,”

“Executioner of Evil,”

“Smite my foe!”

From every pair of black eyes belonging to the Flayed Ones, who writhed within the Barrier surrounding Armen’s Consecration spell, came a powerful beam of pure-white energy, as though emerging from within the heads of the foul creatures. Combined, the light from the Consecration and Smite spells produced so powerful a glare that it was impossible to look directly at, as though a miniature sun had manifested before me.

Rana and I both averted our eyes, and when the eventually dimmed half-a-minute later, there was nothing left but ash. The courtyard flagstones that’d been previously spattered by blood and torn-off lumps of meat from the Flayed Ones fighting each other was now polished white, turned spotless from the spell he had cast.

I let out the breath I didn’t realise I’d been holding in and sank to my knees on the stones beneath me. “Holy shit Armen...”

My energy was drained to such an extent that even just trying to spark a flame in my Ifrit Claw was sure to exhaust the remains.

“It seems my flame was not needed,” Seramosa remarked, sounding almost disappointed.

“That was amazing,” Rana muttered, still in complete awe. “I thought Harleigh was impressive, but even he wouldn’t be able to use three abilities simultaneously. No wonder you ended up as a Bishop in your former life.”

The Armour-Bound Wraith did not reply to our praise, but instead just said, **“It would be worth scooping up the ash left behind. It is known as Consecrated Ash and has medicinal properties.”**

Wet footsteps suddenly came from the right, as though belonging to something that’d crawled over the wall that stood between the courtyard we were in and the mansion next door.

“I will be unable to perform such a feat again,” Armen warned, no doubt referring to my exhausted energy. Rana quickly got in front of me, while my Wraith raised his shield and mace. I wondered if he’d still be able to move around and fight normally even if my energy was completely drained. I assumed he would, given that his normal function required no energy from me, but I wasn’t too eager to find out if I was right or not.

Rana tossed out the little bit of Ash she still held and cleared away a small part of the fog, just in time to see the creature that came running. From nearby came something like a loud *thump* and *crunch* of stone, and before the errant Flayed One could enter the reach of Rana’s sword, a silhouette flew out of the fog and slammed the monster into the ground with enough force to splatter its skull like a tomato and pulverise the flagstones underneath.

Renji stood up and shook the blood and viscera from his right gauntlet.

“Hey guys. Glad I finally found you. Did you create that lightshow from earlier?”

Rana and I blinked in surprise at his sudden appearance.

“Are you okay?” I asked him, seeing that he was absolutely drenched in blood.

“Oh *this*?” he said, indicating himself, “Don’t worry, it’s not my blood.”

“**I was unaware a Flaykin might be punched to death,**” Armen said dryly.

“It isn’t easy, but they seem to stay down if you destroy their heads.”

I got up from the ground and handed Renji a waterskin I’d been carrying with me. He refused the offer with a shake of his head. “The night is still young. No point in cleaning up when there is still more to do.”