

81 – The Flayed Noble III

While Mortl’s undead knights spread out and reinforced the safe zone camp, which Renji’s group of Otherworlders had established alongside civilians and guards, I moved through the makeshift area for the wounded and dead, trying to reach Rana and Renji who I’d seen up by the closed-off Castle Gate.

Mortl and Armen followed me, and we all took in the aftermath of the fight that had broken out when the group of Otherworlders reached the gate. Around us were Nobles, petty Aristocrats, their entourage, and their bodyguards. There were a few commoners here too, people who seemed to have reached the Castle in the hopes of the Royal Guard coming to their aid.

Amongst the dead were many of the highborns’ bodyguards, as well as a few commoners, and far more Otherworlders than I had ever seen dead in one place.

“So many Adventurers and Mercenaries dead...” remarked Mortl. There was a judgemental part of my mind that wondered if he viewed their bodies as potential knights for his private army, but it was clear that he was unsettled by the deaths and I felt shameful for the brief thought.

“My friend, Lukas... before he...” I paused, taking a deep breath and then continuing, “Before he died, he said that they were walking into a trap.”

Mortl shook his head. “I’ve dealt with Flayed Nobles twice before, but this one is far more powerful and prepared than I’ve ever seen. To think that so many hearts were turned by her... it quite frankly makes me want to pulp her head into a mush.”

“There will be nothing left to pulp when we are done with her. Ashes is all that we will leave behind.”

I’d never heard Armen use such incendiary language and wondered if it was the loss of Lukas that made him talk this way, or perhaps Seramosa had finally begun rubbing off on him. Nonetheless, I nodded along with what he was saying. Even if I wasn’t a frontliner, I would do everything in my power to destroy the Flayed Noble and the people who had schemed to bring this disaster into reality.

As I looked over the bodies again, I realised that many of the bodies had, like Lukas, allowed themselves to be slain before their transformation completed, though the many corpses full of horrific claw marks and damage from twisted magic attested to the fact that not all those who turned had tried to remain human. The bodies of those transformed Otherworlders were nowhere to be seen though.

“Come on,” I told my companions. “Let’s find my friends and get this over with.”

We continued through the safe zone, as I led the way, while Karasumany and a few of its clones circled in the air above. One of them was linked to my right eye, showing me the camp from above.

From this high vantage, I saw that Renji and Harleigh were still busy arguing, while Rana had left the scene, though I spotted her a moment later, as she was talking to two Otherworlders in blood-spattered armour. My guess was that, since Renji and Harleigh were too busy arguing over something pointless, Rana was taking the lead to regroup the fighters and break through the gate to reach the Prince on the other side, as well as the Flayed Noble they’d all come here to slay.

I spun the crow around to look back at the way we’d come, and saw that the orderly rows of Mortl’s knights were keeping a horde of Flayed Ones at bay, though their numbers were rapidly dwindling, as the undead fought back with brutal prowess, while Otherworlders and highborn bodyguards lent their ranged weapons to the skirmish, making any attempt to reach the non-combatants in the camp impossible for the monsters.

With a single thought, I cut off connection to my Observer in the sky and then strode forward to where Rana was busy talking strategy with two men that, by the look of their auras, were a Crusader and a Vanguard like her. The fact that they deferred to her meant that they had probably seen her in action. Rana was, besides Renji and Armen, the strongest fighter I’d seen in this world.

“That woman is your friend?” asked Mortl.

I didn’t correct him to the specifics of our relationship, but instead just nodded.

“Do you know her?”

“She once helped me when I was in a bit of a bind. I also observed a few of her fights in the Arena. She’s quite a formidable one.”

“Ryūta?” Rana said as she noticed us. “What are you doing here?”

“I finished with my Exorcism and heard that you were walking into a trap.”

“Well, you’re a bit late if you meant to warn us,” she replied jokingly, though there was no humour in her eyes. “Who told you?”

I shook my head, “It doesn’t matter. We need to get to the other side of this gate. The Flayed Noble is fighting Prince Torvalder in the courtyard, but I don’t think he’ll be able to last much longer.”

Rana nodded. This clearly wasn’t news to her, but then again, it would’ve been strange if they hadn’t at the very least had one or two scouts look at what transpired within the Castle. “We’re trying to regroup our fighters, but, now that we’ve set up this camp, we cannot leave or the civilians and injured Guild members will be overrun.

“Do not worry yourself with the defence of this place,” Mortl said and Rana’s eyes brightened in response, as she just now realised he was here.

The Vanguard ran forward to hug the Necromancer tightly, then let go and said, “I’d heard you were in Arley, but to think you were *here* of all places.” Rana grinned. “Alright, let’s get everyone together, we’re storming the Castle! The Immortal Mortl is with us!”

The two men nearby seemed to light up at the name as well, and it seemed pretty clear now that my companion was quite the famous character.

“I hate that damn nickname,” Mortl said wearily.

While Rana went through the camp, rousing those Otherworlders who weren’t grievously injured, I made my way to where Renji and Harleigh were still arguing loudly by the large Castle Gate.

The gate itself was at least six metres tall and reinforced with metal braces horizontally. A metre-and-a-half above it sat a large blocky gatehouse with trapdoors in the bottom, allowing for anyone within to drop burning oil, rocks, or other projectiles on any would-be invaders. The wall itself was just a colossal barrier of stone. It reminded me a bit of the Osaka Castle with its impressive walls and gates, though Japanese castles often made their gatehouses of wood.

When I was just about to come into view of where the two of them were arguing, Harleigh stormed around the corner and came towards me, freezing in place as he saw us, then quickly moving on without looking back.

I wonder what they were arguing about.

The Crusader’s aura had been very agitated.

I retraced his steps and found Renji leaning on some debris from what might’ve been a carriage. His Brawler gauntlets were equipped and his arms were red all the way up to the elbows, with some of it still looking wet. Clearly he had been fighting a lot and his style meant that he was constantly in the splash-zone too, so the fact that only just his arms were bloody was kind of impressive.

“Ohai Ryūta, didn’t think you’d make it.”

“Of course,” I replied. “What were you arguing with Harleigh about?”

“It doesn’t matter. Please tell me you brought reinforcements so we can go kick some ass. I feel like I’ve been sitting on my hands for hours.”

“I tried to have some messengers warn you about the trap you were walking into.”

He frowned. “No messengers have arrived.”

A pang of remorse flowed through me as I realised that the three runners the Branch Master had sent to Noble Quarter had probably all perished thanks to me.

“How did it happen?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I checked all the Guild Cards of everyone who joined us, but, somehow, when we got within sight of the Castle walls, a bunch of people just started turning.”

“You’re saying the Flayed Noble had a way of turning people without the curse?”

He nodded. “That’s what it seems like. Maybe it’s some kind of aura, or perhaps there are other ways it can be triggered. It didn’t only affect Otherworlders though. We had quite a few Natives with us who turned as well. It was... yeah... it wasn’t great.”

I took a deep breath. It felt like all the times I’d gone up against a Haunter with unknown powers, except the consequences here were more widespread and devastating than ever.

Have you seen such a thing before? I asked Armen.

“I am unsure. When I dealt with a Squire-Lord of Betrayal, it was after it had unleashed its powers. I only know its blood carries the curse of the Flayed Lord.”

“How’d you know we were going into a trap?”

“Lukas told me,” I said.

“I see. Is he here with you? He really shouldn’t leave the Guild.”

I shook my head, a ball forming in my throat. Then I said, “He’s dead, Renji.”

“He’s...? How?”

“Somehow he figured out that there was some kind of trap, so he came to Noble Quarter to warn you all, but before he could get to you, he started transforming because of his curse or maybe because of the Flayed Noble, I don’t know.”

“Did he turn into one of *those* monsters?” he asked, horrified.

“No. He asked Elye to kill him and she did.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. But don’t tell Rana yet.”

“Don’t tell me what?” she asked, suddenly right behind me.

“I’ll tell you later,” I quickly answered.

Mortl was behind her, and coming up after them were seven Otherworlders, the only survivors of the initial thirty-or-so they had set out with. A few of the Noble and Aristocratic bodyguards flanked them, as well as twenty of Mortl’s knights.

Rana came over and put a hand on my cheek. “You should stay behind,” she told me.

I shook my head, “I want to lend what aid I can. Plus, Armen is too powerful to leave back here and I need to be close for him to use his powers.”

“Is Harleigh not coming?” Renji asked.

Rana frowned. “I don’t know what you told him, but he said he was going to find the corpses of his party members.”

“I was just honest about how his friends betrayed us.”

I sighed. “Renji... you must’ve known how stupid a move that was.”

“What can I say? The guy pissed me off, so I wanted to put him in his place.”

“Alright enough,” Rana said. She had really stepped up and taken charge of the situation I thought, while I was disappointed with Renji’s carelessness. But then, I hadn’t been here when half their group suddenly began transforming into monsters. Clearly they’d been put through the ringer.

The Crusader walked out of the group and started spraying us all with water from a large jug under his left arm. It was almost like some kind of religious ritual.

“Thanks for the shower,” Renji deadpanned after he got splashed in the face.

“May the holy water keep the Flayed sickness at bay,” said the Crusader. He was an older man, but seemed quite powerful, like anyone with his Advanced Role.

“Let the Paladins and Crusaders go first. If you aren’t engaging the enemy, then try to aid any injured Royal Guards you can reach. If you get hit with the Flayed Noble’s magic, you *will* be transformed into a monster, so stay focused!” Mortl shouted to the assembled Otherworlders and Natives. Their auras showed that they were prepared but terrified.

“Remember,” Rana said, likely reiterating a point she’d made several times before. “We’re here to bring down the Flayed Noble, but don’t throw your lives away to do it! We’ve seen enough death already!”

“Alright, let’s get the gate open,” Mortl said and moved towards the wall, his twenty knights moving past him. Though he was immortal, time had clearly not been gracious to him, as he moved with the gait of an elderly. I hadn’t noticed it so much when we walked here from the plaza, but it was very obvious now.

With a simple gesture, the Necromancer lifted his ancient lantern and an unseen pulse spread out, followed quickly by the twenty knights under his control charging at the gate, their armoured boots producing a cacophony on the stones underfoot.

A violent crash of wood and buckling of metal followed their impact and the gate flew open.

It seems he has some sort of power to vastly increase his minions’ strength, I observed.

On the other side of the wall was a bloodbath and hundreds of dead bodies belonging to the Flayed Ones and the Royal Guard, and in the midst of the circle formed by their piled-up corpses were two figures. The Prince with his greatsword swinging to precisely block and intercept the wild and manic strikes of a whirling dervish of blood and claws embodied by the Flayed Noble.

With a kick, the freakish humanoid launched off the tip of Torvalder’s blade and flew towards the undead knights that’d broken down the Castle Gate. She landed on one of the knights, knocking it to the ground, while additional limbs of blood emerged from her body to strike the ones around her, as though she was turning into an eldritch insect made entirely of blood and flesh.

It was clear that her attacks were penetrating their bodies and transforming them from the inside-out. Already, the first one she’d struck down was changing colour and its limbs were elongating.

Holy shit, she can transform even corpses!

“Oh no you don’t,” Mortl said in annoyance, then tightened his grip on the lantern and yelled, “Corpse Explosion!”

From one moment to the next, half of the twenty undead knights were vapourised in mists of crimson, and I heard sounds like arrows whistling through the air, only to realise a moment later that it came from the shrapnel pieces of shattered knight armour produced by the explosions.

“Goddamn, undead hand grenades!” Renji commented in awe, then turned back to look at Rana, “What are you waiting for, let’s go!”

Armen joined the Otherworlders and bodyguards alongside Rana and Renji as they charged in, while I pulled the Singing Branch from my back and joined Mortl as the support unit. Two Rangers and a handful of Natives joined us moments later.

“**Unleash me!**” said Armen as he charged the Flayed Noble with golden light glowing from his mace.

I didn’t understand what he meant for a few seconds, but then it sunk in. With a tight grip on my staff, I shouted, “Unleash Armour-Bound Wraith!”