

71 – Pawns

While I sat cross-legged and meditated to try and recoup some of my energy, Renji and Rana scooped up the Consecrated Ash, storing it in an empty belt bag that Rana carried. On my orders, Armen moved around and gingerly spread more Sinner’s Ash to give us a larger bubble where the fog did not obscure our surroundings.

“**You are running low on the Ash,**” Armen said when he returned to my side. He showed me the pouch and, sure enough, there were maybe only a few grams left.

“I’m amazed you found the place,” Renji commented, joining Armen in front of where I sat.

“We just followed the sounds of the monsters,” Rana replied. “It was Ryūta’s idea.”

“Well, good job. This is definitely the place. I can feel it.”

“I’m close to running out of ways to combat the illusions,” I told him.

He nodded. “How about we go inside and see what we find?”

I rose from the flagstones, dusting off the butt of my pants. “If there really is a Flayed Noble, would we find them here?” I wondered.

“**It is unlikely,**” Armen commented. “**If their aim is to overthrow the Royal Family, they would not stay in one place. They would use the chaos as a distraction to get to the heart of their foe.**”

I frowned. *Of course it wouldn’t be that simple...*

“It’s rare that the last boss just waits around for the heroes to show up at their lair in this world,” Renji remarked with faux disappointment in his voice.

Rana looked at me. “Did you understand any of what he just said?”

I shrugged with a weak smile, “I think what he’s trying to say is that this isn’t a game.”

The explanation didn’t seem to help her much.

“I am fairly low on energy,” I told the two of them.

“**It will suffice,**” the Armour-Bound Wraith said.

Sera was floating around in the air aimlessly. I could tell that she missed Elye, given the one-sided obsession she had for the Elfin.

“Renji and I will lead the way,” Rana decided. “It’s best to save Armen for when it matters.”

“Did you see any traces of Elye or Lukas?” I asked my friend.

He shook his head, “No, but I did get front row seating for watching a guard ‘awaken’ as a Flayed One.” He mimed grabbing a zipper at the top of his head and pulling it down to his waist.

I frowned.

“Let’s get moving,” Rana said.

“We might not find anything,” I replied.

They started walking towards the front door of the large manor that’d been revealed by Armen’s diligent effort with clearing away the fog. I moved a few paces behind them, with Armen just a step after me.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Renji said knowingly. “There’s definitely something in here. I feel it in my bones.”

“Brawlers are always talking about their intuition,” Rana remarked mockingly.

“When you can feel literal magic nonstop, it gives you a sense for it,” he shot back.

She just scoffed.

I was glad they were getting along, even if a deeply-buried possessive part of my mind didn’t want them to become too familiar.

Although only the front door and surrounding façade was visible of the mansion, it gave off a very ominous impression. The door itself was dark and dense wood, with a rust-covered iron knocker in the shape of a leering face and a curled door handle. The building itself was made of dark-grey stone that was a few shades darker than the outer wall and the flagstones underfoot. There were no windows on the bottom floor as far as I could tell, and, though the top of the building was obfuscated by the heavy fog, I got the sense that the building stood close to four stories tall.

Off to the right was a barely-visible garden with plants and grass that seemed well-tended, which was at odds with the idea that the place was abandoned. Then again, it was quite possible we had arrived to a completely different estate than the one we’d been heading for, but I got the sense that we were exactly where we needed to be, thanks to Renji’s premonition and Magic Sense.

Renji grabbed the door handle, but nothing happened, since it was locked. He let go and took a step back then shot forward with the heel of his foot against the door, hitting just below the handle and snapping the internal lock, sending the door flying open. It swung on its hinges with such speed that the impact against the wall inside resounded loudly through the entire building.

He then grinned unapologetically and indicated the open doorway to Rana. “Ladies first.”

She bumped into his shoulder with a huff then entered with her weapons drawn. Renji followed behind her, his arms up and ready. He had wiped some of the blood and viscera from his armour and body, but it still absolutely covered him and gave off a foul stench.

“You might as well have yelled at the top of your lungs to alert whatever is hiding in here,” I said as I followed behind him.

“Armen’s lightshow from earlier would already have alerted them,” he replied.

“The Brawler has a point.”

“Whose side are you on!?”

Armen produced a hollow chuckle from inside his blank helmet which was quite ominous and made gooseflesh ripple across my skin.

“Oh yeah, this is definitely the place,” Renji confirmed.

I was about to ask what he meant, when I saw the interior of the mansion properly. Rana was rubbing her temples in confusion, “This makes my head hurt.”

I couldn’t help but laugh a little by the absurdity of what I was seeing.

As soon as we’d gone through the doorway, the doorway itself had vanished, along with any semblance of the building that’d been visible from outside. The floor was now a field of golden-yellow wheat that reached up past my waist and a scalding sun was beating down on us from a cloudless sky. In the distance was a modest village with wooden houses and thatched roofs, as well as kids running around while playing, as contented-looking adults watched from doorways or the fields they worked in.

“It’s an illusion,” I said and noticed how my voice echoed as though I was in a confined space and not out in the open. “This doesn’t even come close to what I experienced in Ochre,” I said, pinching a bit of Sinner’s Ash into my fingers and tossing it into the air.

The vision of the idyllic wheat fields and village burnt away as though fire had begun devouring it piece-by-piece, before the true interior of the mansion was revealed to us. The floor was made of the same dark wood as the door, but the walls were covered in red tapestry, while a few bits of dark furniture stood at random intervals down along the hallway next to the entrance. Doorways led from this central hall into rooms, and at the end was a spiral staircase that led to the floor above.

Two figures stood across from us on the floor, seemingly surprised by our ability to break free of the illusion. I recognised them immediately.

“Well, hello again,” Renji said to the Brawler and Elementalist.

I gritted my teeth.

“They’re not on our side,” I muttered.

Their auras were *wrong* and the spots of crimson I’d noticed in them earlier were now much larger. On top of that, their features had changed, becoming sharper and bulkier, and decidedly less human. Horns sprouted from the right side of their brows and their physiques seemed to have bulked out as though they’d undergone a massive steroid-fuelled workout in the few hours since last I’d seen them. They also both had a scar pattern around their right eyes, which formed some kind of symbol that was uncomfortable to look directly at.

“***Burn the heathens!***” Seramosa screeched and spontaneously manifested. At the same time, my right hand lit up in flames and took on the shape of a monstrous claw; the very same I’d used to kill Leopold.

Armen thundered forward, as though chasing the Ifrit, who flew at the pair of corrupted Adventurers.

“I’ll take the Brawler!” Rana said, but Renji followed behind her, as though knowing it would not be so simple.

Gilliam and Zelser, the Brawler and Elementalist of Harleigh’s Party, lifted their arms up to meet our attack. Though they retained most of their human features and skin, their arms had been flayed and sported clawed hands like those of the Flayed Ones. It was like a partial transformation to allow them to retain the strengths as Otherworlders, since I doubted they’d have access to those if they became like the animalistic monsters we’d fought outside.

Before Seramosa could scald the pair with her flames, a buffet of gale-force winds emerged from Zelser’s clawed hand and pushed her back, as well as stopping Rana and Renji in their tracks. Armen, however, was unfazed and continued forward, golden light suffusing him and the mace in his hand.

“Banish!” I yelled at Seramosa, but she refused to disappear.

I don’t have the power to sustain you! I yelled at her internally.

“***The pawns of the Flayed Lord must be reduced to cinders!***”

Armen ducked under a lightning-fast jab from Gilliam, before using his shield to shove him aside. Then he lifted his mace over his left shoulder and slammed it into the side of Zelser’s head, uttering a single word.

“**Judgement.**”

A burst of golden light illuminated the hallway brightly, before a powerful shockwave followed on the heels of the gale-force wind and flung Seramosa head-over-heels in the air where she floated.

Renji and Rana held fast, before descending on the corrupted Brawler as soon as the aftermath of Armen’s ability subsided.

Left in the wake of the Wraith Crusader’s powerful ability was a large indent in the tapestry-covered wall and a small hole to the outside, as well as a headless body of the former Elementalist. I’d expected it to be harder than that, but Armen had struck decisively and quickly, wiping out the potentially-biggest threat immediately.

I gasped as I felt the strength drain from my body, thanks to Armen’s exertion and Sera’s passive drain. A moment later I fell to my knees, my head throbbing and my vision blurry. The Ifrit became incorporeal with a complaining screech, while the light in Armen’s body faded away and he became like a statue.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

“I am momentarily unable to move,” Armen told me.

I tried to cross my legs and concentrate, but it was impossible, especially given the fight going on between my companions and Gilliam, whose transformation seemed to have elevated his attributes greatly above Renji’s, allowing him to move quicker and swing harder.

With the Spirit Sight enabled by my glasses, I saw that the aura of Zelser’s headless body was slowly fading away and I got a dumb idea into my head, as I began to crawl towards it, not trusting my legs to carry me.

Renji dodged away from a swing, then exclaimed “Thunder-Fist!” as he hammered Gilliam in the face with a right hook that produced a crack like thunder and seemed to send a wave of convulsions running down the Brawler’s body, allowing Rana to ram her sword straight through his ribcage and heart, though to seemingly-little effect.

As she pulled away, dragging viscera and blood with her, Renji yelled, “The head! Focus on the head!” A second later he was punched so hard that he skipped across the floor and slammed into the wall just behind where I was crawling.

Rana caught a fist meant to cave her head in and deflected it off to the side with her shield, ramming her blade up through Gilliam’s exposed armpit, once again seeming to forget that it wasn’t a human she was fighting, as he responded to the normally-fatal strike by kneeling her in the stomach. She absorbed the impact with her armour, though it put her off-balance and she only barely avoided a fatal blow by catching it on her shield, pushing her further back and almost knocking her to the ground.

Before the corrupted Brawler could capitalise on her weakness, Renji sent an armoured palm-strike into his cheek. “Overpower!” he shouted, and the resultant impact slammed Gilliam into the wooden wall to one of the nearby rooms with enough force to crack part of it. But it hadn’t killed him, like when Renji had used the same ability to decapitate the Mimic Knight.

I finally made it to Zelser’s body and put my Ifrit Claw on it. I focused on the mental image, which was painful given the exhaustion-induced migraine I sported, then muttered “Drain Spirit!”

The throbbing pain in my head and the fog clouding my focus and blurring my vision was pushed away, as the energy from the Elementalist’s fading soul flowed into me. Armen immediately ‘awoke’ from the induced stupor and strode towards the fight with the Brawler. Moments later, my hand touching Zelser’s body burst into flames, reducing the part of him I was touching to ash, as Sera became corporeal once again without my consent.

Instead of shooting towards the Brawler, she flew the other way, heading for the spiralling staircase. I looked back, just in time to see Rana slam the edge of her shield into Gilliam’s neck as Armen hit the back of his head with his mace. A loud *thump* sounded as the Brawler’s head hit the wooden floor nearby.

A loud angry scream sounded from the floor above and I immediately scrambled to my feet and ran off towards the staircase. Shortly after, the other two overtook me and together we all moved to the floor above.

At the top of the landing to the second floor was a small room that led out into a tall chamber of sorts. The floor and walls were scalded black by Sera’s furious passing, and as soon as I came out into the large chamber behind my companions, I saw what the Ifrit had seen: two bodies lay on the floor before a handsome and tall man with glowing red eyes and a scar pattern around his right eye. He wore a well-fitting black suit with red jewels on the sleeves and an expensive-looking choker also studded with tiny jewels.

His aura immediately sparked familiarity to me as it was teal spotted with beige. The same aura I had seen in the Mimic-infested armoury.

I swallowed hard as I realised that the bodies belonged to Lukas and Elye.

“I WILL BURN YOU TO ASH AND BLACKENED BONES!” screamed the Condemned Ifrit, but as soon as she flung her fire at the grinning man, the air shimmered and he was gone.

I knew another illusion was at play though, so I scooped up as much Sinner’s Ash as was left in my pouch and started flinging it into the air, until suddenly the illusion broke and the man was revealed as he was trying to slink off to the stairs that led to the floor above.

He looked at me in surprise, as though not knowing that his trick could be so easily uncovered. His appearance had changed as well, as the man I revealed was like an uglier version of the one I’d just seen, with thinning hair, gaunt cheeks, and hollow sunken eyes.

Before either he, Rana, nor Renji could react, the man burst into flames as my Ifrit torched him with such intense flames that his screams could not be heard over the roar they produced. Within a few seconds he’d become curled into a ball and all the meat and fat and skin was burnt away.

I flagged as my energy was once again about to be fully exhausted and I knew just how hard it would hit me the second time around, thanks to the Mimic fight where I’d also used Drain Spirit to recoup my energy before spending it all again.

“Stop!” I yelled to my familiar. “He’s already dead and you’re wasting my energy!”

The fires immediately died down as the Ifrit at last saw reason. Then she turned around and floated off towards where Elye lay motionless on the floor, her flames disappearing from every part of her body except her hair. She landed on the floor, which hissed from the heat of her charred feet, then she knelt and said, “*The Elfin child still breathes.*”

We all moved over to where the two of them lay. Armen had not followed us up the staircase, but I assumed he was keeping guard below, such that we had advanced warning if more of the Flayed Ones assaulted us.

As I looked at the Rogue and Elfin, I saw that their chests were rising and falling steadily, as though they were just sleeping. Rana shook Lukas slightly, but he did not stir.

“It’s a spell,” Renji said. “They’re locked into an illusion within their minds. This would’ve been us as well if not for Ryūta’s quick thinking.”

“Illusionists are scary,” Rana commented.

I looked over to the charred remains nearby. “Not so scary when they can’t hide behind their tricks,” I said.

“How do we lift the spell?”

“I’m not sure,” Renji replied.

“**I believe more of the Flaykin are making their way here,**” I heard Armen say directly into my mind.

“Banish,” I said to Sera and she immediately went incorporeal, not putting up a fight this time. “We need to go,” I then told my Party.

“Where do we go to?” Rana asked.

Before I could think about it too much, Renji answered, “We should head for the Adventurers’ Guild. They’ll have a way to deal with the spell these two are under, and we need to inform them about what we know.”

I nodded. “Armen will carry Elye, one of you can carry Lukas.”

“I’ll do it,” Rana said.

I took a deep breath. Hopefully we could get there safely, but there was no way of knowing how bad the situation was in other parts of the city. With the Illusionist dead, I hoped that the spell blanketing the city in obscuring fog would dissipate and make the fight against the Flayed Ones easier.

As Armen joined us and lifted Elye off the floor carefully, Rana hefted the Rogue onto her back. She glanced towards the curled-up remains of the Illusionist and said, “I recognised him when you dispelled his Glamour. His name was Hamel. Last time I saw him he was a new Priest making a living by selling his services to the fighters in the Arena. It can’t have been more than a year ago.”

“He went from being a Priest to a powerful Illusionist that quickly?” I remarked sceptically as we made our way down the spiral staircase, with Renji in front.

Sera floated behind Armen, a hand on his bulky shoulders, while he carried the sleeping Elfin in his grip. As Rana descended the stairs, I walked behind her, supporting Lukas’ body that slumped against her back.

“**There are those who take shortcuts to gain power,**” Armen responded to my question.

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch in this world,” Renji commented from in front of us, as we made our way back along the hallway where the two headless bodies of the corrupted Adventurers lay, underscoring his point.

“You think he served the Flayed Lord?” I asked.

“**It would explain everything.**”

I sighed heavily. Suddenly Owl being an Adherent to the Observer didn’t seem quite as bad, when people serving a force of such blatant evil existed.

Perhaps this is why he sent me to Helmstatter...