

## 82 – The Flayed Noble IV

The warm golden light spread from Armen’s mace and onto his hand then up his arm. It moved from his arm to his shoulder and from his shoulder to his torso. Then it spread to his lower body and legs, as well as his head and left arm. Within moments, the Armour-Bound Wraith had become a glowing silhouette, from which emanated velvet-soft wind that brushed over his surroundings.

Immediately, the Flayed Noble tore her claws from one of the undead knights, which she had used to shield herself from Mortl’s Corpse Explosion, and then flung hundreds of needle-thin projectiles of blood at the charging Priest Crusader, as well as many veering off to strike those behind him.

Although my familiar tried to block them, they were too bountiful and pierced through his raised shield, as well as the many Barriers he conjured simultaneously. From behind, where I watched, his glowing silhouette was punched full of holes, but then someone, with a white aura tinged with a rainbow hue, caught the Flayed Noble in the side of her head with a strike and flung her away, ceasing the assault.

Those few who’d been hit by the projectiles started convulsing and then began turning into Flayed Ones, but they were mercifully slain by their companions before they could finish transforming. After watching even more of their fellows succumb to the transformative powers of the Flayed, the rest of the Otherworlders spread out and started using various abilities from afar, though Rana and Renji continued their pursuit of the enemy, who bounded across the courtyard, before skidding to a halt.

Torvalder, the Prince, had come up from behind the Noble and swung his blade into her head with the full brunt of his power, but, when she stood up, her malformed body quickly reassembled itself, before she pounced on one of the charging people: the old Crusader.

With a single slash of her claws, she tore his body to shreds, but no sooner had she leapt from him to attack Renji, than Armen came up from behind the Crusader and caught him in his plated arms that glowed with a holy light.

I’d switched to watching through one of Karasumany’s eyes, since the fight was moving further-and-further away from where I stood. Through its hovering vantage point from above, I saw that the old Adventurer was restored to life by the simple touch of my familiar, but such power came at a tremendous cost, as my energy was sapped by nearly half its total amount.

I gasped and fell to my knees. A Spellhand came and tried to support me, but I could already feel how my legs were turning to jelly. He was part of the ranged support unit, but it was clear he didn't have a way to fire off his magic without potentially hitting one of our comrades, particularly since the Flayed Noble moved about with such tremendous speed and constantly positioned herself to make any clear shot impossible.

*Did you just bring that guy back from death?* I asked through my bond to Armen.

**“I healed him instantaneously before he could die.”**

*Isn't that the same thing?*

**“No. Once a body is dead, it will remain so forever.”**

*Well, regardless, I don't know if I have enough juice for a second one of those.*

**“I understand. I can feel how the power possessing me is consuming my armour as well. It is like the intense heat of the sun.”**

I grimaced. *We don't have a lot of time then.*

Mortl glanced at me while holding his lantern aloft, which somehow allowed him to manipulate his knights with more finesse. “What spell was *that*?” he asked. “I've never heard of ‘Unleash’ before.”

“I'll tell you later,” I promised him.

He nodded, then aimed his lantern at the Noble, who was trying to get a hit in on Renji. He was too quick to let himself be struck however, and his teamwork with Rana clearly frustrated the monster. As she leapt against Rana's shield and used it to lunge for one of the Native bodyguards, Mortl cast a spell. “Curse of Lethargy!” he said, and something like a translucent snake made of purple-blue chains emerged from his lantern, flying straight towards the Flayed Noble.

“I didn't know you could cast curses like that,” I remarked, watching as it moved over the heads of the many Otherworlders, most of whom looked very out-of-place and unsure how to aid in the fight with the acrobatic monstrosity. They clearly didn't want to get too close, but many were frontliners who had no use at the back of a fight.

“Normally, you can't, but this isn't any normal lantern,” he said, “though there will be a toll for me to pay later.”

I had no idea what that meant, but it sounded quite ominous.

Just as the Noble tore through the bodyguard and leapt onto the armoured torso of a dual-wielding Brawler, Mortl's curse struck and wrapped itself about her body, before sinking into her pale flesh and disappearing. Before the monstrous woman could tear open the Brawler's face, a broad-headed

arrow curved around his shoulder and struck her head just below the left ear, packing enough punch to send her tumbling off his body, taking the man with her as they fell to the ground.

She'd barely touched the dusty stones of the courtyard, before the Prince strode forward with the tip of his greatsword lancing through her torso and flinging her away from the Brawler, whose terrified face was quickly filled with relief.

As the Flayed Noble tumbled away again, Renji and Rana were on her in moments, followed by Armen, who had cocked his mace back, ready to swing. Though the effects of Mortl's curse were subtle, it was clear that it was just the thing needed to even out the fight, as it made her movements a bit slower and easier to predict.

It was terrifying to think that just one creature like her could potentially hold her own against a very powerful Prince, as well as many experienced Adventurers, who fought monsters every week.

Renji kneed the Flayed Noble in the jaw, producing a loud *crunch* as it impacted and knocking her back onto the ground, allowing Rana to chop her head off with a yelled-out ability, though I couldn't hear which, because of the noise and distance to where my familiar hovered in the air.

Just as the head separated from the Flayed Noble's neck, Armen raised his shield hand and cast a Consecration on the ground. Smoke billowed from the monstrous woman's body, though blood tendrils quickly flew from her neck and latched onto her severed head, pulling herself back together. From her torso flew out six scythe-like limbs, which flailed about, forcing Renji and Rana back.

Armen, however, braved the storm of terrifyingly-sharp limbs and swung his mace down.

Even from the distance between where he was and where I stood leant against the Spellhand, I heard his voice clearly utter the ability he used:

**“Judgement.”**

A shockwave of warm wind and golden light blew out from the impact site of his spell and the Consecration circle became like a tall pillar that reached into the heavens above. Perhaps it was because of the Unleash ability, or maybe it was some combo of Judgement with Consecration, but, whatever the cause, the result was so bright that it was impossible to look directly at it.

Furthermore, it caused the last bit of my energy to be siphoned from my body with such violence that I immediately passed out. As the world darkened before my eyes, I heard a loud *woosh* from another shockwave, then the beginning sounds of cheering.

When I came to, I was lying on some kind of blanket on the hard stones of the courtyard. Around me were people in various states of joy, excitement, but also grief.

“Ryūta? Are you awake?” asked Rana from nearby. I turned to look at where she sat next to me, with her knees pulled against her chest.

“Did we do it? Is the Flayed Noble dead?”

“I think so.”

“Then why do you look like that?”

“Armen is... gone.”

“Gone?” I asked.

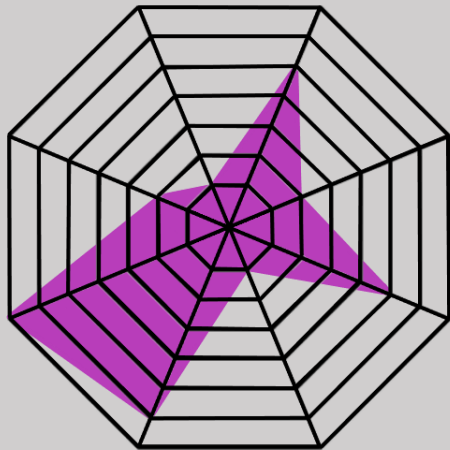
“Yeah. When he created *that* pillar and destroyed the Flayed Noble’s body, his armour vanished too. Or well, it became part of the ashes, I think.”

I used my elbows to push myself to a sitting position. My head was swimming and it felt like I hadn’t eaten anything in days. Not to mention, a massive headache pulsed behind my eyes. It felt as though whatever Armen had done, it had used up more energy than I actually possessed, and now I was paying the price in the form of some kind of wicked hangover.

“How long was I out?” I asked.

“Ten minutes maybe.”

I reached into my belt pouch and withdrew my Guild Card, dreading what I’d see.

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
<b>ROLE:</b> <i>Exorcist</i>		<b>RANK:</b> <i>Seeker</i>	
<b>GENDER:</b> <i>Male</i>		<b>AGE:</b> <i>18</i>	
<b>ACUMEN:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>DEXTERITY:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>INTELLIGENCE:</b> <i>B</i>	<b>LUCK:</b> <i>F</i>
<b>PACT:</b> <i>A</i>	<b>SOUL:</b> <i>S</i>	<b>STRENGTH:</b> <i>E</i>	<b>VITALITY:</b> <i>F</i>
<b>ABILITIES</b> <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist II’</i> <i>‘Curse of the Excruciating Bond’</i> <i>‘Ifrit Claw Wielder’</i> <i>‘Gravelight Ring Wielder’</i> <i>‘Pact (????)’</i> <i>‘Pact (????)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Observer)’</i>			

*The ‘Armour-Bound Wraith Wielder’ is gone, but the Pact is still there... Armen, can you hear me? Are you still here?*

No answer came.

“He’s not gone,” I said with utter certainty, “But the armour I bound him too is.”

The sounds of metal boots on the ground drew my eyes away from my Card and over to Mortl, who was approaching with his full army of undead knights. It seemed that he’d recalled the ones he’d left at the camp outside the Gate. I took it as a sign that the Flayed Ones were gone for good.

“Good job Ryūta,” he said, praising me. “Your familiar’s sacrifice saved a lot of lives.”

“He didn’t sacrifice himself,” I told him.

He nodded. Thanks to his mask, I couldn’t tell if he believed me or not.

“Nevertheless, I believe the Prince would like to personally thank you for your aid.”

I swallowed hard, while Rana looked at me proudly.

“I doubt I’d be able to walk there on my own two legs,” I said jokingly.

Rana seemed to take it as an invitation to lift me to my feet and put her arm around my waist, while I held on to her shoulder. With Mortl walking in front of us and his knights on either side, we walked to where Prince Torvalder was conversing with a few Otherworlders, Renji being one of them.

“I managed to get some of the Flayed Noble’s blood into a flask,” Rana whispered to me. “We can use that to cure Lukas.”

A ball formed in my throat. “Rana, I—”

Before I could say anything more, the Prince noticed us and walked our way. Each of his steps produced a resounding *boom* throughout the echoey courtyard, but most intimidating of all was his aura. I had caught brief glimpses of it during the fight, but seeing it up close was something else.

Everyone had a glow around their body when viewed with Spirit Sight, but for most it was concentrated around the head like a halo framing their face. For the Prince, however, it was a dense line surrounding every part of his body, and it consisted of a pure white light, with edges like a translucent rainbow hue that constantly shifted between different colours. If I had to guess, it seemed as though he possessed something like an S-Tier in all Attributes, and from the intensity and unadulterated strength of it, he had to be an Otherworlder or an offspring of one.

Which begged the question: how had an Otherworlder become Royalty in this world? And since Armen had stated that there were stories of the Royalties’ births, then what made them special enough to be able to produce offspring, when most Otherworlders couldn’t?

I’d never seen an aura like this ever before, but the white part of it seemed reminiscent of what blessed or consecrated corpses gave off, as well as the innate nature of a Light Elemental like my Gravelight.

Standing before him was also just like Armen had said: it felt as though an oven’s heat was brushing against me, but I also couldn’t turn away from his gaze.

Then I noticed his eyes. They were like a microcosm of his aura, and in a way they were similar to my own and those of Mortl’s, which, I guessed, was the visual part of having a high Soul attribute. Given that this man likely had high attributes across the board, his body ought to have the supreme human physique and appearance, at least so far as what the system deemed that to look like. However, apart from his chiselled features, intense aura, and spellbinding eyes, he had quite a normal face. He was neither blindingly-handsome nor ugly, just sort of, plain...

Although, when he stood before me, it was hard to truly believe that.

***“Temaru Ryūta,”*** he said, carefully enunciating my name. ***“The Principality of Arley owes you a great deal of gratitude for your aid in vanquishing such a vile specimen as the Flayed Noble.”***

His voice was like nothing I’d ever heard before. If I’d believed in such a thing, I would’ve called it ‘Angelic’, though even that was perhaps too simple a word for it. It was deep and imposing, but charming and full of a trustworthy timbre. It was pitch-perfect and lilting every-so-slightly, as though a faint vibrato followed every syllable he uttered.

What’s more, his voice seemed to fill my body with a strange euphoric sensation, which I recognised from when the Siren had spoken to me. If he had asked me to join his army, I was certain I wouldn’t have been able to say no.

Torvalder’s eyes brushed over me and I felt an electric sensation as his gaze moved across my features, pausing on my hand and belt pouches, gazing briefly at my Singing Branch, before returning to look me in the eyes.

***“Peculiar. You possess the bond of a loyal and pious Wraith, a vengeful and fiery Demon, and a benevolent and pure Light Spirit. I also feel the whisper of a Siren’s luring voice hover about your person.”***

Without knowing why, I blurted out. “I have a Siren that I bound to a music box. I want to set her free so she can live in the sea. I don’t mean to use her for evil, I swear!”

The Prince smiled slightly. ***“I see this. You have an unusual nature, but ultimately you will do much good in this world.”***

His utterance of faith in me filled me with a lot of unearned pride and I realised, in the very deepest reaches of my mind, that he somehow had the same manipulating speech as the Siren. Part of me was sceptical of his character, as it seemed he was possessed of a power that allowed him to always get his way, but this part was buried so deeply in my mind, when he looked at me, that I could not act upon it. The fact that his very voice compelled me to be truthful was quite unnerving, but without any wards prepared in advance, I was totally at his mercy.

“We brought Myrabelle Gyldenrose to Helmstatter,” Rana suddenly said. “We didn’t know what she was up to, but we knew that you were trying to kill her and still we helped her get here!”

Torvalder shifted his gaze to her. ***“I am aware of your transgressions. Ignorance is not a sin in itself, but an ignorant soul may unwillingly commit evil. Your decision to right this wrong has absolved you of your wrongdoing. And you could not have known that my half-sister conspired with evil and sought to release a tide of betrayal upon my fair city.”***

Rana looked to be on the verge of tears and I realised that she felt an immeasurable amount of guilt for having unwittingly aided the Flayed Noble’s schemes.

The Prince turned to look at the Necromancer to my left. ***“Have you heard from the Witch Hunters yet?”***

Mortl nodded. He didn’t seem affected in the same way that Rana and I were, but perhaps this was not his first time speaking directly to the Prince or other Royalty for that matter. After all, if the Prince had so profound and powerful an impression, then what of the King in Lacksmey? They clearly weren’t human. Otherworlders already straddled the border of humanity, and it was clear that the Royalty of Lacksmey and Arley transcended it. The Prince was a silver-tongued monster of war, whose skill with the greatsword put any Otherworlder to shame; while his half-sister had become the most fearsome and powerful entity most of us would ever fight in our lifetimes.

“My rodent scouts accompany Oliver Smile and his team, who are on the trail of the Demonologist. Their whole Order has mobilised to track him down and punish him for his crimes.”

I gritted my teeth. *It has to be the same one that set the Demon loose on Ochre, and no doubt also the architect of all the infestations in Helmstatter...*

***“He is heading to Lacksmey, is he not?”***

“He is,” Mortl replied.

***“Egil will deal with him if the Hunters do not. Despite her many shortcomings, our half-sister was dear to him. He will wish to have a hand in the Demonologist’s death, that much is certain to me.”***

“What about aid and reinforcements to Helmstatter?” Mortl inquired. He seemed to have a vested interest in the city, but his blunt nature towards the Prince made me cringe inwardly, though Torvalder seemed to let it slide. I doubted he was a man who took kindly to being second-guessed, but his interests probably aligned with the Necromancer’s. After all, it *was* his city and seat of power.

***“The King is already mobilising the Priests of Altar and sending a contingent of guardsmen to refill our ranks.”***

“That’s good to hear.”

***“However, there will be much work for intrepid Otherworlders such as yourself,”*** he said. ***“Helmstatter is far from the only place that has felt the insidious touch of the Demonologist and his cult.”***

The Necromancer nodded. “I will see to it that the Guilds are aligned and work together.”

***“I have faith in you on this. You may leave your dead here, if you wish. The Archpriest and her adherents will see to their burials.”***

His words made the ever-present pain in my chest bloom and make itself noticed, when I realised that we had a friend to bury.

I turned to Rana and said, now that it was all over, the truth that I had been withholding from her.

“Lukas is dead.”