

## 80 – The Flayed Noble II

I took in Mortl’s features again. He had light-grey hair and a porcelain mask with two holes for his eyes. Its glossy exterior was cracked and marred on the edges and around his right eye-hole. The eyes that shone out through the mask were not too different from my own, as they were like two tiny dark-green galaxies full of multi-coloured stars with a single black hole in the centre.

His body seemed frail and old, but none of his skin was visible, as he wore some sort of liquid metal covering from the neck and all the way down, over which was a crisp and soft-looking dark-blue shirt. Draped over that was a black silken robe with dark-emerald-green embellishments and swirls. The liquid metal covering was porcelain-white and glossy like his mask, visible in the gaps between the bottom of his dark-grey dress pants and fancy leather shoes, as well as on his neck, wrists, and hands. Despite the unhinged mishmash of colours and fabrics, he somehow pulled it off with some innate authority and charm he exuded naturally.

Most stark of all was his aura, for it was a deep and dark purple hue and showed not a flicker of emotion. Actually that wasn’t right, it showed one emotion, which I interpreted as ‘curiosity’.

**“This man is very powerful to be wielding the reins of over a hundred undead at once.”**

*I know.*

Mortl glanced at Armen with marked interest. “It has been a long time since I saw someone with an Armour-Bound familiar. Your bond must be strong.”

I nodded. “It is. And thank you for watching over my friends.”

“Of course. Power is meant to be used, if not for thyself, then for those within thine reach.”

“I need to ask, because I recognise your name, but...”

“Yes? Pray tell. You have heard it before perhaps?”

“I have.”

**“The Elfin of Skovslot Enclave spoke of a Necromancer who bore the same name as you.”**

“Amusing.”

“Was that you?”

“Indeed. Peculiar that they still remember my name. As I recall it,” he said, tapping the chin of his mask, “I merely aided them with one of their recurring problems: the so-called Rotmaker.”

“I used the method of exorcism that you left behind.”

“Truly? And how did you fare? Be honest.”

“Not well.”

**“It was incomplete.”**

“Ah, I feared as much. The Necrotic Parasite is a pernicious bugger. It comes back stronger every time. I suspect that it learns from its defeats and adapts, albeit slowly.”

“Can it not be exorcised fully?”

“Not entirely, no, though if the Elfin would cease with their burial rituals, it would not come back every odd hundred years. But alas, tradition is not erased easily.”

“The Branch Master said you dealt with ghosts in the Church Catacombs. Are you heading for the Castle now? We need to go there and aid our friends. Maybe you could come along?”

“I plan to head there as well,” he replied, beginning to walk out of the northern exit of the plaza, while Armen and I followed behind. His undead knights regrouped and moved around us like a protective armour. The fact that he was able to manipulate and command them all simultaneously told me everything I needed to know about his powers. It also made me certain that he had been a Summoner before becoming a Necromancer.

He continued, “And yes, I dealt with the ghosts. A bothersome pair. The Clarion Twins, they are known as. Quite a rare Shade to encounter in the wild, but then, the orchestrator of this entire mess has spent a long time preparing this event for us.”

I’d never read about such a Shade in the Encyclopaedia, but I guessed that, like the Larder Keeper, it was not from the regions near Arley and Lacksmey.

“I would’ve preferred to handle the Barracks, as clearly that was the more pressing case. Alas, the politicking of Lords and Ladies, even amidst a literal disaster...”

“I dealt with the Barracks Haunter,” I said, trying to sound nonchalant. Though my friend had literally just died, I could not help but want to absorb the knowledge of this ancient living lexicon. Perhaps it was also just a coping strategy to keep my mind off of it.

“Not too shabby, sounded like a messy one.”

“It was a Shadow Elemental that kept prisoners to feed on and had a large territory that prevented outside sounds and communication.”

“Peculiar. I haven’t dealt much with such creatures, but they’re usually weak to fire and daylight, if I recall.”

I nodded eagerly. “I used a Gravelight I bound to a ring to push back its shadows, then had my Ifrit burn the core it was bound to.”

A tiny beat passed through Mortl’s aura at the words, then he laughed mightily, falling into a coughing fit that sounded like a lot of phlegm was knocked loose in his throat. “An Ifrit *and* a Gravelight!? Hilarious!”

His reaction gave me pause and I asked, surprised, “Why?”

“Light Elementals, like your Gravelight, are one of the closest things this world has to Angels. They are quite literally the embodiment of Benevolence and Goodness, while an Ifrit is a hateful Demon that would sooner see the world in flames than fight on the side of humans. How did you manage to attain such opposing familiars? Their combined presence alone ought to cleave your soul in two!”

I smiled. “I have a secret,” I lied.

Mortl stopped and every single one of his undead knights came to a halt as well. He turned his masked face towards me and I felt his eyes scan me scrupulously. It took me a second, but then I realised he was using Spirit Sight. If my guess that he’d been a Summoner was correct, then he had probably unlocked the ability when he achieved his Necromancer specialisation.

“You have no clue, right?”

“Yeah, I didn’t even know they were opposing forces.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “I like people with a sense of humour,” he said, then continued moving.

“By the way,” he added, “Those crow-looking spirits I have been seeing, they’re yours right?”

I nodded. “It’s my Observer.”

“An Observer Pact?” he asked, humming a bit to himself. “Say, you’re not a pious one, are you? Please tell me you don’t drink from the same pot of mushroom tea as *that* Owl.”

“We don’t see eye-to-eye on things, if that’s what you’re wondering. But he *was* my Mentor.”

“Of course he was. Hasn’t been an Exorcist in the last ten years he didn’t try to get his claws in.”

“You’ve been around for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Oh indeed. I arrived to these lands when the ‘portal’, as it were, was found in the city of Evergreen and not Lundia.”

**“I too arrived in Evergreen,”** Armen commented. **“Though I do not think I have heard your name before.”**

“Fascinating. It’s rare for a spirit to retain its former self, let alone be that of a former Otherworlder. And I like to stay off of important people’s lips,” he replied. “That’s how you end up in trouble, trust me on that.”

“Armen here used to be a Bishop in the Church before he died.”

“A Bishop? What Role were you?”

“**Priest Crusader.**”

Mortl chuckled. “I have actually met you in the past then. Interesting that you go by the name of Armen now. But I understand *why*.”

“Wait... you met each other?”

“I was still just a Summoner back then, so I’m sure your friend here does not recall. But he was already a Bishop at the time, nevertheless, he healed my friend back from the brink of death. Still, it cost me two weeks’ worth of Quests to afford.”

“**I apologise, but I do not recall such an event. I healed and saved many in my time. I also have not known anyone with a lifespan as long as yours. I find it troubling.**”

“It does seem that way, doesn’t it?”

“Is it a curse?” I asked.

The column of knights that surrounded us veered right and elongated somewhat as we moved into a narrower street heading for the Castle. Though I couldn’t see over the tops of their helmets, I heard as they diligently shoved aside the piles of corpses and debris that barred our way, as well as fought off stray Flayed Ones that still tried to reach the Necromancer. I felt certain that the Flayed Noble wanted to keep him far away from her.

“Indeed. It’s known as ‘The Tome Warden’s Pledge’. I cannot die until my pledge is completed, but unfortunately it is an impossibility. And you may think that being functionally immortal is not a bad curse to have, but you’d be wrong. My body still ages and, if not for some specialised tools in my repertoire, I would be no more than a pile of sentient mulch by now.”

I looked back at the strange liquid porcelain that covered his skin, as well as the ancient lantern he carried. It was half-a-metre from handle to bottom and formed of blackened metal. The four sides had hazy glass that was hard to see through, but I could just barely make out a small white flame with black edges flitting about within. Despite not knowing what sort of entity was trapped in his lantern, I was certain it was the means by which Mortl controlled his army of undead knights.

“You cannot break the curse with your Cursebreaker ability?”

“I cannot, no. Likewise, the Flayed Lord’s curse also cannot be broken. Curses come in many varieties, and those manifested as a result of an Old God’s power are near-impossible to get rid of.”

“**The Guild Genius believed the blood of the Flayed Noble might be able to reverse the transformative effects of the curse.**”

Mortl glanced at Armen, then shook his head. “Bacchi is ambitious, but he’s yet a fledgeling in many arts.”

The vanguard of the Necromancer’s army seemed to condense as it met with opposition, but in our little safe bubble in the centre, the only effect was that we had to slow down for a brief moment, before resuming our steady pace. We weren’t moving fast, but I realised now how difficult it would’ve been to ride through this part of the city, given the abundance of Flayed Ones still lurking about.

**“Is it not a blood curse?”**

“No. Old Gods curse the soul directly. While a Flayed Noble may spread their Lord’s curse through their own blood, it does not a blood curse make.”

“Has she tried to curse you?”

“Not yet, though she would also not dare to try. You see, the Old Gods are like territorial wolves. They do not piss on a tree that is already marked.”

It took me a second to get the meaning of his words. “So, because you are already cursed by this ‘Tome Warden’, you are immune to the Mark of the Flayed Lord?”

“Immune? No. But the Flayed Lord will not attempt to transform me, even if he is opposed to the Tome Warden.”

“That sounds odd.”

“The Old Gods are certainly *that*.”

“How does the Observer fit into all this? That’s the one that Owl serves.”

Mortl nodded as if that wasn’t news to him, but then again, if he truly had been alive since before Armen was turned into a Wraith, then he probably knew a lot of secrets.

“The Observer, also known as ‘Zhmera’ or the ‘Realm Watcher’, is generally a neutral party to all this, while the Flayed Lord enjoys his scheming and the Tome Warden often seeks to thwart him.”

“Owl told me that all who adhere to the Observer are cursed by the Flayed Lord.”

“If we were to follow the hierarchy of this world, then the Observer is the King, while the Tome Warden and Flayed Lord are both squabbling aristocracy. A King cares not about petty nobles, while they often grovel at his feet and scheme behind his back.”

**“I have not heard much of these Old Gods,”** Armen commented.

“Truly? I assumed spirits knew more than most.”

**“Perhaps I have not been paying attention.”**

“Well, you know how the Church worships healing powers and light?”

My familiar inclined his head slightly.

“That too is the demesne of an Old God, one which is often called ‘Creation’s Spark’.”

**“You are quite well-versed in this secret pantheon,” Armen observed. “In my time, we did not have much of an object for our worship, though there were certainly sects surrounding people who were perceived as saints, as well as those who prayed to the formless entity that granted us these powers.”**

“Isn’t it normal to have a Church centred around a deity?” I wondered.

**“It is, though as a Bishop, most of my days were spent debating the minutiae of how to govern my assigned branch, as well as overseeing training, and healing the sick-and-injured. It is not much different from any other Guild, I believe. The Church has a Royal Charter just like the Mercenary and Adventurers’ Guilds.”**

“It was a pain and a half to get the Charter for my Guild,” Mortl interjected.

“Your guild?” I wondered.

Our column of knights came to a brief halt, while the sounds of fighting was audible both from the fore and rear, though the Necromancer’s minions were brutally-efficient against the monsters. Karasumany, who was hovering in the sky above, lent me its vision and I could finally appreciate just how effective the undead knights were in dealing with the Flayed Ones, as piles almost two metres high lay up against the buildings and houses on the sides of the armoured column. However, there were easily two-hundred of the creatures slamming up against the front of Mortl’s army, while three-dozen attacked from the rear, and a few scattered ones leapt from rooftops to try and get towards the middle of where we stood.

With a mental nudge, I sent my Observer familiar ahead to where a large towering edifice stood behind massive walls. It was the Helmstatter Castle.

“About a century ago, I decided to make a Guild for my fellow Necromancers and Summoners, though it is invite-only,” Mortl explained, while I took in the scenes of death that lay ahead of us through the borrowed sight of my familiar.

“What about Exorcists? Can they join?” I asked, while steering Karasu around to find my friends in the thronging mass of people.

Guards, volunteers, and Otherworlders had formed a protective area near the large gate to the Castle grounds, behind which the sounds of fighting were still audible. It looked like Renji’s group had only barely managed to defeat the people in their midst who had turned, when the Flayed Lady’s trap was sprung, and now they were licking their wounds, even though the object of their scorn was so close.

“Not usually, no, but I can make an exception for you perhaps.”

“I’d like to collect more knowledge about spirits and apparitions,” I told him.

“Then you would likely be a great fit.”

“I see my friends!” I announced, as I spotted Renji and Harleigh arguing animatedly, while Rana sat nearby and watched. They were all seemingly unscathed, which made a lot of tension leave my body, though there was still the pain of Lukas’ death gripping my lungs and making my breathing painful.

“They are close?”

“Up by the Castle Gate.”

Mortl nodded. “Let us not waste more time then,” he said, lifting his lantern for the first time since I’d seen him.

A pulse of energy that was more felt than seen brushed across the area and all the knights seemed to change in behaviour, becoming faster and more aggressive in their mannerisms, as they spread out their formation to tear through the horde that barred our passage.

While the monsters were slain and repulsed, we fell into a spirited gait to reach the outskirts of the Castle. I continued observing with one eye and ear borrowing Karasumany’s vision and hearing, manoeuvring the crow past the large stone gate and thick wall, so that I could eavesdrop on the battle taking place with the Flayed Noble inside the courtyard.

Like before, the figure in the bulky armour, who wielded a greatsword, was still fighting with the Noble, but her Otherworlder minions were dead behind her, alongside more than half of the Prince’s retinue who defended his Castle.

“What do you see?” Mortl asked. “I’ve tried sending my rodent scouts in there, but they keep getting slaughtered.”

It seemed very on-brand for a Necromancer to use rodents as his Watcher familiars, but it was clear that having one with the ability to fly or defy the laws of gravity was the winning strategy here.

“The Flayed Noble is still alive, but so is the Prince’s defenders.”

“Do you see a big guy with a large sword?”

“I do.”

“Is he alive?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good.”

“He seems very strong. Who is he?”

“That’d be the Prince, actually.”

I blinked in surprise. “The Prince is fighting against his attacker!? Isn’t that reckless?”

“Do you see how he’s fighting?”

“It looks like he hasn’t been hit a single time.”

“Exactly. Of all the Otherworlders I know, none could match the Gyldenrose family in pure strength and talent. They are Royalty not purely by bloodline, but also by merit and uncontested power.”

“It doesn’t look like he’s winning.”

“He may be stalling for time, hoping for more reinforcements. A wrong move against a Flayed Noble is likely to get him killed after all.”

I spun my crow around so that I could observe our armoured column from afar and the relative safety by the closed-off Castle Gate. “We’re not far away now.”

“Excellent. I’ve always wanted to have a Prince owe me a favour.”