

51 – Parasite Insidious II

While most of Karasumany’s copies were spreading out across Skovslot, I prepared to enter the decayed building with Elye. I had no clue if the entity we were dealing with, if in fact it was such a thing, left behind any intangible clues only visible to my eyes, but my dealings with the Weeping Widow had taught me not to be too hasty nor leave stones unturned, as not having learnt the name of the minstrel had seriously set me back and caused undue death and devastation. Mistakes as an Exorcist were costly, and I didn’t want to impact the Enclave in a similar way if I could help it, even if the Elfin were odd creatures.

“You can let go of me now,” I said to Elye, who had been holding on to me since I had collapsed.

She let go of me and looked at the opening leading into the diseased building. Suddenly I wondered if she had been holding onto me for her own sake.

“You don’t have to go with me. I’ll just be looking for clues.”

“I will go!”

I nodded.

Make sure you protect us both, in case I missed something lurking in there.

“Understood.”

“I will protect the child!”

You sure do like Elye, don’t you Sera? I remarked.

She grumbled like a menacing fire.

If you can quell your flames, perhaps I wouldn’t mind you revealing yourself to her. It must be hard to have this unrequited affection for someone who doesn’t even realise you exist.

The Ifrit floated around Elye and over in front of me. **“Do not lie to me, Exorcist.”**

I’m not. But I’ll only give you my energy to manifest if you don’t hurt her or burn down your surroundings.

“I will contain my fire.” The gravity in her voice made it sound like I had offered her a chance to return to life.

“Elye,” I started, turning to the Elfin, who was staring at the opening into the tower with some consternation.

She looked at me with a sideways glance.

“One of my familiars would like to meet you. In the flesh. Or well, what amounts to it for a spirit.”

“*Really!?*”

“Let me know if she scalds you with her heat though. She is after all an entity born of fire.”

Without allowing for a dramatic pause or anything, Seramosa manifested herself before the Elfin. The only part of her body that was on fire was her face and hair, but the rest was as the first day I had seen her: a charcoal-black body not too unlike that of a burnt corpse.

Elye took a step back in surprise, her eyes going wide at the Ifrit that had just appeared out of thin air from her perspective.

“***Hello Elfin child,***” said Seramosa. “***I am Seramosa.***”

“*My name is Elye,*” she replied.

I blinked in surprise. *Okay, I wasn't prepared for her to be able to speak to others.*

“**Unlike myself and the crow-spawn, Seramosa is untethered by the terms of her Pact, thus she can freely interact with the real world.**”

I was glad that she was not hostile towards me, since that kind of freedom was terrifying for such a powerful apparition to wield.

Seramosa reached out to touch Elye on the cheek, but the Elfin took a step back with a wince before she could get too close.

“You're too hot, Sera. You'll burn her if you touch her.”

“***I can make it no less than this!***” she complained.

Elye suddenly took my right hand into hers. “*Yuuta has the same skin as you on this hand, Seramosa.*”

“***He stole my powers,***” she said spitefully.

“I did no such thing!” I argued.

Alright, you've said hello. Time to go incorporeal again before you burn through all my energy.

“***No!***” she screamed and Elye took another step back in surprise.

“Don't be obstinate now.”

“***I can help with the Rotmaker!***”

“If I run out of energy, I'll be completely exposed. Just wait for me to call you.”

The Ifrit turned to look at me, a dangerous glare in her eyes.

“***Make me.***”

Fuck.

“**It would perhaps be best to acquiesce to her demands,**” Armen said diplomatically. In his words was the unspoken warning that to make an enemy of a Condemned Ifrit was a quick way to learn what burning to death felt like.

I let out a deep sigh.

“Fine, lead the way and we’ll be right behind you. You can be our vanguard.”

“I will burn all who threatens Elfin!”

“Remember: don’t burn down the city.”

“I have honed my flames. They will not burn those who do not deserve it.”

With a tiny spark, the Ifrit’s body suddenly became coated in a layer of fire that took on the form of a summer-dress with mid-thigh-length skirt. The stubby horns on her head also seemed to lengthen as fire gave it shape, and her hair swished around in an unseen wind, yet somehow reminded me of the wagging tail on an excited dog.

Seramosa moved through the opening, which was really just a large aperture in the wooden structure that led into a raised walkway which opened up further to reveal the bottom floor. Elye and I followed a few steps behind.

“*She does not seem to respect you much,*” Elye whispered to me just as we crossed the threshold.

I just shook my head, not knowing what to say.

Though I had been in Skovslot for some hours now, it was my first time setting foot inside one of their strange ‘living’ buildings. The floor was formed of interwoven roots and felt no different than any wooden floor, though the roots seemed to shift ever-so-slightly, as though the whole place was breathing. Most unsettlingly, the Foresight granted to me by the Prideling in my glasses showed the future movements of anything I laid eyes on, and the walls, ceiling, and floor were all a blur of very faint movement, something which had not been perceptible from the outside. It was as though we were within the bowels of a benevolent creature that allowed for its internal architecture to house us.

“Are all the buildings like this one?” I asked, putting a hand on one of the walls. It was trembling slightly.

“This one is in pain.”

“But do they all move like this one?”

She nodded. *“Do your houses not grow and shift and move?”*

“Absolutely not.”

“That is weird.”

I don’t even know what to say to a comment like that.

“We are all the product of the environment into which we are born and raised. To an Elfin, our ‘dead’ houses are strange.”

I guess...

As I watched the Ifrit move around in front of us with rock-hard confidence and a I-will-burn-down-any-foe-I-see swagger, I felt a pang of sadness. I really missed Rana. And while Elye was similar to Lukas, it was not the same. It wasn't like my *real* team.

I truly hoped that I could reunite with them again as soon as I was done mucking around in the Enclave. Although, when they saw me and noticed the differences, would they still want to be around me? After all, I had become closer to the image of Exorcists; the sort of villain that held monsters on a short leash and possessed the literal body of a demon, shaped by unholy rituals.

Every passing minute siphoned more of my energy to the Ifrit, but not so hungry a rate as when she went all out. Still, my most optimistic estimate was that I had perhaps forty minutes before I'd run out of steam, and *that* was if she didn't go haywire and start setting everything ablaze.

The first floor seemed a mix of individual rooms like in a hotel, but there were no doors, and all the furniture sort of just grew from the floor, walls, and ceiling. Chairs were little more than hanging vines, and tables were either stumpy growths or large flat-topped mushrooms of dense-yet-spongy material. Shelves were much the same, either protruding growths or mushrooms shaped to specific length and depth. As for light, there were luminescent flowers that looked like tulips, which grew from the floor up through the cracks between the roots, as well as glowing toadstools that sprouted from the walls and ceiling.

“Have you guys not invented doors?” I asked. “There's no privacy for people living here.”

Elye gave me a strange look.

I shook my head. “Let's go to the next floor, I don't see anything here.”

As I'd noticed from when I'd moved through the space while connected to Karasu's senses, the way up to the next floor was like a tunnel, rather than a stairwell like I'd expected. The emphasis of the root- and tree-based buildings seemed to be on organic shapes, or perhaps it was not so much intentional as it was an unavoidable limitation.

On the second floor was much of the same as the first, though here the signs of decay and disease the tower was stricken with was more evident, as the ceiling was drooping in places, as though having lost rigidity. Some foul-smelling water was dripping down in places, and it would only be a matter of hours before this floor looked like the ones above. But still there were no signs of the perpetrator, at least none that registered as those of an apparition.

“This is a sad thing to see. This home has stood here for many generations to growth to this size.”

“We’ll continue up,” I said. Seramosa had already gone that way, and we were mostly just trying to catch up to her at this point.

After moving into the tunnel that led to the third floor, the decay that I’d seen through Karasu’s eyes became strikingly evident. The root-formed floor and walls were squishy, having lost much of their density, and the ceiling looked deflated, and in many places drooped so low that it nearly touched the floor. It was a mess to move through, which I had underestimated when traversing the place in Karasumany’s small crow body.

Just as we’d made it halfway across the floor to the next tunnel, Seramosa returned from that way, grumbling about the place being deserted. She was hungry for a fight, which worried me.

“There is nothing but the leavings of the Rotmaker!”

“Did you see any signs of what sort of creature it might be?” I asked.

Her fire flared briefly, then she said, *“Come.”*

I looked back at Elye who, despite the melancholy of seeing the diseased and dying tower, had a twinkle in her eye, just like I’d often seen from Lukas. She was having fun exploring and investigating it seemed.

The mulch and soft root-floor was uncomfortable and precarious to walk across as I followed the impatient Ifrit. Once I got to the tunnel, there was a giant tear in the floor which just let to a straight drop down onto the street outside. I swallowed my initial fear and manoeuvred around the hole, feeling the breeze that blew up through the gash. Unlike normal buildings, the floors of the Elfin root-grown towers were much taller and thus the fourth floor of this tower was equivalent to the sixth floor of an apartment building in Japan.

I let out a gasp of relief as I got to the fourth-floor landing, then immediately lost my breath as I saw what resided within: an enormous cocoon. It was torn open as though something had hatched from it, and decay filled the air thanks to the ‘juices’ left inside the pod. The ceiling above was full of holes where the roots had simple just wilted and decayed into brown-and-black matter. Connected to the cocoon were hundreds of cable-like roots. These were not the roots that the buildings were grown from, but rather ones that seemed to emerge from the cocoon itself, like feeding tubes for whatever had resided within.

I gritted my teeth. Whatever had been within the cocoon had to be massive. Easily the size of a polar bear, perhaps even bigger than the Welin I’d caught a brief glimpse of before arriving to the Enclave.

What’s more, there were huge ephemeral-red claw-marks all over the cocoon and ceiling. The ceiling had not caved in on its own, no, the creature torn through it on its way out. And if the traces left behind were an indicator, it was clearly not just any ordinary creature. I could sense a vile malevolence from the stains of its claws, as though they left behind stains of an insidious evil.

“We need to warn your father,” I told Elye.

Karasumany, do you have eyes on Imir? I asked, phrasing it not as a command, but rather as a request, such that I didn’t run the risk of triggering another painful brain spike from violating the terms of our Pact.

A distant **CAW!** sounded from above, where I guessed the main body was hovering over my position, accompanied by identical copies that swirled around it, as though it was the eye of a storm of black feathers and sharp beaks.

I sent my essence out to the Observer and saw through the eyes of one of its clones, though I had no idea which part of the city it was in. It showed Imir standing with two men, weapons drawn. Behind them cowered children, one of which I recognised as the youths that had been following us earlier.

The thing in front of them terrified me.

It was absolutely massive. Its maw alone could swallow a person whole, and its entire body was formed of diseased-looking and off-coloured roots, which were shaped into two enormous claws on bulky arms. It had at least six eyes, three on either side of its dinosaur-like reptilian head, and its lower body was like that of a serpent.

“Your father is in trouble,” I said, hurrying from the floor and to the tunnel. I slipped on some gloopy mulch and nearly fell into the hole I’d taken such care to avoid just moments prior, but Elye managed to catch me just in the last minute, so that just one of my legs poked through.

“Holy shit... thank you, Elye.”

She helped me up and then we sprinted through the third floor, down the tunnel, then the next floor, and down again, before making it to the street outside.

Karasumany, can you show me the way?

Another loud **CAW!** answered from above, and I saw the main body move, with its flock trailing behind it. It was heading northeast.

Get ready, Sera, you might be our best hope of taking this monster down.