

32 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire II

“Are you an Exorcist?” asked the woman.

I nodded, to which they both shared an uneasy glance, their mutual hostilities seeming to fade away somewhat.

“And that kid running around, he yours?”

“That’s my companion. He’s a Rogue.”

“Tell him we’ll know if he steals anything,” the man quickly interjected.

I frowned, but then just nodded, figuring it wasn’t worth arguing about.

“The Chief will be your best source of information,” the woman continued.

“Can you take me to him?” I asked.

The two shared a glance again, then the woman sighed and said, “Follow me.”

The woman took me to a house that stood pretty much at the centre of Hearthshire. The village was built on a slight hill, meaning that the two-storey house peeked a bit higher than the nearby houses and from its doorway you could clearly see the gentle slope that led down to the furthest house half a kilometre away. If not for the blanket of snow, the fields surrounding the village would no doubt have been thriving with crops, as well as the many small gardens and planters that lay between the houses. It seemed to me that the entire spirit of the village was its farming culture, so it was impacted heavily by the snow, whereas a city like Lundia probably wouldn’t have been impaired much, aside from maybe having slippery roads.

My temporary guide left me to return to the man she’d been arguing with, while I knocked on the door to the Chief’s house. After about two minutes, someone came to the door. It was a young girl, who looked up at me in terror, before yelling, “Dad!”

An older man with a spotty dark-grey beard and wearing rough-spun clothes came to the door moments later, giving me an appraising look. Before he could ask, I held out the quest flier.

“You’re very young,” he remarked sceptically.

I didn’t want to mention that I’d only been an Exorcist for about a month, so instead I just said, “I was hoping to get some more information about the quest.”

The Chief frowned, but then asked, “What do you wish to know?”

At no point did he move from the door nor invite me inside. I wondered if this is how all Adventurers were treated here or if it was specifically because I was an Exorcist.

“Can you tell me when the snow appeared?”

“It was five weeks ago.”

“Was there any event or accident or perhaps a death that preceded it?”

“No,” he answered quickly, but I could tell by the wavering edge of his vaguely-red aura that he was lying.

“The quest mentioned that two people went missing from the village,” I pressed.

He grimaced, but then admitted, “My daughter, Helen, and a minstrel who was staying here. They disappeared a few nights before the snow first appeared.”

I nodded.

I wonder why he didn't just say that right away?

“Do you have any idea where they could've gone?”

“No.”

Something else that'd been bothering me about the quest description then came to my mind. “What made you believe that this is a Haunting?”

I'd read enough about some of the monsters that appeared in Arley to know that there were a couple that could perhaps also have been responsible for the elemental shift in the weather, such as the invasive ‘Frost Wyrn’ that normally dwelled in the far north, but were known to seek out warmer climates when its natural habitat became inhospitable. Granted, those tended to favour caves and mountains for their nests.

The Chief's eyes shifted and by the way his aura began fluttering, I wondered if he was embarrassed, but then he said, “Some of the villagers saw *things* at night after the snow started appearing, and they've heard a crying voice around midnight. My wife was the one who filed the request for the Adventurers' Guild, but, if you ask me, people are just scared and blaming it on ghosts.”

He sounded like he didn't believe in the supernatural, which I thought was odd for a world that had monsters in it, but maybe they were far enough removed from all that, making it easy to write it off as tall tales of fantasy.

“Where is your wife now?”

“She is staying in Brig for a few more days.”

Crap...

“I see,” I replied.

“Is there anything else? I’d like to go back inside before my fingers freeze off.”

“I may have more questions later,” I said.

He frowned, but then said, “I’ll be here.” After that he shut the door.

Well, that probably couldn’t have gone worse.

“**I remember similar warm receptions back in my adventuring days,**” Armen remarked.

Really? Even as a Priest?

“**To many villagers outside the big cities, outsiders are potential threats and people like us are incarnations of their very worst fears. To them, it is unnatural that we possess the powers that we do, even though they often rely on those very powers.**”

Part of me already knew this, but it was uncomfortable to hear that the same illogical treatment of Adventurers had existed back when Armen was alive.

I wonder why only us Otherworlders possess the powers that we do?

“**There have always been parallels in Mondus, but our powers are stronger. The theory that I heard the most was that our abilities were a gift to make us fit into this world. It seems to have backfired.**”

So, we’re given powers as a compensation for being stolen away to this world... that seems pretty thoughtless to me.

“**It is but one of the many theories I know.**”

And what do you believe?

“**I believe that it does not matter. What use is there in knowing why we were put in this place?**”

Wouldn’t it give you peace of mind to know?

“**Ryūta, I have become a wraith. Peace of mind means little to me.**”

Sorry... Still, I’d personally like to know.

“**And what would you do with the answer?**”

I’d curse whatever Deity or Entity responsible to hell and back.

I reunited with Lukas a few houses over from the Chief’s place. His face was glowing red from exhaustion, but he looked like a golden retriever that’d been allowed to run wild for hours.

“**He does indeed have very a dog-like quality,**” Armen commented, agreeing with my thoughts. I wondered why he was so talkative today, but I was glad for the company at least.

“What have you found?” I asked.

From the peaks and valleys of his light-green aura, which bounced up-and-down, I could tell he was very excited to report his findings.

“There were four places that the Stone started glowing a lot! And one of the women said that she’d heard loud wailing on the wind when the moon was highest in the night sky. Oh, and an old man yelled at me when I was on his roof, but then he told me that he’d seen a woman dressed in a see-through veil and white dress floating around at night, looking for something.”

An actual description! I thought, excitedly. Although, when I ran through my memory of the entries in the Encyclopaedia, there were easily a dozen that could be described by such terms, but I wondered how many of them could also affect the weather and create snow.

“Good work,” I told him. “Take me to these four places, I’d like to see them.”

“Okay!”

The first place Lukas took me was a solitary tree that was hidden away by three houses that formed a horseshoe-shape to hide a garden. Next to the tree was a simple wooden bench with rusted screws. The branches of the tree were stripped of leaves, the cold having triggered its natural response to shed them, despite the fact that we were in the Seed season and Fall was a while away.

When Lukas returned the Energy Stone to me, I saw that it was pulsing steadily when held above the bench.

“Interesting,” I said, a theory already forming in my mind.

Sumi, come to me.

The inky eye appeared in front of me and I sent my essence into it to use its Sight, while manoeuvring it around the area, trying to spot anything that mortal eyes could not see. However, even to the Watcher’s special gaze, it was simply a bench next to a tree.

I pushed my Spirit Glasses further up the ridge of my nose as I looked around, but there were no footprints or other sorts of signs for me to observe.

“Take me to the next place.”

The next spot was a small inn, which was currently crowded with thirty-plus people huddled around a central fireplace that was dancing with flames. I realised something when I saw them all in their shivering states: they were affected by the cold far more than Lukas and I.

“I think maybe the Haunter has the ability to make people feel colder than they are,” I said to Lukas, “or maybe it is an effect that is slow to build.”

“Like a curse?” he asked.

I shrugged, but couldn’t help but feel like *that* was pretty spot-on.

With the Stone in my hand, I moved around the interior, eliciting several suspicious glances from the crowd, though no one stood up to challenge me. It was glowing and pulsing as I moved around, and seemed the brightest in the middle of the few tables and chairs.

As I pocketed the tool, I moved over to the proprietor of the inn, who was nursing a mug of mulled wine and looking bored.

“You recently had a minstrel visiting Hearthshire, didn’t you?”

He looked me up-and-down, glanced to Lukas, then returned to me, and asked, “You here to fix the weather?”

I nodded.

“Then why you wanna know about a minstrel?”

“It might be related.”

“How?” His meaty jowl sloshed around as he spoke and it was like his skin was struggling to hang-on to his body.

“Please just answer the question,” I said.

He frowned at my tone, but I didn’t have time to explain to him my theory, besides, I wanted to see the last two places Lukas had found before dusk settled. “There was a minstrel who arrived here six or seven weeks back. He stayed in my inn and played here every night on his lute. He was pretty popular. Seemed a nice sort.”

“Did you ever see him with the Chief’s daughter, Helen?”

His eyes narrowed to slits, then he said, “Get out.”

I was about to ask what he was keeping from me, but then Lukas put a hand on my back and whispers, “Let’s just go.”

As I followed him out, I realised that everyone in the inn had been glaring daggers at me.

“They’re hiding something,” I said to Lukas as we were walking to the next place. The snow was as crunchy as ever, and parts of the melted ice had seeped into my boots and were soaking through my only pair of socks.

“They don’t like outsiders,” he replied.

“It’s more than just *that*.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Something happened between this minstrel and the Chief’s daughter, Helen, and I think it’s an important piece in solving this case, but some reason they don’t want to talk about it.”

Lukas looked at me with stars in his eyes. “I wish I could think the way you do!”

I suppose he hasn’t benefitted from watching crime shows on TV, I thought to myself. Granted, I hadn’t been an aficionado myself, but it was impossible not to pick up some stuff from it, although most of it didn’t help me much here. The main benefit was probably the ability to think outside the box and questioning inconsistencies and shifty witnesses. When I had been in middle school, I’d also read a bit of the ‘Meitantei Konan’ manga, but, again, much of it was useless to me here.

The hairs stood up on the back of my neck when I saw the third place and as I pulled out the Energy Stone it started pulsing like crazy, only intensifying as I got closer-and-closer. Gooseflesh rippled across my skin as I climbed up the lip and looked over the edge and down into the darkness.

As I held my Energy Stone over the darkness, its rapidly-pulsing light lit up the stone walls of the well that surged down into the ground. The bottom was so far below that even my bright tool could not illuminate it.

I swallowed hard.

Of course it’s a well...

I was pretty sure I’d seen this horror movie before...