

## 31 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire I

To say that Lady Myrabelle was not happy with the sudden layover in Brig, while I handled the Exorcism Quest, well... that'd be an understatement. However, she acquiesced when Rana said she'd stay by her side in Brig to make sure no harm came to her. I wasn't super happy about going to Hearthshire with just Lukas, but I really wanted to take on the Exorcism, especially when it sounded like low risk and high reward. Of course, in the back of my mind was Rana's comment about misleading quest information, which repeated over-and-over as Lukas and I traversed the hills from the Gate Town to the village.

The wind was a soft breeze that came like waves on the shore, lapping over us and cooling down my sweat-covered face. Lukas, unsurprisingly, looked spry and unencumbered by the repeated climbing of the round hills, and with his semi-long blonde hair waving behind him in rhythm with the wild grass and flowers, I got the premonition that he'd end up looking quite similar to Harleigh. Of course, I had no idea how much his attributes would determine his appearance, but if his early-puberty boyish charm was any indication, then it seemed a sure thing.

*And he's a Rogue too... he won't ever be in need of a Party...*

**“Are you envious of your companion?”** Armen asked.

*Maybe. I don't know.*

**“Envy is a sinful emotion,”** he preached.

*Spare me, please.*

**“I say it only for your own sake. I once let myself be ruled by it, and look at me now, a soul bound to an Exorcist.”**

I was taken off-guard by his comment. *Do you despise me, Armen?*

**“There are worse masters than you.”**

*That doesn't sound like a no.*

**“In time I may learn to enjoy myself, but it is painful to be reminded of my past mortality whilst in your company. To love. To embrace another. To have agency. To sleep... these are all things I can no longer do.”**

I stopped at the crest of a hill while Lukas skidded down the slope and began making his way up the next.

“If it is in my powers, I will try to grant you a physical body,” I said out loud. With Lukas far enough away, I didn’t think it necessary to contain my replies within my mind.

**“Truly? You would do such a thing for me?”**

“Why not? You have saved my life so many times already.”

**“The people of this world, as well as your fellows, would consider such a thing heretical no doubt.”**

“I don’t know if it would be considered forbidden or not, but it was an idea that struck me when Rana talked about the Puppet Master. It seems there is a way to bind a familiar to a vessel.”

I figured it was worth a try, at least for a familiar like Armen who was only focused on defence. I wanted to keep him around, since it sounded rare to have someone like him, considering Owl’s interest in him. It also could not be understated how powerful his healing ability was, let alone how potent it might become as I got stronger with my Familiar Pact and Summon abilities. I did feel bad for having a conscious entity serve me, so if he could experience a small degree of freedom from being given a physical body, then I wanted to grant him one.

**“Are you planning on giving me a human corpse puppet?”**

I grimaced at the thought. “Not quite, but maybe it’s possible to stuff you into a suit of armour. Like a robot.”

**“I do not know what a robot is, but that sounds far better than my current state.”**

Lukas was waving at me impatiently from the next hill and I started making my way down the slope towards him.

“I’ll try and research it. The Encyclopaedia does mention some apparitions that are permanently bound to physical objects as a result of a specific type of summoning ritual, but it might also be possible by using the ‘Contain Spirit’ ability that Master Owl never bothered to teach me, but which he said was used on the Demon Statue in the Galleon.”

When I climbed up the hill and came next to Lukas, I saw what it was he had spotted. In the distance, where the hills evened out and buildings were just poking above the nearby landscape, a darkness clung to the land and the grass was covered in a layer of frost and snow. In the sky above, all was as normal, that is to say: a cloudless azure expanse.

I sighed when I realised that it was still a few kilometres of hiking to get there.

*At this rate, my F-tier Vitality seems a bigger threat than my Luck...*

**“I believe it would be in your best interest to procure a personal mount.”**

*I can’t imagine that’d be a cheap thing to get, besides, I have no idea how to ride a horse.*

**“You are still young. The things you do not know, you can yet learn.”**

*You sound like one of my old teachers...*

My robe-coat was positively soaked-through with my sweat by the time we made it to the outskirts of the snow-covered Hearthshire. Lukas was giving me a worrying look, and he was of course no worse for wear, barely a speck of perspiration on his skin.

“Are you okay, Ryūta?”

“I just need to catch my breath,” I replied.

“Maybe you need to go on walks more often,” he commented.

“Easy to say when your physical Attributes are way higher than mine.”

“Rana says Attributes are wasted if you don’t train them.”

“I know,” I replied grumpily.

I noticed the change in the rhythm of his aura when he noticed my tone. “What should we do first?” he asked, wisely changing the subject.

I took in a deep breath and slowly exhaled, while beads of sweat trickled down my forehead and neck uncomfortably. Then I knelt before the threshold into Hearthshire. Impossibly, the green grass underfoot gave way to a blanket of snow and frost-stiff earth. There was no gradient or transition, just a straight cut where suddenly the grass was covered in a thick fluffy layer of snow.

At first I couldn’t tell if it was an illusion or not, so I took a pinch of the Sinner’s Ash that I’d had refilled in Ochre, before tossing it onto the snow. When nothing happened, I had two thoughts: one, that the Ash might be counterfeit; and two, that the snow was real. The latter seemed the most obvious answer, but I figured it was foolish to dismiss the former, after all, I didn’t have much of a way to tell if the Sinner’s Ash was actually as advertised or just a convincing replication.

**“It is not counterfeit,”** Armen enlightened me.

*How can you tell?*

**“I can sense the malevolency within the Ash itself. In the same way I can sense the purity of the Sacred Ash that you carry.”**

*That’s useful to know,* I replied gratefully.

“We’re not dealing with an illusion,” I told Lukas, who was busy rolling a snowball with his bare hands.

“It’s really cold,” he replied, confused, but also visibly excited by the dense ball he had formed.

“Well, yeah, it’s snow after all. Have you never seen snow before?”

“No.”

“Oh...”

I cleared my throat awkwardly.

“Well, don’t get too carried away, this is potentially a dangerous quest. Remember that.”

Lukas looked at the snowball in his hand and then let it plop to the ground where it broke apart. I felt a bit bad for not indulging him, but, at the same time, if an apparition was behind this, I figured it was paramount to stay alert.

“What do we do now?”

“I think we start off by going into the village to look for clues. Right now I have no idea what sort of Haunter we might be dealing with.”

Lukas was the first to cross the invisible barrier between the grass and snow, and when his boots touched down on the crunchy ground, his face lit up with excitement.

I sighed, then said, “You can play around a little bit, but stay near me and keep your eyes open for trouble.”

“Okay!” he said and immediately ran off, jumping around and kicking the snow enthusiastically.

I summoned Sumi and told it: *Go to the centre of the village.*

As the inky Watcher floated off ahead of us, I watched Lukas frolic excitedly. Armen hovered up next to me and I said, “I feel shameful for being envious of him. He’s never seen snow before and I doubt he’s had much time to play around as a child.”

**“It is natural to desire the things we do not possess,”** Armen weighed in. **“The children of Mondus do not all receive a happy childhood. It was the same in my world. I do not have fond memories of being a child on the streets of Modai.”**

“My childhood was happy and carefree,” I told him. “Probably better than what most kids experience, I imagine. At least compared to this world.”

**“What would it take to give all children a happy upbringing?”** he wondered out loud.

“You’re asking the wrong person for answers, but I’d imagine that the whole class system of this world, as well as the constant threat of monsters and ghosts, probably aren’t helping the issue much.”

**“There were no social castes in your world?”**

“Not in the same way as here, with Lords and Ladies, although I suppose our societies were hierarchical in the sense that rich people had more freedom of choice and societal mobility.”

**“It must be human nature to create distinctions between peoples and giving some more power than others,”** Armen philosophised.

I just shrugged in response, while continuing to trudge through the crunchy snow, one arduous and tired step at a time. It was almost half-a-metre deep in place and the ground below was uneven and treacherous, making me stumble more than once as I worked my way to the centre where Sumi hovered dutifully.

I reached out through the bond with my Watcher familiar and narrowed my right eye as the vision of my left one was granted its Sight. From its high vantage point above the two-storey buildings of the village, I saw that not many of the inhabitants were outside, with those few present mostly working on moving snow away from their doors and roofs, using brooms and improvised shovels. Some people seemed to be in the middle of a heated debate over something, and a few others were just staring despondently at the blankets of snow that covered everything. From how they were acting, I got the sense that this problem had lasted more than a week, but probably less than a month.

I broke off the connection to Sumi as Lukas and I neared the first of the houses, then I pushed my Spirit Glasses high up on my nose and pulled out my Energy Stone. I saw no visible signs of a Haunting, such as the handprints of the Remorseful Betrayer or the footprints of the Skinstealer, but the Stone in my hand was pulsing weakly, indicating that there was *something* around, but it was yet too faint a response to infer any direction of the source.

When Lukas came up to me and was about to ask what we should do next, I pre-empted him by pushing the Energy Stone into his hands.

“You remember how this tool works, right?” I asked him.

He nodded eagerly.

“I need you to go around the village and keep a track of any place where you get a stronger reaction than what it’s currently doing.”

“Okay!” he said, and then he was off.

**“A smart way to utilise your enthusiastic companion and his strengths.”**

“He has energy to spare, while I’m already drained, so it was a no-brainer,” I remarked.

As the boy ran around with the pulsing Stone in his hand, he drew some curious gazes from the few people who dared stay outside. It hadn’t hit me until now, but the air was many degrees colder here than it should’ve been; cold enough for my breath to turn to mist as it left my lips.

*I suppose that makes sense, given the snow and frost,* I thought to myself. I quickly paged through the Encyclopaedia after stopping to lean against the wall of a house where the windows were all shuttered. I vaguely recalled a few entries that mentioned weather- and temperature-manipulation entities, particularly one which shared an uncanny resemblance to the Japanese folklore creature, the

Yuki Onna. However, when I found the entry of the ‘Winter Witch’, as it was called, I knew I could already exclude it, since it was described as an entity that viciously turned people into frozen statues in revenge for disturbing its habitat.

From the quest info, I got the sense that this was a problem that had occurred spontaneously, no doubt as a result of foul play, given that two people were missing. Right now, the thing I lacked most was information though, since the flier had been woefully sparse, so I pushed off the wall I was leant against, then sought out the two people I’d seen arguing through Sumi’s eye.

The two, a man and a woman, were still going at it, with their debate seeming to be over firewood to heat their homes, with the man accusing the woman of having taken too much from the communal pile, leaving him with less.

“Excuse me,” I said, interrupting the two.

Both turned on me with such swiftness that I couldn’t help but take a step back.

“What do you want?” asked the man angrily. Then he took in my appearance and his expression softened slightly.

I pulled the quest flier out of my belt pouch and held it in front of them.

“Would you mind telling me a bit about how everything suddenly got covered in snow?”