

13 - Ghost in the Castle IV

I reread the entry in the Encyclopaedia for the sixth time. There was no doubt about it, *this* had to be the Entity we were dealing with.

“Remorseful Betrayer,” I said, as I showed the page to Rana and Lukas. “The description lines up perfectly with what we’ve discovered: It’s highly territorial and protective of mementos from its past life; it’s mostly harmless towards those it knew in the past, which explains why Lukas could explore around in here without being attacked.”

The boy looked surprised that I’d figured that out about him, but it had been obvious from the way he moved around and the fact that the stern woman had made him our guide, meaning she’d clearly known he often ventured into the East Wing.

“Even this Potts guy made it to *this* room until he was attacked, and, I bet he wasn’t attacked until he found *this* letter and tried to leave with it.” I held up the letter we’d found in the drawer. Thanks to the protective Ash that lined all entryways to the old Margrave’s room, we were safe from such attacks.

Rana looked at the letter in my hand. “So, this man, Steffen, was a servant here, who, by his own admission in the letter, deliberately poisoned the old Margrave to make him sick. And because of his guilt, he is haunting this place?”

“That’s part of it,” I replied. Lukas had confirmed that Steffen was one of the servants who’d gone missing after the old Margrave died and the new one moved in. “His spirit would not be haunting this Castle if not for the fact that he was murdered, no doubt to silence him, and his body hidden away without a proper funeral.”

“So we just have to do the same thing you did to the Skinstealer in Hamsel’s Rest?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, it’s not as simple. There are some quite specific things we need to do in order to put this spirit to rest.”

Both Rana and Lukas seemed to wait with bated breath. Though I was just regurgitating the knowledge in the Encyclopaedia, it did feel nice to be treated like an expert.

“Firstly, we must collect all the objects associated with the spirit. Given that we have been thorough in our investigation of the East Wing and its rooms, and the fact that the ghost has been acting aggressively whenever we found something, I feel confident in saying that those items are: the Scarlet Vow given to Cecilia; the Painting; and the Confession Letter.

“Secondly, we need to burn all these objects alongside his corpse. And, lastly, we’ll need someone of importance from his life to witness his funeral pyre...”

“That’s...”

“A lot, yeah, I know.”

“How do we pull that off? He’ll attack if we try to leave this room with those mementos, and he’ll attack if we get near his body or try to take the Scarlet Vow.”

I rubbed my face tiredly. “I need to think about what the best way to pull this off is, but I think I know what we need to do to start with,” I said and looked at Lukas.

He blinked, uncomprehending.

“You need to find Cecilia and bring her to this room,” I told him.

“Okay!” he said and prepared to leave the room.

“Be careful not to disturb the ash on the floor,” I told him.

“You’re not seriously sending a kid out there,” Rana scolded me.

“He’ll be left unscathed,” I assured her, though it was gamble, but I didn’t want to tell her that.

After Lukas left the room I used Sumi to watch him descend the staircase and leave out the front of the East Wing. As predicted, he was left unscathed. Moments after seeing him leave, the same exhaustion that I’d experienced from the repeated usage of Armen reared its head again and I had to dismiss the Watcher and take a break.

While considering how best to proceed, I sat down on the floor facing out one of the big windows while taking up my Meditation pose and attempting to refuel my energy for what was to come. Through the window I could see the end of the island the Castle was placed on, as well as parts of the surrounding Noble Ward and the Market Ward beyond that. A bit towards the north-east in the distance was the unmistakable towering edifice of the Adventurers’ Guild. In the far distance lay the wall that surrounded the city.

Most of Lundia was comprised of two-storey buildings and though some areas were clearly poorer than others, there was no Ward that might be described as a Slum or anything, which I took to mean that the general populace might fare relatively well all things considered.

It must be weird to live in this world and have to rely on Otherworlders to protect you... I considered. It was almost like if Japan had to leave all of its police and emergency services to literal aliens, who only took on the jobs because they had no other way to make a living. It was a mutually-beneficial system I supposed, but fundamentally flawed. I could understand why the Natives looked

at us with such clear disdain, because no one liked to be subservient to someone else. At the same time, I wondered what was stopping the Natives from treating Otherworlders with more compassion and respect. We were expected to put our lives on the line for these people, so why didn't they try to make us feel a bit more at home?

Granted, it was no binary thing, as Rana had seemed well-liked by the owner of the restaurant she took me to. But a cynical part of me assumed that was just because he had figured out it was more beneficial for his, transactionally, to do that.

I hadn't met a lot of children in this world, but Lukas at least seemed sincere and kind, showing no ill will towards us.

Maybe it's just Lundia that's like this? I wondered, but then I remembered what Rana had said about the south. She had seemed to imply that Lundia was comparatively nice, since no one openly stole from you...

I hope there are better places than this. If I have to live in this world, I want to feel like I belong.

I'd been sitting by the window for about an hour with my hands in my lap and my legs folded. The energy reserves that I'd expended by repeatedly requiring Armen to protect me was now mostly restored, so I summoned Sumi to me and put a hand over my right eye, while mentally navigating the familiar to go through the floor and explore the East Wing, room-by-room.

Armen had told me that Watchers could see other familiars, so I was sure that all-seeing ability also extended to entities that were invisible to my eyes. Perhaps, once I became more proficient with Spirit Sight, I would be able to see more than just spectral handprints and auras.

It took quite a lot of concentration to move the Eye of the Observer around using just my thoughts, as I had to somehow imagine inky and shadowy floating body as my own and give it very deliberate impulses to move in certain directions and rotating and such.

After it finished scouting the second floor, it moved down to the first and began traversing the hallway. Immediately, I spotted a floating see-through and pale-white phantom at the end of the hall and I cautiously implored Sumi to move closer.

Through my left eye and the sight I shared with the familiar, I got an up-close look at the Haunter of the East Wing. Unlike the Skinstealer, its body was vague and barely humanoid. In fact, it looked more like a Teruterubōzu than anything: large featureless head that blended seamlessly into a robe-like body. From below the robe-like body hung a dozen hands, a few of which the spirit was using to tidy up the room it was in front of: Cecilia's room.

Keep following it and observing it, I told Sumi and severed my connection to it. I'd realised belatedly that I didn't need to keep banishing the familiar when I was done using it, as it only seemed to drain my energy when it actually shared its sight with me. Hopefully it would stick to the Remorseful Betrayer so I could check in on its location, but thus far Sumi had only moved when I explicitly commanded it to, so it was a test as much as a precaution. If Watcher familiars could autonomously follow any target, then it opened up the possibility for some pretty heinous stalking and might explain why Master Owl had seemingly known so much about me when we met, as it implied he had watched me for days...

I shook the thoughts from my head.

"Are you okay?" Rana asked from where she lay on the couch. "You were holding your eye weirdly. Do you have a headache?"

"Shouldn't I be asking *that*? How's your leg?"

"I think I broke my ankle when one of those bricks slammed into me as I was trying to escape the room downstairs."

I frowned, feeling guilty. "I'll pay for the treatment when we're done here."

"Have you come up with a plan?" she asked.

I nodded. "You're probably not going to like it, but we need to bring the corpse up here. I'm thinking we can use the large fireplace to burn it alongside the mementos without setting the entire castle on fire."

Rana's face turned dark. "It'll be dangerous. It's capable of throwing those objects with devastating strength."

"I've recouped my energy, so my familiar should be able to protect us as we transport the corpse. But I think I'll have to count on you to do most of the lifting. There's no way I can drag it up the stairs by myself."

"I'll endure the pain," she promised. "When should we do it? Should we wait for Lukas to return with Cecilia?"

"I don't know how long that'll be," I told her. "I think it's best to do this now, while the ghost is downstairs."

"You know where it is?" she asked, impressed, but also a bit sceptically.

"I'm using my other familiar to keep an eye on it."

“You can do *that*?” she asked. Apparently she hadn’t caught on to this quirk of Exorcists and their familiars while we were in Hamsel’s Rest. Then again, she hadn’t been interested in observing my summoning rituals.

I nodded, full of the understanding that she would probably be far more suspicious of me and all other Exorcists now. After all, it was like we had the ability to control an invisible camera that could go wherever it pleased. I’d like to wish that I was above using Sumi to spy on people, but I couldn’t say for sure, after all, I’d contemplated using it to keep an eye on Master Owl on more than one occasion.

“I think if we use the Blessed Bell as soon as we leave this room and then run down the stairs to the room where the corpse is, we should be able to bring it back here before the Haunter goes completely crazy.”

“If and should,” she replied with a worried smile. Then she nodded and got up. Surprisingly, she put her full weight on her right leg and endured the pain. “Let’s do it then.”

I took the bell from her and we went over to the door. Ever so carefully, I pushed it open, then switched to Sumi’s vision to confirm that the Haunter was still downstairs, which it was.

“Alright, let’s go,” I said, making a tiny break in the Ash so Armen could follow me out, and then we left the room. No sooner had I crossed the threshold than I rung the Blessed Golden Bell once, sending its reverberating *ding* through the entire building.

I switched to Sumi’s view while following behind Rana, and though splitting my vision between my familiar and my actual sight was giving me a sudden migraine and making me super nauseous, I kept it up as we thundered down the stairs. From Sumi’s perspective, I could see that the Remorseful Betrayer had gone into a corner of Cecilia’s Room and had wrapped its many arms around itself, as though to escape the sound of the bell, which continued to echo in the air unnaturally.

Rana let out a grunt of pain as she hopped the last few steps to the second floor, which I thought was reckless, but she continued down the hallway as though her right foot wasn’t a total mess. Perhaps her metal boot was able to keep the broken ankle from impairing her too much, or maybe this was the sort of endurance an S-tier in Vitality possessed.

As we came to the room where we’d broken down the wall and discovered the corpse of Steffen, I saw a sudden change from Sumi’s perspective, as the Haunter unfurled itself began to grow in shape and turn a deep-red hue. I immediately cut off the connection to the Watcher.

“We have to hurry!” I told Rana, as she had already picked up the corpse and thrown it over her shoulder like it was just a sack of flour.

"Is it coming?" she asked, while already making for the door.

"Yes, we don't have a lot of—"

The ground began to quake and the whole building shook. I briefly shared Sumi's sight again and saw, to my heart-dropping dismay, that the perspective came from inside the room we were in, and that the Haunter had tripled in size and its dozen arms were each reaching for the bricks that still lay strewn about the floor.

Armen! Do everything you can to protect us!

"Of course."

"Go, go, go!" I yelled as I ran out of the room after Rana. She had made it to the stairs and seemed to be slowing down, so I ran up past her and said, "Put the corpse on my back, I'll carry him the rest of the way!"

She obliged and, though it was quite a disgusting thing, I put my arms around the legs of the corpse, while its head and torso slumped against my back, then I began ascending the stairs. Armen was doing a superb job of intercepting every devastating throw sent our way, but I could feel the jolt of exhaustion with every brick he swatted from the air or caught in his gauntleted ghostly hands.

Rana had pulled up behind me, walking carefully backwards up the steps, preparing to defend against any object that might be thrown at us.

The going was slow up the stairs, and I cursed my horrible physical condition every damn step, but when I reached the top, Rana quickly moved ahead of me and took the corpse from my back and into her hands, before running down to the open door that led to the safety of the old Margrave's room.

Armen, that's enough! Return to my side!

The Guardian Wraith floated up the stairs to my side and hovered next to me as I ran the last few steps and all but leapt through the doorway, shutting the door behind me.

The quaking continued and then Armen said:

"It would be a good idea to repair the protection in front of the door."

A sudden fear fell on me as I ran towards the doorway where I'd broken the line of Ash to let him out, because, in the same moment, the door was being opened from outside. I slid the last metre to the line of Sacred Ash and then quickly closed the tiny gap I'd made in it.

Terrified, I looked up at the half-open door, but no flying bricks came my way and the quaking had subsided.

"That was a terrible plan," Rana commented from where she had collapsed on the floor, the corpse of the ghost right next to her.

It was absurd, but I couldn't help but laugh in response.

With a shock I bolted upright in the chair that I'd dozed off in. It was early morning, based on the light outside, but it was still rather dark. A sound from outside the room had awoken me and I looked over and saw that Rana had gotten up from the couch as well and had her sword in hand.

A second later, the door to our room squeaked open and Lukas' head popped into view.

"I brought Miss Cecilia with me," he announced. A girl, slightly taller than me and with round cheeks and grey-blond shoulder-long hair stepped into the room. She was wearing a simple robe and I wondered if Lukas had roused her from her sleep to bring her here.

"I also brought *this*," he announced, holding a folded paper in his hand, which I knew, without looking closely, had to contain the Scarlet Vow. I had no clue how he'd managed to bring it with him without angering the spirit, but maybe the presence of Cecilia had placated it?

After getting up from the chair, I took the Scarlet Vow from his hands and placed it with the corpse in the large fireplace, alongside the confession letter and the painting. I felt bad about having to burn Cecilia's memento as well as the no doubt irreplaceable painting.

"Is... is that...?"

"I'm sorry," I told the lady. She seemed to be in her thirties perhaps, but her expressions were very sincere and almost child-like in a way. "I have ascertained that the spirit in the East Wing belongs to the man known as Steffen, whose body we found hidden away on the second floor."

"I always knew he wouldn't have just runaway," she said sadly. "But, why am I here?"

"Unfortunately, his spirit cannot pass on without your presence," I told her, twisting the truth somewhat. "His love for you was so strong that it keeps him bound to this place."

Upon hearing those words, she froze, seeming on the verge of tears, though she remained stoic. "What must I do to help him find peace?"

"You simply need to witness as we burn his body," I told her.

I had already prepared the wood, which had been stacked next to the fireplace in a little cupboard of sorts, and Rana had located a firestarter, which was a type of metal tool that could, with a simple gesture, cause sparks to fly, which in turn could light the flammable bits I'd stuffed around next to the wood. I was no expert, but Rana had said that the fire ought to take.

I double-checked the Encyclopaedia entry for the Remorseful Betrayer, where I'd added a sketch of the thing I'd witnessed through Sumi's vision, and my eyes caught on the warning at the bottom near the exorcism details:

Take heed that when you attempt to exorcise a Remorseful Betrayer through funerary pyre that you have all the requisite mementos and people present, lest from the flames a Condemned Ifrit be born.

From the entry on the Condemned Ifrit, there was a further explanation that stated that it was often a vengeful and hateful spirit birthed out of a failed exorcism involving fire. From what I could understand, this meant that because the spirit did not pass on, but most of its earthly ties were burnt alongside its corpse, it became a fire elemental that would burn uncontrollably until it could be slain. It was only a concern for the flame-based exorcisms that involved Shade-type entities, but it almost made me want to scour the entire East Wing again to see if some additional memento wasn't hiding away somewhere.

I swallowed hard as I took the firestarter and ran the two metallic pieces along each other, casting a shower of sparks onto the pile of wood and burnable items below the corpse, painting, letter, and flower. As the sparks took hold and a fire began to blossom, I took a step back.

Cecilia stood next to Lukas, holding her hands folded close to her heart. I didn't want to pry, but it seemed obvious that she had loved Steffen, though probably for the sake of her own heart and sanity, she must've moved on after he disappeared. I didn't want to tell her the reason why he had died, nor the sin he had committed. It seemed cruel enough to bring her here just for the exorcism to work.

The flames began to spread to the wood and the mementos were already consumed by the fire, while the mummified corpse slowly began to billow smoke. To my Spirit Sight, there was more than just smoke billowing from the corpse and its earthly ties as they were set on fire. I watched closely to see if I had done something wrong, but it was hard to tell for sure until it was over.

The room began to smell of burnt skin and charred bones, along with the powerful scent of wood smoke, but fortunately the majority of the smoke billowed up and out through the chimney. I wasn't exactly the most honourable funeral pyre I had made, but I supposed that the act was more important than the appearance. After all, a burial was still a burial, even if it didn't feature an expensive casket.

"I love you Steffen," I heard Cecilia say to the fire.

I hope his spirit can finally find rest and that he can forgive himself for his sins.