

36 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire VI

For the eight time in the last five minutes I berated myself for my lack of forethought. It was lucky that Armen knew the Ritual of Union, but the fact that I had never learnt the name of the minstrel, as I’d assumed it was pointless to discover, was now proving the only thing keeping me from completing the exorcism. And, given that I was trapped in this well until Rana *hopefully* showed up to save me... well yeah, that was a sobering thought to say the least.

“You gain nothing from focusing on things you could’ve done better,” Armen advised.

He was floating above the pool of water in front of me, since the upset villagers had left the well and returned to the meagre warmth of their homes, after believing me dead and Lukas driven off. It was clear that the curse was affecting their mental states and reasoning, but at least it meant I was in no immediate danger, although the curse-induced hypothermia was my newest threat. My body had become significantly colder since my plunge into the water, and it seemed that the curse not only made me perceive everything as colder, but it also somehow inhibited my ability to warm up.

“I’m all ears if you have a suggestion,” I replied to him, annoyed.

“Do you not have a way to commune with the souls of the dead?” he asked.

“Is *that* something an Exorcist can do?” I wondered. If it was, it was certainly the first I’d heard of it, but, then again, there were countless things Owl had not bothered teaching me.

“The Ritual ability is stronger than most believe.”

“Like the Worship and Offering abilities?”

“In a way, yes.”

“But how am I meant to commune with the spirits of the dead?” I asked, but then immediately answered my own question, “Wait, would a Ouija Board work?”

“I do not know what that is.”

“I’ll show you,” I said and began using my index finger to ‘draw’ a Ouija Board in the soft earth of the cave’s floor.

When I was finished, Armen hovered over to look at it. **“I still do not comprehend its function. Is it an alphabet?”**

“It’s like a board where the soul of a dead one can apparently write out words one letter at a time... oh but wait, it’s missing something.”

I looked around to find something that could serve as the little planchette for the crude board I’d drawn and eventually found a piece of waterlogged driftwood the size of my hand, which I quickly carved into a little triangle using my sword, before poking a large hole in its centre.

I proudly displayed the piece of carved wood to Armen, but he still seemed confused, so I brought it over to my drawing of the Ouija Board and said, “The people who take part in the séance to commune with the dead using the Ouija Board all have to put their finger on this piece of wood. Then a question is asked of the spirit and it’s supposed to move the wood such that the hole in the centre lands on a letter or number or the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ markers.”

“That seems a fascinating way of pretending to speak with the dead,” he remarked scathingly.

I frowned. “It was the only way I could think of!”

“Perhaps a test is in order, though I remain sceptical.”

“Fine.”

Because it seemed important for most other rituals, I brought out the Black Tallow Candle and placed it behind my ‘board’ on the damp earthen cave floor.

I cleared my throat, then said, “Helen, if you are here, give me a sign.”

Expectantly, I stared down at the planchette that my finger was loosely touching the bottom of, but though it was quivering slightly, it wasn’t responding to my words.

“Your shaking hands are moving the wood,” Armen commented. He seemed to find it amusing to make fun of my improvised Ouija Board...

“I’m slowly freezing to death,” I reminded him.

“What do you do if she is unable to read your letters and understand their meaning?”

“You can read them, right?”

“Yes, but I had the Omniglot ability while I was alive.”

“Didn’t you yourself say that it was the intentions that mattered most.”

A strange sound emanated from Armen. It took me a moment to realise he had chuckled.

“I suppose I am being overly harsh. My apologies. I merely find the prospect of you freezing to death in this well quite upsetting and thought this a silly attempt to remedy the situation.”

“You’re the one who suggested it,” I reminded him.

“I had higher hopes for your imagination.”

“Alright, I’m gonna try rephrasing my question, maybe it just didn’t work because it was too vague a request.”

“Did your book not say the Widow was only active at night?”

I sighed.

“I will stay my tongue.”

“Thank you.”

I cleared my throat, then asked the Ouija Board, “Helen, are you here?”

A cold wind brushed over my neck and ear, then the Black Candle lit a pale-blue flame and the planchette shot out of my index finger’s loose grip. The hole in the middle of the piece had landed on ‘yes’.

I swallowed hard, while a ball of fear and excitement was steadily growing in my chest. Nearby, Armen was still as the grave. Despite his antagonistic remarks about my impromptu board, I too had shared his pessimism about its odds of working.

This time, I didn’t place my finger on the wooden triangle, when I asked, “What is the name of the minstrel, your lover?”

The piece lifted off the corner of my drawing that said ‘yes’, where it hovered a few centimetres above the floor, then it shot to the first letter. Then the next, and so on.

‘S’.

‘E’.

‘R’.

‘A’.

‘N’.

‘O’.

‘F’.

‘O’.

‘C’.

‘H’.

‘R’.

‘E’.

I swallowed again, before asking, “The minstrel’s name was ‘*Seran of Ochre*’?”

The planchette flew to the ‘yes’, before something like a giant invisible claw raked across the floor of the cave, extinguishing the Black Candle, tearing my drawing to pieces, and making me stumble backwards in surprise. I slipped and landed on my ass in the water, soaking through my almost-dry pants.

“I don’t think that’s a good sign,” I said.

Then a scream rent the air, so loud that I felt blood trickle down my right cheek from where my eardrum popped painfully. While the scream went on-and-on, it took a decidedly inhuman distortion to it and became less of a scream and more of a terrible cacophony of agony that made the ground above me shake violently. The bits of snow that floated atop the pool nearby suddenly began forming a layer of ice and within seconds the entire reservoir was frozen solid.

As frost spread up the walls at the far end of the cave, I quickly reconnect with Sumi and peered down into the well from where it floated above, just managing to cast as the frost escaped out the stonework and spread in a ring from it and across the village. I flew up higher to get a better perspective, and saw one of the villagers who had left their house to investigate the sound just as they were caught by the spreading frost. As the wave hit her leg, it immediately crawled up her body and turned her into a solid statue, which tipped face-first into the ground, arms and legs locked in mid-step. Two more villagers were frozen solid in the same way, but I had no way of knowing how the sudden frost spread to the interior of the houses from where Sumi floated, so I moved it down towards the inn, which I knew many would be gathered.

As my Watcher familiar moved through the roof of the inn and down to the ground floor, I beheld the congregated villagers huddled around the fireplace. But, they were also frozen solid, having become statues as well. The surprise made me lose the bond with my Watcher and returned me to the cave the bottom of the well.

I looked uncomprehendingly at the frozen pool and the trail of frost that had moved up the far wall. I couldn't explain why, but I had somehow been spared, despite the curse on my body.

“I do not understand what happened,” Armen admitted.

“I think I might have enraged the Widow, and in return she turned everything to solid ice.”

“It does not bode well for those frozen solid, even if you should manage to reverse the effect.”

“Why not?” I asked, horrified at the certainty in his voice. Had I just killed everyone in the village!?

“Like water expands when frozen, so does blood. When blood is frozen it is unable to deliver air to the brain. A brain starved of air for only just a few moments will be irreparably harmed. One starved of air for more than that will never recover. In short. Those frozen solid are dead.”

I swallowed hard, but then gritted my teeth. “I'll perform the Ritual of Union as fast as I can! Maybe I can still save them!”

“I admire your tenacity, but it is wasted.”

“Just tell me what words to say for the Ritual!” I had stood up, and though my whole body was quivering from the cold I was feeling and which was emanating from the pool and the world above now, I pulled out my bamboo-like Staff tipped with a glassy stone and pointed my free hand, palm-first, at the two corpses that were still connected by a flimsy red thread of ethereal energy.

“Very well. Repeat after me...”

I listened to his words and repeated them out loud.

“Before me stand the betrothed,”

“Helen of Hearthshire,”

“And,”

“Seran of Ochre,”

“These two hearts will become as one,”

“Their two minds will meld into a united whole,”

“Their two souls will twist into a single strand,”

“Let these two be conjoined in a single embrace and connect their souls with a single thread,”

“Merciful Timeless Dragon, whose coiled figure surrounds us all,”

“Make of these separate hearts a single whole,”

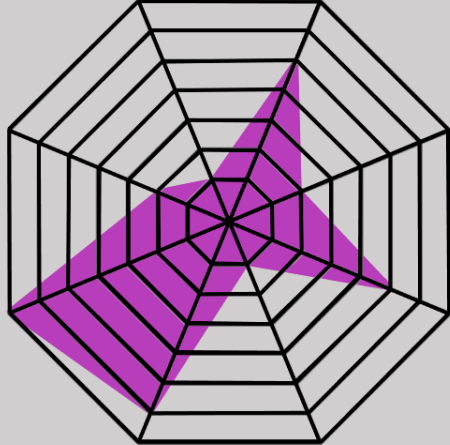
“And even in death be they twinned of heart eternally!”

A bizarre translucent-pale energy began radiating from the tip of my staff and, as it pulsed outward, it seemed to make the weak reddish link between the corpses of Helen and Seran grow stronger and more visible, like my Ritual was strengthening it.

Then it was like a crack of thunder and a pulse shot out from the pool of water, immediately breaking apart and evaporating the solid ice. As the pulse rolled along the same path as the flash-freeze before it, it thawed the ice that ran up the cave wall and out of the well above, and when I connected to Sumi to watch its progress, I saw that the fallen villagers who had been frozen solid now slumped unconscious on freshly-thawed dirt and grass. The layer of snow that had blanketed the entirety of Hearthshire was gone as though it had never been there, though puddles of meltwater remained behind, but to any onlooker it might as well have been the aftermath of a nasty downpour.

“I think I did it,” I mumbled uncomprehendingly. Things had gone from looking impossibly dire to suddenly hopeful.

There was just one last thing to check. I pulled out my Guild Card and stared at it:

<i>‘TEMARU RYUUTA’</i>			
ROLE: <i>Exorcist</i>		RANK: <i>Seeker</i>	
GENDER: <i>Male</i>		AGE: <i>17</i>	
ACUMEN: <i>B</i>	DEXTERITY: <i>E</i>	INTELLIGENCE: <i>B</i>	LUCK: <i>F</i>
PACT: <i>A</i>	SOUL: <i>S</i>	STRENGTH: <i>E</i>	VITALITY: <i>F</i>
ABILITIES <i>‘Omniglot’</i> <i>‘Exorcist I’</i> <i>‘Pact (Watcher)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Greater Protector)’</i> <i>‘Pact (Fighter)’</i>			

“It seems your Ouija Board worked,” Armen then said.

“Pretty sure that only made things worse.”

“It allowed you to learn the name of the minstrel and complete the ritual.”

“Who knows if I was fast enough though? I can’t exactly climb out of here to find out if the villagers are unscathed.”

“Many will have died,” he concluded. **“They were weak to begin with and such a sudden freezing of their internal organs and blood must surely have finished what the curse started.”**

“I hope you’re wrong.”