

## 33 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire III

I was uncomfortably aware that darkness was steadily creeping across the land as I leant over the edge of the well, trying to see what lay far below. A rank smell assailed my nostrils as air wafted up from below, but it was impossible to see the bottom.

*Sumi, I need your eye.*

The Watcher appeared before me and I immediately tapped into our bond to gain its vision, while moving it down into the darkness below. Despite its sight recasting the world in greyscale, the shadows below were too dense for it to penetrate, but I moved it further-and-further regardless, while cold sweat ran down my brow and back.

“What’s down there?” I heard Lukas ask curiously. He seemed to have no foreboding sense of what we’d find, but part of me already knew.

I didn’t answer him as I drove Sumi to the very bottom, but it was so dark that I could not tell what was supposed to be down there.

“Do you have a torch on you?” I asked Lukas.

“I don’t have anything to light it with,” he answered.

I bit my lip as I thought about what to do. Then made a quick decision: “Return to the inn and use their fireplace to light your torch, then come back here. Whatever you do, don’t let them stop you.”

Unlike Lundia and Ochre, Hearthshire had no street lanterns nor Lamplighters, and I didn’t carry a firestarter like Rana, so it seemed our only option, except for maybe knocking on the doors of the nearby houses and hoping to borrow a light from them. Somehow that seemed a worse option than the inn.

While my companion ran off, I tried to manoeuvre Sumi around in such a way that the dimming sunlight that touched the top of the well could backlight whatever was below, but it produced no tangible results, though I saw a few *things* poking out here-and-there, but without a proper light it was impossible to discern their nature.

To spare my energy reserves, I momentarily broke off contact with the familiar, letting it remain in the deep well until Lukas brought the torch.

As mentioned, Hearthshire stood on something of a hill, which allowed me a vantage point from the well and through the gaps between the buildings, wherefrom I could see how the darkness was

creeping across the distant hills, coming closer-and-closer. I wanted to pull out my Encyclopaedia and leaf through the options, but part of me was too terrified to look away from the well, as though knowing the very moment I turned my back on it, the monster below would spring out and attack me.

**“I will do everything in my power to protect you,”** Armen reassured me.

*Thank you, Armen.*

**“It may not relate to the Haunter, but did you notice the nature of the affliction the villagers suffered from?”**

*Affliction?* I asked, surprised. I’d already forgotten Armen had a good eye for these things. *Aside from being untrustworthy and mean, I didn’t notice anything.*

**“They seemed to be freezing in a way which the present weather does not truly account for.”**

I considered his words and realised he was right. While the snow itself was cold and the trees and plants were dead or dormant, the air was its usual tempered state that reminded me of early fall in Kyoto.

*You think the cold they’re experiencing is unnatural?*

**“Indeed.”**

Crunchy footsteps came from around the corner of a nearby house, and then Lukas appeared, running full tilt with the torch in his hand. As he came up to me he looked around in paranoia, then concluded, “They must’ve stopped following me.”

“What happened?”

“When I lit the torch in the inn, all the people there became really angry, saying I was stealing their warmth. Some of them started chasing after me to get the torch back.”

I frowned. It was bad enough that we were dealing with an unknown lady in white who caused winter to spontaneously manifest, but if the villagers were going to obstruct our work as well, then the quest would become significantly more dangerous.

“From now on, we stay together,” I told him. “It’s possible that the Haunter is making the people here act irrationally.”

“Okay.”

I took the torch from his hand and then walked up the lip of the well again, while reconnecting with my Watcher that awaited below. With my right eye narrowed to a slit, I let the torch drop from my hand and down the well, then moved Sumi around so I could watch it fall.

The torchlight fluttered as it fell, its golden-orange light like a comet piercing the darkness of the tunnel into the earth, while illuminating the stones of the well until it passed the section where they

transitioned completely to just dug-out earth. As it came nearer my familiar’s vantage point, I realised that it had been far from the bottom, as the well itself was somehow even deeper than I’d expected initially, going almost fifty metres down. The things that I’d seen turned out to be roots that broke through the soft earth and brickwork. The last twenty metres of the well opened up into a small cave-like pocket, with a pool of water a few metres deep and which seemed to bubble up ever-so-slowly from the aquifer layer that fed it.

I only had a few seconds to see the bottom of the well lit up by the torch, before it hit the water and its flame died out. In those few moments, I saw the cave in full, and it seemed an isolated pocket of hollowed-out earth with no other entry but the well tunnel. In the pond directly below the tunnel floated a few pieces of debris, some persistent snow, and a bloated corpse of a woman, which the elements and time had not been kind to.

In shock of what I saw, I instinctively broke off contact with my Watcher and almost fell off the lip of the well, though Lukas steadied me with a hand.

“What did you find?”

I swallowed, suddenly feeling as though my mouth had been robbed of moisture, then I said, “She’s down there, Lukas. The missing girl, it has to be her.”

He asked the first thing that I’d been wondering too: “How do we get to her?”

Lukas was leading me to the final place he had found with the Energy Stone. As we walked there, darkness finally set on Hearthshire and the few villagers who had been outside all retreated indoors, casting us wary glares, but otherwise not acknowledging us, despite the fact that we were here to help them. It felt as though I possessed secret knowledge, now that I knew where the Chief’s daughter had gone, but I had no idea what to do with the information. I doubted he would be happy to know that she lay at the bottom of their well nor that she was undoubtedly the cause of the Haunting.

We left behind the village as we came to a hill with a large tree on it. Despite the snow that covered it, a few birds watched us approach from its thick branches. A sense of wrongness seemed to emanate from it.

*Do you feel that?* I asked Armen.

“**Yes. This is a hanging tree.**”

I grimaced at the thought. Trees such as these were responsible for my Fighter familiar’s existence. It was not a practice of punishment I thought was very just. I could understand why the Stone had reacted to the tree, because, when I looked up at one of the things that hang from its branches, it was

the corpse of a man, though most of his flesh had been picked clean by scavengers, with only errant bits of tendons and sinew and muscle keeping his head, torso, and arms connected, although his right hand was missing, along with his legs.

“You should’ve taken me here first,” I told Lukas.

“Sorry.”

“I’m not upset,” I told him, “But when we are looking for clues of an Exorcism, this is the most obvious kind.”

He nodded, as though taking a mental note for the future. I could sort of guess that he had shown me the things in the order that was most convenient, since the hanging tree lay on the very edge of the snow-covered landscape.

“It seems he was killed by the villagers,” I remarked, looking at the corpse.

“Villages like this are allowed to deal with criminals how they see fit,” Lukas explained.

“That’s barbaric.”

“**They must have thought he killed the girl in the well,**” Armen remarked, reading my thoughts exactly.

I bit my lower lip in consternation and was just about to pull out my Encyclopaedia to find whichever entity matched this case the most, but then a loud piercing wail rent the air.

A shard of ice lodged itself painfully in my lungs and I gasped for air. Next to me, Lukas exhibited the same reaction.

I turned around, heaving for air, and saw the village in the distance.

“The Haunter! It’s active!”

Since I’d left Sumi at the bottom of the well, I invoked our bond and borrowed its vision with my left eye while lifting it out of the dark well and into the village.

I’d only moved it around for a minute or two, when I spotted a figure drifting through the streets of Hearthshire. It was exactly like the description had said: a woman clad in white who wore a veil that hid her face, though her brown hair flowed down the front of her dress. It was hard not to notice the similarities of the White Lady and the bloated corpse at the bottom of the well.

Although sound did not travel through my bond with the Watcher, I could hear the loud wailing of the apparition even from the hanging tree that stood over half a kilometre away from the well that she circled around. It was as though she was tethered to it, her corpse below not allowing her to travel far. Given her appearance and manifestation, which, based on the witness testimony, was visible to

human eyes, it seemed a sure thing that we were dealing with a sort of Wraith, as they were often described as visible to normal sight, while most shades were invisible to the naked eye.

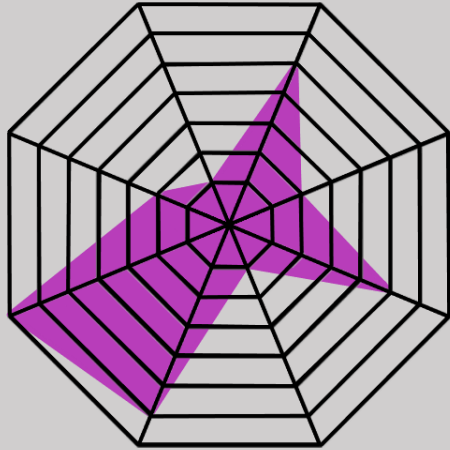
“**You have been afflicted, like the villagers,**” Armen remarked.

I broke off from Sumi and regarded him, where he floated in the steadily-darkening night air in front of me.

*What do you mean?*

“**It is as though the voice of this apparition has cursed you.**”

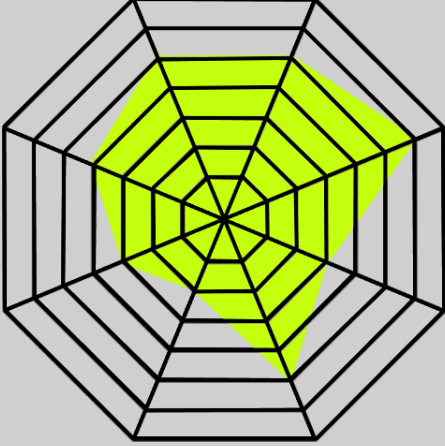
I blinked uncomprehendingly, then pulled out my Guild Card, since I remembered seeing Owl’s curse on his:

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

“Lukas, show me your Guild Card!”

The boy looked confused, but pulled it out and showed it to me without asking why:

<i>‘LUKAS’</i>	
<b>ROLE:</b> <i>Rogue</i>	<b>RANK:</b> <i>Novitiate</i>
<b>GENDER:</b> <i>Male</i>	<b>AGE:</b> <i>13</i>

<b>ACUMEN: <i>B</i></b>	<b>DEXTERITY: <i>A</i></b>	<b>INTELLIGENCE: <i>D</i></b>	<b>LUCK: <i>B</i></b>
<b>PACT: <i>E</i></b>	<b>SOUL: <i>D</i></b>	<b>STRENGTH: <i>C</i></b>	<b>VITALITY: <i>B</i></b>
<b>ABILITIES</b> <i>‘Rogue I’</i> <i>‘Fleetfooted’</i> <i>‘Guardian Angel’</i> <i>‘Curse of the Frigid Soul’</i>			

“We’ve been cursed...”