

12 - Ghost in the Castle III

Rana was using the fire-poker from the fireplace to repeatedly strike the white bricks of the suspicious wall, each of her powerful blows echoing throughout the entire East Wing, while bits of the stone bricks flew all around us.

"This is really bad! They're gonna be very angry!" Lukas complained. I found it disturbing that he was more scared of the people in the Castle than the ghost trying to throw stuff at us. Then again, it seemed as if the apparition was mostly targeting Rana and I.

"No one said we couldn't damage the building to exorcise this thing," I replied calmly.

Each strike made my heart thump, as I wondered what exactly we might find in the hollow space between the two rooms. While Rana worked to open it up, I went to the opposite wall and tried to knock on it, but it was a completely different sound.

Something was deliberately hidden here...

"Lukas," I started, while the pounding strikes continued in the background, "Who lived in this room?"

"No one, this was a guest room," he replied, eyeing the wall with great concern.

"Why does this room alone have a different wall?" I asked him.

"I don't know."

"Was the fireplace here added later?"

"I don't know. Sorry."

"It's okay. You can't know everything."

A loud crash of broken bricks hitting the wooden floor brought my attention back to the wall, just in time to see the hollow recess be revealed. With a gesture I halted Rana, as I went over to look. After her destructive work, I could easily pull a few of the bricks free and I brought out the Energy Stone and held it up in front of me like a flashlight. It was pulsing so fast it was impossible to see the breaks between the pulses and as I inserted it into the dark cavity and looked around, my eyes slowly adjusted to the pulsing light as it washed-over the interior.

The smell that came from inside the hollow space was rank and foul, with a heavy undertone of dust and powdered brickwork.

My heart froze as the light caught on a shape, a large shape, and it took me a second to realise what it was. Then Rana looked into the hole as well, after shifting some bricks out of the way, before saying:

“There’s a body in here.”

I forced myself to take in a breath and push it out again, the shock having momentarily made me forget my faculties. I swallowed hard and pulled my arm and head out of the hole in the wall, then looked to Rana.

“If the Energy Stone is reacting *this* strongly to that body, then it must be connected to the Haunter.”

“Let’s remove the wall and get it out,” she decided without a moment’s hesitation. I was glad she took the lead on this, because I suddenly felt very out of my depth again. I’d strolled around giving orders, but the reminder that I was just some inexperienced nobody reared its head and cowed me.

Knowing I’d just be in the way, I took a step back and let the Vanguard tear loose the bricks to the left of the hole she’d made, such that we could have direct access to the body.

The implications of what we’d found were slowly dawning on me. Suddenly the meaning of the word “discreet” in the Quest info was incredibly suspicious.

“Lukas, did anyone go missing in the Castle around the time that the new Margrave moved in? Or maybe just before then?”

He nodded. “A lot of the older servants suddenly just left one day. I don’t think they wanted to serve the new Margrave.”

“Were any of them involved with Cecilia?”

“I don’t know.”

“And there were none of them whose disappearance you were surprised by?”

“Most of them surprised me,” he replied sincerely.

I frowned. Perhaps it was fine not knowing the name of the person, although their identity could give clues to the sort of apparition they’d become after their death.

A crash of a large section of the brick wall made me suddenly jump and when I looked over to where Rana stood, I saw that, along with the section of the wall, the corpse had fallen out. It was unmistakably the corpse of a man, though what age he might’ve had in life was impossible to tell, as the airless and dry space he’d been confined to had sort of mummified his body.

"He was killed by a blow to the back of his head," Rana remarked. Now that I looked closer, I could see how she came to that conclusion, as the back of his head had a devastating indent and old dried blood ran down his back.

"Why would someone kill this person and hide them in a wall?" I wondered out loud.

No sooner had I put the question out there than the entire East Wing awoke to a terrible earthquake, as though the very foundations were lifting themselves out of the ground. For the briefest of moments, I saw *something* in the dust of the ruined wall, just as the bricks began lifting into the air. One hurtled through the air and caught me right on my left thigh, sending me tumbling to the floor. Another flew for my head but was then battered out of the air.

"My apologies, but you are running out of energy for me to consume."

Shit.

"We need to get out of here, fast!" I yelled and got up, grabbing Lukas by the wrist, while Rana tried to follow and guard us at the same time.

Another brick flew around her and aimed for me, but was knocked from the air as well, but along with the protecting move from Armen I felt a massive drain on my energy. One or two more of those and I'd be unable to stand on my feet, let alone run away from the enraged spirit.

Focus on protecting me from attacks that will kill me!

"As you desire."

When Lukas and I dipped around the corner, the sounds coming from within made it obvious that it had shifted focus to Rana entirely.

"Use the bell!" I shouted, as I let Lukas lead me towards the stairs and up to the third floor.

I heard the *diiing* of the Blessed Bell as it reverberated throughout the Wing, but the quaking in the floor and the sounds of bricks hitting Rana's metal armour and shield, as well as the walls, did not cease.

"In here!" Lukas yelled as I came up the steps after him. He was holding a fancy white-painted door with golden accents open for me and I quickly got in.

"You need to go get Rana," I told him. He did not question my demand for a second and immediately ran back towards the staircase while yelling for her.

Keep him alive! I told Armen, while I frantically pulled the pouch of Sacred Corpse Ash from my bag and ran to the furthest door of the enormous room I was in, where I began spreading a line carelessly on the floor in front of it. I did the same for the windows, though only two of the five great windows had windowsills, so for the rest I did the line on the floor and hoped it would suffice. Then

I ran to the door at the other end of the room, making another line, before returning to the large doors I'd entered through, just in time to see Lukas enter with Rana supporting her weight on his small frame. I quickly slammed the door behind them, before spreading a line in front of it as well.

As I finished I stood back and bade Armen return to my side.

"The room is secure," he told me.

Can you cross those lines? I asked him.

"No, but your other familiar can."

That seemed weird and illogical to me. *Why?* I asked him, while my heart thudded painfully in my chest, a mixture of exhaustion and dread fuelling its powerful rhythm. The floor was still quaking, but thus far the Haunter had not followed us into the room.

"Observers may go where they please."

What an ominous turn of phrase... It also meant that no matter how much I tried to hide myself from someone's watchful familiar, it would be meaningless.

Are there no ways to prevent an 'Observer' entry to a place?

"There are wards to steer away prying eyes," he answered. I wondered what he meant by that, before remembering that I did actually have an Ability called 'Ward Crafter', though I'd never used it or been instructed about it. 'Worship' and 'Contain Spirit' were two other Abilities that I'd also never used.

"Are we safe?" Rana asked, looking at the lines of ash I'd drawn on the floor.

"I think so," I replied and stepped away from the door.

For the first time, I had a proper look at the luxurious room we were in. Like Cecilia's room on the first floor, it was left in pristine condition.

"Is this the former Margrave's room?" I asked Lukas, to which he nodded in reply.

"Your stone is blinking again," he then said.

I looked at the Energy Stone that I'd left on the floor in my frantic haste to secure the room with the Sacred Ash. After picking it up, I started looking around the room. When I spotted a handprint on a cabinet, I remembered that Lukas had said the man named 'Potts' had been attacked in this room while looking through it, but, unlike the other rooms, the cabinet had been placed back where it belonged.

"There has to be something of importance to the ghost in here," I said out loud. "It seems to protect the rooms that means something to it."

"Maybe it was a servant during its life?" Rana ventured. She was sitting on a couch with her right leg up. From the way she held it, it didn't seem broken, though she might've sprained it or taken a hit there.

I nodded. It was a good guess. Perhaps the apparition had been a loyal servant of the old Margrave, before something had led to his murder, and now his vengeful spirit was protecting the East Wing from intruders. I thought about it some more. If he had been murdered here and the murderers had been able to build an entire wall to cover up the crime, then there was no way they didn't have connections to the new Margrave.

It was making a lot of sense now why Master Owl hadn't taken this quest. To someone like him it would no doubt have been easy money, but he was probably well-versed enough in the politics of this world to know that this quest stank of foul play. In hindsight, I should've realised as much too. I had no doubts that this was a lesson he wanted me to learn. Rana had taught me that quests were unreliable, and he was teaching me that not all quests were worth the trouble.

After searching some more, I came to a large painting, where the Energy Stone absolutely lit up.

"Bingo," I said. "Lukas, who are all the people in this?"

He came over to the two-and-a-half-metre-wide painting that hung on the wall above a commode with vases and fancy plates and cups.

"This was made four years ago, on the order of the past Margrave," he said. "He knew he was dying, so he commissioned a painter to make a painting of him, his castle, and all his servants, family, and retainers." He pointed to a corner and added, "That's me right there."

I had to squint to really see the details, but I could sort of recognise his hair in the painting. Lukas was placed next to a lot of other children. It seemed fairly obvious that the man who had become the Haunter of the East Wing was in the painting, but when I moved the Spirit Stone back and forth along the small faces, there was no change in its reaction. Still, it was another clue to add to the list.

"The dead man we found downstairs might be in this picture," I said. "If he is in fact the one whose spirit is now haunting this place."

"Are you saying that the body might not belong to the ghost?" asked Rana.

"There's no way to be certain. The ghost may as well be the murderer of the man we found."

I walked over to where she sat, needing to get some rest myself. I was about to put the Energy Stone away, when, strangely, it began turning brighter and pulsing faster after initially dimming from being removed from the painting.

"That's strange," I said, looking at the object in my hand.

“What is it?”

“It’s reacting as if there’s more than one special object in here.”

I began searching around again, heading in the direction that made the glow and pulse intensify.

“Lukas, come help me out.”

He ran over. “Are we looking for something else?”

“Yes, but,” I said and stopped, looking at the desk and bookcases that the Stone had brought me to. At the opposite end was a lounge and bedroom area in the enormous room, but in this end was a study or office. “But I need you to help locate something that the spirit might have a special connection to.”

He scratched his nose, where I noticed he had a faint white scar, which was only visible due to his naturally-tan skin. “Maybe it’s another letter?”

“Let’s start with that,” I said and he helped me scan all the papers on the desk, before rifling through the drawers. Eventually he came to a drawer that was locked, but the key was nowhere to be found. I was just about to call Rana over to break it open, when Lukas knelt down and pulled two pieces of metal wire from his boots and began trying to pick the lock.

I blinked in surprise. I had a fairly good idea what his light-green aura now represented, given that I’d heard of a Role that featured ‘Lockpicking’ as a unique ability. With one of his metal wires, a flatter one, he kept tension on the lock, while using the narrower one to push the pins above the shear-line. After a minute-or-so, there came a click and the wire he used to tension with began to spin. He spun it around completely and then pulled open the drawer.

“Tadaah!” he said and I almost clapped. It was quite impressive.

Despite him being a Native to this world, I really wanted him to try and take the Role Assignment, since I was fairly confident his aura was strong enough to be picked up by the soul-stone slate. If there was any deciding factor for why Natives couldn’t become Adventurers, it seemed to just be that they had weaker auras, but Lukas’ was far stronger than any other Native’s.

We didn’t have to leaf through the contents of the drawer, as there was just a single letter within. Lukas pulled it out and placed it on the table and the Energy Stone once again lit up and confirmed it had a strong trace of spirit energy attached to it.

I unfolded the letter and the first line immediately read: “*I’m so sorry.*”

“Crap,” I commented, while continuing to read the letter.

“What is it?” Lukas asked.

“I think I know what sort of apparition we’re dealing with…”