

## 11 - Ghost in the Castle II

Like the main building of the Castle, the East Wing was made of stone for its outer walls as well as the walls that divided up the interior into rooms. The floor was made of strong wood that seemed to resist the fluctuations of temperatures as it neither creaked nor protested as we walked across it with our boots. There was a total of four floors to the Wing, and Lukas told us that it was identical in layout to the West Wing, although it showed clear signs of having been abandoned for years, as cobwebs and rat droppings could be found almost everywhere on the bottom floor.

The ground floor had a small basement that led to a wine cellar and cold storage for preserving food, though apart from some large barrels for wine, the space was fairly empty. The floor itself seemed mainly designed to house servants in small rooms with narrow beds, as well as the kitchen and laundry facilities such servants would be occupied in.

As we climbed the staircase to the first floor, the atmosphere changed from abandonment to something more difficult to describe. There were no obvious signs of rats, though large webs of spiders showed that insects still thrived here. Additionally, as we were shown to the other rooms on the floor, we found random furniture in the hallway, damaged objects that'd been thrown against the walls, and an overall mess comparable to a tornado passing by.

I noticed that Rana kept her right hand permanently glued to the pommel of her sheathed sword. Lukas, for his part, seemed only excited to be showing us around. I guessed that, to a boy his age, this was like going on an adventure in a place he was normally not allowed to access. I had no doubts that the boy, and maybe some of the other servants' children, often made trips to the East Wing to explore, despite being forbidden from entering it. It was the sort of mischief children his age always got up to after all, and he didn't seem phased by the clear signs of a Haunting.

"What are you looking at?" he asked, when I'd stopped next to an overturned chamberpot that'd been thrown so hard against the wall that it'd caved-in on one side.

I wasn't sure how to explain it to him, but then I remembered the Sinner's Ash that Master Owl had given me. I brought out the pouch and took a small bit of the dirt-brown ash into my fingers and smeared it over the corner of the chamberpot.

Rana took a step back in surprise, while Lukas said, "What's that?"

"It's a handprint," the Vanguard said, perhaps remembering what I'd told her about the Haunting in Hamsel's Rest.

I nodded. "It's an important clue to figuring out what sort of apparition we're dealing with."

I lifted up my Spirit Goggles and confirmed that the ethereal glowing-blue handprint was visible without them, thanks to the Sinner's Ash. Part of me wondered if perhaps it was a mistake to show this to Rana and Lukas, as it was sure to freak them out, knowing that there were things they could not see with their own eyes all around them.

Expectedly, Rana looked at the messy hallway and all the furniture and objects that lay strewn about. "Are they all like that? Covered in handprints?"

I nodded. A bit of cold sweat tickled down my back and I could feel my shirt become clammy where it touched my skin.

"Hey, Lukas?"

"Yes, Mister?"

"Have anyone died in here because of this Haunting?"

He shook his head. "No, but Old Man Potts broke his leg after a cabinet suddenly fell on him, while he was looking through the past Margrave's room on the fourth floor. One of the Guards also lost a finger when his sword flew from his scabbard and tried to attack him."

I swallowed hard, then shared a look with Rana. She quickly secured her sheathed blade by closing a strap that normally hung loose, such that it would be impossible to pull the blade out. Granted, it was no sure thing, but I was glad she at least took a precaution.

Then something hit me. "Did you say that the Margrave had a room in this Wing?"

Lukas nodded. "On the fourth floor. It's reaaaally big!"

"How long have you been living and working here, Lukas? Since before the current Margrave?"

He nodded. "Yes. I have been here since I was..." He paused and began counting on his fingers. "Since I was six," he then said. "I lived in the orphanage before that."

I frowned. Perhaps it shouldn't have surprised me that a world with a medieval setting employed child labour, but, then again, so did the real world, it had just been hidden better I suppose.

A sudden theory appeared in my mind. "What happened to the old Margrave?"

"He died from a sickness in his lungs."

"And where is he buried?"

Rana seemed to catch on to what I was going for and leaned in closer.

"Margrave Reis Litterby was buried with his family in their crypt in the city of Helmstatter."

"It lays to the south," Rana replied. "It's over eight-hundred kilometres away."

*So much for that theory...* I thought to myself. It would have been simple if the old Margrave was to blame for lingering in this place.

Suddenly, the sound of knocking came from a room further down the hall. It sounded almost like someone was trapped in a closet and trying to get out.

Without being told, Rana moved in front of us both, but Lukas didn't seem bothered by the commotion.

"He really likes that room," he commented while continuing to stare at the handprint on the chamberpot.

"He?" I asked, while Rana began moving a bit closer.

"The Ghost. It must be an angry man with all the noise he makes, says Madam Colleen."

"I see..."

A loud metallic *bang* sounded from where Rana stood and I saw a stone brick fall to the ground after it had presumably collided with her shield.

"Ryūta! It's throwing things, we should go!"

"He's very angry today," Lukas remarked in surprise. I wondered if the Haunter could sense that I was here to exorcise it, or maybe it reacted more aggressively because of Rana, given that it had attacked a Guard in the past.

"We need to see what's in that room!" I told her.

*Armen, can you protect us from thrown objects?*

"**As you desire,**" said the Guardian Wraith and moved in front of Rana, just in time to deflect a metal lantern, which fell to the floor as a crumbled heap.

Both Lukas and Rana looked at the lantern, which to their eyes must've hit the air and just crumpled by itself. To snap her out of it, I yelled, "My familiar is guarding us, keep moving! Lukas stay behind me."

The apparition continued to throw things at us, but I couldn't see the creature itself, despite the fact that I saw the glowing handprints it left on every item it threw. As we advanced closer-and-closer to the room it had made all the banging sounds in, the onslaught of thrown objects became constant, though its arsenal of objects reduced to things such as chair-legs, books, and paintings.

Either exhausted of its supply or deterred by our advance, the Haunter suddenly stopped its attack and we came to the room it had seemingly appeared from. Rana remained by the door, with Armen hovering in front of her, while I looked through the room itself. Unlike the few other rooms I'd seen

on this floor, the interior was organised and neither the bedside-table, chairs, desk, dresser, nor wall-mounted picture frames were tossed about. It was like the eye in a storm.

“Lukas, do you know who lived in this room?”

“That would be Madam Colleen’s daughter, Miss Cecilia.”

“And where is she now?”

“She has a room in the West Wing now, but only works here three days out of the week, with the rest in a tavern in the Noble Ward.”

I scratched my chin below my goggles in contemplation. “Does she have any dead relatives who used to live here?”

“I don’t think so,” he replied sincerely. I was fairly sure I could trust everything he said, but I wasn’t entirely sure it was a good idea to rely on his memory, as he would’ve been quite young back when this Wing was in use three years prior.

While sitting down on the bed, which had been made perfectly, I considered which of my tools might aid me here and realised that, since there was something keeping the spirit fascinated with this room that the Energy Stone was my best bet.

I pulled the quartz-like stone from my bag and immediately it began pulsing quickly while shining bright as a flashlight. As I moved it around the room, its pulse frequency and light volume shifted up-and-down, until I eventually aimed it at the desk that was neat and proper, with a full inkwell, a crisp new piece of vellum paper, and a silver-tipped feather pen.

While moving the stone around, Rana sneaked a peek from where she stood guard by the doorway and Lukas was eagerly following my motions. It was clear that there was something about the desk that the stone responded to, but I couldn’t tell which object it was. Then the blonde boy pulled open one of the drawers and the light intensified as I moved the stone over the papers that were inside.

He helpfully lifted them one-at-a-time in front of my stone, until one suddenly made it light up to the point that it was no longer pulsing. I put the stone away, sure that I’d found the proper object, then reverently took the folded paper from him and placed it on the desk. As I unfolded it, I expected to find a letter or something of that nature, but instead I found a dry red flower with triangular petals that’d been pressed flat and kept by the room’s former resident for some reason.

I looked to Lukas. “Do you know what *this* is?”

“That’s a Scarlet Vow,” he said, surprised.

“They don’t grow around here,” Rana remarked, surprisingly. When I gave her a quizzical look, she explained, “I did a Gathering Quest for such a flower a couple years back when I was in the south.”

“Old Man Potts said that they can’t be cultivated and only grow in the wild,” Lukas added.

“You know a lot about flowers?” I asked.

He nodded eagerly, “Old Man Potts has taught me a lot!”

“Is the name significant?” I asked them both.

Rana shrugged, but Lukas replied, “Old Man Potts says that Nobles often gift them to each other to represent a pre-marital gift, either to court someone or to showcase the sincerity of their love.”

“Do you know anyone that had romantic interest in Cecilia?” I asked.

He shook his head.

*Of course not... what did I expect a child to know about romances about the castle, especially a boy his age?*

I looked at the flower for a bit, wondering if this Haunting could be as simple as someone dying before they could fulfil a vow they had made to someone they admired or loved. I pulled the chair out from under the desk and sat down, then pulled my little Encyclopaedia out and began looking through the entries.

Lukas stood behind me and looked over my shoulder as I leafed through the pages.

“Can you read what it says?” I asked him, but he shook his head.

*That’s probably for the best.*

“What language is it written in?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied truthfully. The curling script was legible and perfectly known to me, but I had no idea what it was called, and from the few signs and such that I’d seen in Lundia, it was clearly of a different origin.

“That’s ‘Chthonic’,” Rana said, also looking over my shoulder, having left her post by the door after realising we were safe inside this room. “Magicians and Summoners often use this language.”

I wondered if it was related to the giants and titans of Greek myth, as they were at times known as the Chthonians: the ones of the earth. It might also refer the Underworld in Greek myth, as well as the gods and creatures that hailed from that place. Though I hadn’t called upon this sort of useless trivia information, it had endlessly fascinated me in middle school during my Chūnibyō phase. At any rate, it was an ominous connotation, even if it meant something entirely different in this world.

After some more searching, I had a few guesses as to what type of ghost I might be facing here, but each had slightly different requirements for their exorcism, so I didn’t want to accidentally enrage the ghost in the East Wing by attempting something incorrect to deal with it, like using my Sanctify ability on the Scarlet Vow flower. *That* would be the right decision if I was dealing with a Poltergeist,

but it was not the only type of Shade to exhibit the sort of behaviour I'd seen, as it might as well represent an Obsessive Stalker, in which case the tampering with the Scarlet Vow, which had clear significance for the spirit, would enrage it and make it manifest, turning it significantly more dangerous.

I scratched below my goggles as I thought about the best way to proceed. Eventually I decided to fold the paper back over the flower and carefully return it to the desk drawer.

"What now?" asked Rana.

"We'll continue looking for clues. Make sure to return everything in this room to the way that it was."

"Yes, Mister Exorcist!" Lukas obeyed and immediately began straightening out the bed linen and duvet, which I'd sat on. I myself return the chair to under the desk.

*Hopefully this will be enough to placate the ghost.*

The flower and this room were of significance to the Haunter, so I believed it prudent to be as respectful to the state it had been left in as possible.

We continued looking around on the first floor after leaving Cecilia's room and were thankfully left alone by the spirit. Where the kitchen and laundry rooms were placed below us, the first floor instead had a sizeable library with a sort of lounge area, as well as study desks, for people to sit in while reading either fanciful tales or treaties on war and politics. Although the shelves of the tall bookcases were for the most part empty, as the abandonment of the East Wing had no doubt seen them removed.

In a world such as this, where the printing press was seemingly not invented yet, each book was a labour of months of hard work, meaning that a library of this size could contain a literal wealth of knowledge. As with the hallway, the furniture and few books left behind were scattered all about the place, with desks on their side and comfortable looking chairs battered to pieces by repeated violent throws across the room. I could imagine that the evacuation of the hundreds of books that must've been within the library had been the cause of the frantic mess, since I could imagine the Haunter attacking the servants all throughout their work.

For a while, I moved around with the Energy Stone, carefully checking the objects in the room, but eventually I relented, as it was simply too much to go through. I kept it in the palm of my right hand as we moved around, but while it reacted weakly to the ghostly handprints everywhere, it didn't have any response similar to the Scarlet Vow.

We left the library and briefly looked through the few other rooms on the floor, before ascending to the second floor. If the first floor was for those of slightly higher status than servants, then the second floor was for guests or cherished retainers, with the rooms here being twice the size of those below and three times the size of the servants' rooms. The furniture was also more opulent and many of the rooms had their own fireplaces. All the rooms were a total mess of destroyed furniture, and it seemed the ghost had been especially harsh on this floor, which made me suspicious.

Sure enough, as we neared one of the rooms furthest down the hallway, there was loud banging and soon after we were beset by an artillery of furniture, lamps, chamberpots, and the like. The way it was throwing several objects at once, all of which were intercepted by Armen and Rana, reminded me of the image of the Poltergeist in the Encyclopaedia. However, its description didn't line up with what we were experiencing, as it stated clearly that the Poltergeist had to be sufficiently disturbed to become enraged, and all we were doing was exploring and not tampering with things. I doubted that this behaviour would've been spelled out so succinctly if there was wiggle-room for what might be considered 'sufficiently disturbed'.

Fortunately, having read the entries had reminded me that all Shade-type entities were repelled by the Blessed Golden Bell, so I brought it out and gave it a single *ding*, which seemed to echo all the way throughout the building far louder than my little gesture ought to have accomplished.

Immediately the onslaught stopped and I saw Rana breathe a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad we have your competent familiar," she commented. "I don't think I could intercept all these projectiles by myself."

*Good work, Armen.*

**"It is simply my duty."**

I handed her the bell. "This should deter it if it attacks again, though I have no idea how long the effect lasts nor if it will remain effective with every repetition."

Rana nodded her thanks and secured it to a loop on her belt. Then we went to a room near the end of the hall, and, as soon as we entered, the Energy Stone in my left hand began pulsing. Rana once again took up guard by the doorway, while Lukas helped me scour the overturned furniture for clues. It surprised me that the Stone was reacting to a place that the ghost clearly had not tried to protect and keep neat and organised. In fact, as I looked at the furniture in the room, it had been utterly smashed to ruins, as though deliberately attacked over-and-over until it could be broken down no further. Sheets and pillows and curtains had been ripped to bits as though by flensing claws, and vellum paper and canvas paintings had been shredded to such fine bits that it might qualify as confetti.

While traversing the mess in the room, the Energy Stone continued to glow brighter-and-brighter, until I reached the fireplace by the backwall and it was blinking its light so rapidly I feared someone might experience an epileptic seizure.

Lukas poked through the little bit of debris in the fireplace with a fire-poker, as I scanned it with the Stone, but it seemed to react more to the wall on the right side of the fireplace. I noticed that the burnished white bricks of the fireplace extended all the way from wall to wall, which was unlike the other rooms, where the fireplace bricks only surrounded it and its chimney, while the rest of the wall was the same dull grey stone just like the outer walls.

"It might be in the other room next to this," I said and the two of us rejoined Rana by the door, before going to the next room, where the furniture and interior was in a similar state. Strangely, the wall it shared the previous room was not the white bricks, but rather the usual grey ones. I had an ominous and foreboding knot in my stomach as I went up to the wall and knocked on it with my knuckles.

The sound that returned told me only one thing: the wall was hollow.