

## 34 – Endless Winter in Hearthshire IV

My pulse was pounding so hard that it was filling up my ears with its drumming rhythm.

“**Calm down,**” Armen advised. “**If this is the same curse as what afflicts the villagers, then we know it does not kill you immediately. There is no need to panic just yet.**”

I tried to push back the knot of anxiety that had formed in the pit of my stomach, but to no avail. Meanwhile, the shard of ice in my lungs seemed to only hurt more, while in the distance *that* wailing voice rang out.

“At least I have a good idea what sort of entity we’re dealing with,” I said, trying to sound confident, although I knew how screwed we were.

Since it was dark and I’d thrown Lukas’ only torch into the well, I pulled out the Energy Stone which was already lighting up the belt pouch it was in. While holding the glowing tool in my right hand, I opened the Encyclopaedia with my left and leafed through the pages, trying to find something I vaguely remembered reading.

Lukas was looking over my shoulder when I came to the page I was searching for.

“Is that the one?” he asked.

I nodded.

It was an elemental subtype of a Night Wraith, an entity that only appeared at night, which was called ‘The Weeping Widow’. The depiction was pretty much identical to other Night Wraiths and their subtypes, and seemed to be a strange sort of commonality when dealing with a female wraith.

“How do we deal with it?” he asked.

I’d forgotten that Lukas couldn’t read the text in the Encyclopaedia, since it was written in the Chthonic language, which I only understood because of the Omniglot ability that all Otherworlders were given. Given that one of his parents must’ve been a Native of this world, it seemed that he had not inherited this ability. But perhaps that was a good thing, I considered, when I read through the options we had for exorcising the Weeping Widow.

Given that the Weeping Widow was a vengeful spirit created from a man or woman who committed suicide after witnessing the murder of their lover, its potential exorcisms were pretty complex and involved somehow satiating the wronged spirit. One thing that was bizarre though, was that they came in many different elemental types, with the curse they inflicted somehow matching

that type. The entry said to be wary of the types that possessed the wind element, but made no explanation as to why.

I grimaced, then said, “It won’t be easy.”

There were four potential ways of going about dealing with a Weeping Widow that the entry stated:

*#1 – Wait for everyone cursed by the Weeping Widow to die, at which point the Haunter disappears.*

*#2 – Bring the blood of the one(s) who wronged the Weeping Widow to its grave and then perform a Ritual of Obsequy utilising the blood.*

*#3 – Kill the one(s) who wronged the Weeping Widow and offer their corpse(s) to its grave.*

*#4 – Reunite the Weeping Widow with the corpse of its slain lover and perform a Ritual of Union to lay both of their spirits to rest.*

This first option was obviously no good, since Lukas and I were both cursed, not to mention that I found it a very callous way of dealing with a Haunting, since I considered my job as an Exorcist to be saving the people affected by an apparition.

The second was probably unlikely to happen, since it meant that we needed to confront the ones who had killed the minstrel and hung his body from the hanging tree, then somehow get them to hand over their blood...

The third was obviously just plain immoral.

Which left the fourth and final option, which had its own set of problems associated with it.

Something suddenly clicked in my head as I read through the description and exorcism guide: Helen had been alive when the minstrel had been killed, and she had seen his murder and hanging, which had made her leap into the deep well to take her life, while no doubt cursing the villagers.

A ball of disgust formed in the back of my mouth.

*The villagers are responsible for this!*

“**It seems a commonality for many hauntings,**” Armen remarked.

*I have half a mind to let this curse take the lot of them before I exorcise the Widow!*

“**Adventurers’ lot is often to clean up the mess left behind by the inhabitants of this world, but you must remember that not everybody is dismissive of the work we do.**”

There was probably some wisdom in his words, but right now I was too incensed to consider that side of things. Nonetheless, I gritted my teeth as I prepared for what we had to do.

“We have to reunite the corpse of the minstrel with the body of Helen,” I told Lukas. “Then I must perform an elaborate ritual on their bodies.”

“How are we going to get the body from the well?”

“I have no idea.”

“Should I cut down the minstrel?” he asked, looking prepared to climb the hanging tree to reach the branch eight metres above, from which the noose had been tied.

“No, we don’t touch the body until the sun has risen. If the Weeping Widow sees the body of its lover, it will become enraged and the curse will intensify. Whatever that means.”

“Okay...”

Lukas sat down in the snow next to the large ominous tree.

“Ryūta?”

“Yes?”

“I’m starting to get really cold.”

“I know. Me too.”

I sat down next to him, holding the glowing Energy Stone in-between my hands, while looking at the village in the near distance, from which the pleading mournful cries came every few minutes.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered into the cold wind, “I will let you and your beloved find the peaceful rest you deserve.”

I awoke next to Lukas, shivering and teeth rattling, despite the sun that ought to be warming my skin. With a gentle nudge I woke him.

“The sun is up,” I told him. My entire body was sore from the cold that flowed from within me. I now understood why the villagers had mostly remained indoors, because just the slightest breeze felt like the inside of an industrial meat freezer.

If this was how it felt after less than a day of dealing with the curse, then I wondered why the villagers hadn’t already died from hypothermia. I wondered if the curse only affected my mind and not my physical temperature, since that might explain it.

“**Your core temperature has gone down,**” Armen commented, shattering my fledgeling hope.  
*So there’s a real threat of this thing killing me?*

“**Yes.**”

I slowly rose from where we’d huddled next to the tree.

“We need to get the minstrel’s body into the well before the sun sets,” I told Lukas.

He was slow to rise, but then he began doing some stretches to bring back warmth into his limbs, before he cautiously pulled himself up onto the trunk of the hanging tree, before climbing the tall limb to the branch that held up the corpse.

“Watch out,” he warned. Then, with a simple slice of his blade he released the noose and the body fell into the ankle-deep snow next to me with a *thump*, the right arm popping off on impact as the last vestiges of its muscles and tendons snapped.

I looked down at the pitiful remains of the minstrel, a man whose name I’d never learnt.

A moment later Lukas dropped down beside me, already seeming to have regained the heat in his body, which made me wonder if Vitality played a role in resisting such curses. Soul was supposed to guard me against the effects of magic, but perhaps I hadn’t trained the attribute enough to benefit from *that*? Meanwhile, Lukas had probably always been active and energetic, so he was no doubt already at his peak potential for most of his physical attributes.

“**You ought to meditate more,**” Armen advised.

*I’ll try...*

I made the decision that I would be the one to climb down the well to perform the ritual, since, logistically, that seemed the best option. To compensate for me taking on that job, Lukas was therefore the one who carried the minstrel’s ruined corpse to the well. The smell of the body was repulsive and filled my nostrils with its acrid and sickly-sweet stench, but the Rogue did not complain once.

*I need to get a familiar that can do this sort of dirty work,* I mused.

“**Don’t look at me.**”

*If I find a way give you a corporeal body, then it is the least you could do,* I joked.

Given that Armen was basically a floating featureless man inside a suit of armour, it was hard to interpret his expressions and reactions, but, by the way I notice him shift at my words, I could tell he was not amused.

“**Summoners commonly employ imps for menial tasks,**” he suggested to me. I knew he was just trying to wriggle out of the responsibility himself, in the event that I managed to give him a real body.

I recalled the Greedling that Master Owl had used to carry the Demon Statue and made a mental note to research it more. Perhaps once I got to Helmstatter I’d try to find a Summoner to help guide me in my next familiar acquisition and hopefully teach me some of the things Owl had deliberately avoided. I also really wanted to find out more about Ward Crafting and the Contain Spirit ability.

As we came into the village, Lukas half-carrying-half-dragging the ruined body of the minstrel with the severed noose still attached and trailing behind us, the few villagers who’d ventured outdoors regarded us with unmasked fear and anger. One of them let out a scream and fled into her house, and another man called us monsters, before heading for the inn, perhaps to get people to stop us.

“We need to hurry,” I told Lukas, and, to his credit, he put on a burst of speed that left me staggering to keep up with him, despite the heavy burden in his arms.

When I did catch up to him, the well was in sight ahead of us.

“Sorry for making you do this.”

“It’s okay, Ryūta.”

We stopped by the lip of the well and he settled the minstrel’s body next to it in the snow.

“What now?” he asked.

I looked at the top of the well, where a threadbare rope was attached to a simple iron lever for winching up a small bucket or whatever else it was attached to.

“I unfortunately think I’ll have to use *that* rope to descend.”

“Should we throw the body down there first?”

“Let’s lower it down,” I said, despite knowing we probably didn’t have the time, if the villagers were on their way over in an angry mob. “I don’t want it to break more than it already has,” I argued.

He nodded and together we pulled up the shallow bucket that was fastened to the winch, then carefully placed the minstrel’s corpse into it, along with the arm that had fallen off, and two finger bones I’d found buried in the snow beneath where he’d hung.

I watched the brittle rope as Lukas steadily spun the lever to lower the corpse down and was glad to see that it could carry at least sixty percent of a male body, accounting for the missing bits of bone and meat and skin...

With a single tug on the rope, the body flipped out of the bucket and into the water, at least that’s what I assumed happened, since I couldn’t see anything, but did hear a loud *splash*.

As Lukas winched the bucket back up again, I heard feet stomping up behind us and turned to see nine men staring at us. Each of them looked to be in a lot of pain and their teeth were audibly chattering, but they nonetheless looked ready for a fight.

“We don’t have time for this!” I yelled at them. “I’m here to exorcise the ghost that is haunting your village! I am trying to save you from the curse that’s literally freezing you to death!”

They shared glances between them, but from the way their auras moved, it was clear that reason didn’t hold much sway over them, so I pulled out my Focus and aimed it at them, letting a small amount of energy build in my body before expelling it out with a single word: “Repel.”

As the energy left my hand and became a tiny vortex of wind, it flew through the air and disturbed the top layer of snow on the ground when it passed over, before hitting the frontmost person and slamming him two metres back and into a wall.

*Oh shit, that was too strong!*

The villagers looked at their friend and then at me. The apprehension I had sensed in their auras was utterly gone, replaced by blind hate. In some circumstances, hatred could overpower fear. This was one of such instances.

*Armen, protect me, but don’t hurt them too badly.*

**“Of course.”**

“Lukas, we’re just going to show them that it is foolish to fight us, but don’t be too heavy-handed. They are clearly not in their right mind.”

The Rogue nodded and stayed by my side as I moved forward, while the eight villagers charged at us weakly. Each and every one that tried to strike me was caught by Armen’s hands and flipped upside-down or faceplanted into the snow with just enough force to hurt, but hopefully not enough to injure. Lukas was less delicate, as he dislocated a man’s arm and kned another in the groin, but this was no time to be sensible.

When all nine men were on the ground, groaning in various states of pain, we quickly returned to the well. With a left hand on the well’s edge, my feet in the shallow bucket, and my right arm coiled around the rope, I gave Lukas a nod to begin lowering me.

*Sumi, I want you to remain above the well.*

The Watcher appeared by my side and floated up into the air.

*Armen, stay with Lukas and protect the well.*

**“Understood.”**

Then the rope and bucket shuttered as Lukas began lowering me down. It suddenly struck me just how little I wanted to be doing this, but it was too late to turn back now. As much as the villagers didn’t deserve my mercy, I knew they would die if I didn’t deal with the Weeping Widow before long. I’d gotten Lukas into this mess as well, so the guilt and responsibility was driven me as well. Still, as

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—Kristoffer Pauly (aka “Dosei”)—

my hand ran along the bricks of the well, while I slowly fell deeper into the tunnel of darkness, I couldn't avoid feeling a knot of anxiety form in my chest.