

149 – Merciful Rest

It was done. The dark weight that’d fallen over the apartment building was lifted like a morning fog burnt away by the sunlight’s warmth. The wards that Finnegan and I wore were no longer glowing, and they were so pristine it was hard to tell if the Haunter had even tried to bring its powers to bear on us in its final moments.

A sombre mood had replaced the oppressive weight and it felt a bit like when I’d been staring at Lukas’ grave with my friends.

Armen came up to find us in the attic, stooping low to wrench open the collar around the dead boy’s neck. I took the precaution of Sanctifying the chain and collar once they were removed, just in case the exorcism of the Shade wasn’t complete.

If Emily was here, I wonder if she could see the malevolent energies that might still be lingering? I thought to myself, as I scanned the building from top-to-bottom using my Observers. There was nothing incorporeal lingering behind, but with a unique apparition like this one, it was better to play it safe I thought, as I might very well be setting the guidelines for how to deal with similar Haunters for the Exorcists that came after me.

While Armen carried the body in his arms, I had Jules shrink down and climb into my front-facing coat pocket. He’d managed to meld the top-half of his head back onto the rest of his body using his powers of wood-manipulation, and it was impossible to tell that it’d ever been cut off.

The Peacekeeper was looking around, making notes of everything he saw. While Armen went down through the building and out to where Ludwig awaited him with a coffin for the body, I stayed behind with Finnegan, making notes in my Encyclopaedia. He was busy writing down everything he thought was worthy of further study, or at least it seemed that way to me.

“What do you plan to do now?” I asked him, while trying to come up with a name for the Haunter.

“I will have my men interrogate the former residents to create a broader picture of what happened. It is quite possible that many of them knew about the abuse but did not report it.”

“What kind of punishment would they get if that was the case?”

“It depends on the mood of the King, but it would not be a pleasant nor easy penance. King Egil believes that children must be safeguarded, as they are the ones who will inherit our world. He has punished crimes of neglect and abuse in many inventive and torturous ways, such as stranding a

father, convicted of starving his child, on an island and leaving him to survive on whatever sustenance he could gather with his own hands. Another offender was tied to a tree during a thunderstorm as punishment for beating her young daughter.”

I wondered if such punishments reduced recidivism, but it sounded more like delayed death sentences to me.

“Does Evergreen not have jails?”

“Of course, but the King believes that unique punishments are more effective.”

I closed my tome and put it in my belt bag along with my simple pen. “I have to tell you something,” I started.

He stopped looking through a cupboard and turned to face me.

“Earlier, when Savant Pawn aided me in ascertaining the name of the Haunter, I witnessed the young boy’s past through a forced hallucination. There was a man who found the boy and tried to save him. He couldn’t go to you guys for help, since he was in the city illegally, but it seems he was caught and punished for theft before he could free the boy. Do you know what might have happened to him? He was the one living in the apartment across the hall.”

“A squatter?” Finnegan asked. “We don’t have a lot of those in Easthall, so he might be easy enough to locate. Usually, those who are here illegally are tossed outside the city walls with a stern warning, but thieves are often publicly humiliated in Great Market and then thrown in jail for up to eight weeks.”

“Would it be possible to set him free? He tried to do a good deed. The tools he was caught trying to steal were for freeing the boy, but the stepmother who locked Emil in the attic found out about it and reported him.”

“I will look into it. The King may pardon him once he learns of the man’s good intentions, but squatters are hated in Evergreen, so it will be impossible for me to do anything about it myself. And, regardless of the intentions, a crime is still a crime.”

I nodded. It was worth a try at least. I personally couldn’t fault someone for living in the city illegally. The forests bordering Evergreen probably weren’t very safe and from Emil’s memories he seemed like a genuinely good person who was just on the wrong side of the law.

“You will be the new owner of this building, isn’t that right?” the Lieutenant then asked, changing subject.

“It’s *that kind* of Quest reward, yes, but I didn’t realise people used to live here that recently. I thought it would just be a single house that’d been long-abandoned.”

“Haunted houses and buildings will remain haunted in the eyes of its former residents,” he remarked. “I highly doubt any of them will wish to move back in.”

“Where will they live instead?”

“The city will rehouse them nearby if they are willing or move them to a different district.”

I blinked in surprise at that. “There’s a system in place for this kind of scenario?”

“It happens frequently enough in a city as big as Evergreen that there’s been an organised way to deal with the aftermath for centuries.”

I guess that makes sense.

“So I just get the entire building for myself then?”

“You could rent it out like the Explorers’ Guild often do with the houses they reclaim. They would probably be interested in buying it from you, if you don’t want the hassle of dealing with a building this size.”

I nodded. “I’ll have to think about it,” I replied.

I wasn’t truly that keen on staying here now that I knew the full story of what’d gone down. It was something that I could relate to the former residents on quite easily when I really thought about it.

Armen was saying a small prayer for the grave in front of us. Ludwig was standing nearby, having accompanied us to the cemetery. The First Lieutenant was still back at the apartment building, joined by several of his men. Before we’d left with the coffin, I’d overheard one of the men saying that they’d found Emil’s father in a nearby tavern, where he’d apparently been drinking himself into a stupor ever since leaving his apartment several weeks ago.

Part of me wondered how many of the former residents were afflicted with the same delusions and insanity that many Explorers had suffered. Bellany and the man whom Armen had healed were both taken to a nearby hospital-like building where they would be cured, hopefully, over the next few months. It was clear that the damage caused by the Haunter still remained, even though it was gone, and it was a sobering reminder that I could just as easily have been amongst them if not for my ability to break free of the apparition’s attack.

We were in Easthall cemetery, which was exclusively reserved for residents of the district to be buried in. It had been styled like a park, with trees and hills and carefully-maintained flowers. A few crypts for long-established families sat in the side of some of the hills, while the one where Emil had been buried was retained for those of unknown heritage.

I said a small prayer as well, before heading back to the Guild district.

The Adventurers’ Guild Hall was thronging just like the last time, and I had to wait in line for the counter where quests could be handed in.

“Did you end up on a name for the Phantasm Shade?” Ludwig asked.

“I was thinking of calling it the Humming Horror.”

“There’s no telling if the humming is a part of its traits,” he replied.

“I’ll keep thinking about it.”

I’d written down the exorcism guide, and the few traits that would probably reoccur if a similar entity were to appear, such as the mind attacks, the attempts to frighten and cause emotions to feed on, and the ability to inflict long-lasting and debilitating insanity. For the image, I’d made a very basic sketch of what the Haunter had looked like, but that probably would be a unique facet and not a general thing, since its shape had borrowed from Emil’s true appearance in life.

“Next please,” said the Guild Clerk and I stepped forward, handing her my quest flier and Card. Saoirse wasn’t here to alter the appearance of my Card, but the woman didn’t look past the rank and role.

“Excellent work, Exorcist Ryūta,” she commended me. “Once news of the successful exorcism reaches us, you will receive your reward and the deed to the apartment building.”

Ludwig stepped up and showed her his Card. I purposefully avoided looking at it, since I thought it would be rude. “That won’t be necessary. I was there and observed the exorcism. First Lieutenant Finnegan stationed in Easthall can also attest to it if necessary.”

“I see,” she replied. “That won’t be required, given that you are willing to vouch for him, Savant Pawn.”

He cast me a grin as she fetched one of the younger clerks and had him collect my reward.

“We have also received word from Camp Dusk Hill, saying that you helped exorcise a Greedling that was stealing their weapons and armour. An Officer named Clarke vouched for your effectiveness and said that, given all the circumstances and a personal agreement between yourself and the officers, you were due the full reward of the Investigation Quest, despite not retrieving all the stolen items.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” I replied.

Ludwig slapped me on the back. “Can you believe this young sprite is only eighteen!?”

The woman nodded. “He is quite the rising star indeed.”

I tried not to feel embarrassed by their praise, and was glad for the distraction when the other Clerk returned with two separate coin pouches and a scroll in a leather case.

The woman took the rewards and pushed them towards me, returning my Card after having added my completed quests to its ‘history’, or whatever it was their ‘quest completed’ tablet did to Guild Cards.

With forty-nine gold added to my growing fortune, as well as a deed to the apartment building in Easthall, I felt pretty good about myself.

As Ludwig, Armen, and I left the counter, I spotted Potts by the quest boards again. He was wearing a monocle over his right eye. I was a bit too exhausted to go say hi, and the Incarnate must’ve picked up on it, because he quickly said, “Renji and the rest told me to pass on a message, like I’m some damn messenger pigeon.”

“What’s the message?”

“They’re taking a rest at his apartment in Hearth, it’s the district just north of Taverna. His building is the one with red bricks, or so he said.”

“They’re already done with their quest?”

“Seems the young girl did really well from the sounds of it.”

“I see. I’ll go find them. Are you coming along too?”

“Nah, Mortl wants me to meet up with a Tracker and a team of Witch Hunters to find Kasbar. It seems he discovered that Mortl had a scout on him and vanished shortly after. We believe he’s back inside the city, but it’ll be tricky to find him.”

“Do you think he might come after me?” I wondered.

“It’s certainly possible if he thinks you still have the real Music Box.”

“I will remain by Ryūta’s side. No harm shall befall him.”

“I will also guard you, my Liege!” exclaimed Jules.

A few heads turned to look at me at the sound of the wooden Knight’s voice, and Ludwig quickly ushered me towards the door, as though just now realising we’d been trading secrets in public

“Another thing, Renji said he was approved for Role Advancement two days from now. He’s allowed to bring people with him, so you should go. It’ll be an important thing to witness.”

“Thanks Ludwig.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll get word to you once I have some news about Kasbar.”

With that, I left the Guild Hall in the company of Armen, in search of a carriage that could take us to my friends.