

## 10 - Ghost in the Castle I

I scratched my chin as I walked back to Rana's apartment, looking at the quest that had been thrust upon me. From the description, I already had a few guesses about what kind of apparition could be behind it, and, according to Owl, I didn't have to worry about being eaten or anything. That said, I wondered if I had what it took to exorcise this entity that was troubling the Margrave of Lundia.

<i>'Ghost in the Castle'</i>		
<b>EXORCISM QUEST</b>	<b>TYPE:</b> <i>Complex</i>	<b>RANK:</b> <i>Initiate</i>
<p><i>The Esteemed Margrave Finn Serelliam has been troubled by a Haunting in the East Wing of his Castle since being appointed as the Lord of Lundia three years ago.</i></p> <p><i>Although some builders and servants have been injured as a result of the Spectre in the East Wing, there are no recorded deaths and thus the East Wing has simply been abandoned instead of bringing in an Exorcist and making it a public embarrassment.</i></p> <p><i>None of the servants, guards, or other people in the Castle have ever seen the Spectre in person, though most of the rooms of the East Wing are affected by its presence, as sounds of footsteps and shifting furniture are a daily occurrence.</i></p> <p><i>The Esteemed Margrave's new wife has raised concerns about the Haunting in recent weeks and you were therefore appointed to deal with it. It is of the utmost importance that you ensure your work is as discreet as possible.</i></p> <p><i>The full reward is only paid out after a successful Exorcism of the Haunting Spectre can be confirmed. There is no partial reward for the identification of the Spectre.</i></p>		
<b>REWARD:</b> <i>2 Gold &amp; 50 Silver Crowns</i>		

Still, if I could pull it off, I could expect a pretty sizeable payout. With that, I wouldn't have to worry about money for a while, although Master Owl had advised I invest the money into a better Staff and Focus, since, by his own admission, the For-Rent ones I had were worthless and hindering

my full potential. Most of all I wanted to replace the hand-me-down Spirit Goggles. True to my own promise, I hadn't taken them off since Hamsel's Rest, but they were far from comfortable and the brass had begun causing some serious skin irritation around my eyes.

"That doesn't sound too bad," Rana commented after I arrived to her apartment and showed her the quest flier.

"Maybe you don't need to accompany," I said, even though I wanted her to come. But saying how I felt might put her off.

"No, I'll go with you. Margrave Serelliam has a bad reputation. And just because the quest says that no one has died, you can't be sure with these things. After all, rule one of Guild Quests is: '*Never trust the quest info*'."

"Nobody told me that," I replied with a frown.

"They really ought to put it right next to the Quest Board... A lot of Adventurers die as a result of taking a quest by its word. You're always dealing with unreliable information at the best of times, and, in the worst cases, you might have Quest Givers who understate the danger of their requests."

"Why would they do that? Also, I thought quests were issued by the Guild itself."

"Most quests are from a third-party that goes through the Guild to have it resolved and they pay the reward money, except in the cases where it affects the region, as those are sponsored by local Lord. For example, I'm fairly sure that last Exorcism Quest was funded by the Margrave, since Hamsel's Rest was a productive village that supplied crops and livestock to Lundia and thus he wanted it made hospitable again."

"But why would someone lie about their quest?"

"The reward for a quest is proportional to its difficulty type and required rank, so by lying and understating the danger, the Quest Giver pays less to the Guild. It's not a huge problem anymore, but it still happens, especially from people whose social standing makes them impervious to a rebuke from the Guild..."

"Like the Margrave?"

"Yeah. And I mean, for a 'Complex' Initiate quest, this reward is way too high."

"Maybe it's seen as hush money?" I guessed.

"It wouldn't be the first time an aristocrat has done something like that."

"Apparently he only wanted Owl to take the quest."

"That's highly suspect," she replied ominously. "But, if you complete the quest, you might end up in the Margrave's good graces, which is not a bad place to be. In the Guilds your reputation is more important than your Rank, Role, and accomplishments after all."

"Really? That seems illogical."

"Yeah. There have been many rising stars in the Guild who crossed the wrong aristocrat or had nasty rumours spread about them and ended up not being able to take on any quests."

"Sounds like you have personal experience with it," I replied boldly.

The expression on Rana's face said it all and I regretted my words.

"I've seen it to good people more than once," she replied after a moment of silence.

"What happened to them?" I asked, but she shook her head, not wanting to answer the question.

"I'll put my armour on, then we can go to the Castle," she said, forcefully shifting the topic.

I sat on the hard couch in the main room for twenty minutes, regretting being so brazen with my words. I'd clearly brought up some bad memories for her.

Eventually, Rana emerged from her bedroom, her dark plate-armour covering her body over the arming jacket and hide pants she always wore. It was impressive that she was able to put on all the armour by herself, especially the parts that covered her back where her hands would have a hard time reaching.

Before I could get up from the couch, she seemed to remember something and went back into her room, returning a moment later with a square mirror that was half-a-metre wide and long. It had a little metal stand and she placed it on the table next to the couch.

"You wanted to see your reflection right?"

I was surprised she remembered. "Isn't a mirror *this size* super expensive?"

She nodded. "This one is probably worth five gold crowns."

I nearly choked on my own spit.

Before I could ask why she'd spend so much money on vanity, she quickly added, "It was a gift."

"Ah," I mumbled, "that's a nice gift."

She seemed to blush quite a lot at that. The response made me feel a knot of dread form in the pit of my stomach. Whoever had gifted her *this* was clearly a past lover. Or maybe a present one? I didn't like the thought, so I tried to shove it out of my mind, as I looked into the mirror and saw my face.

I blinked in surprise. The face that stared back at me wasn't mine.

Rana watched in silence as I put my fingers up to my face and poked-and-prodded it. My jawline was more pronounced, though my cheeks were rounder, and the shape of my eyes had changed into

something less charming and more sinister-looking. But most surprising were my irises, as they had become like tiny dark-blue galaxies full of multi-coloured stars, with a single black hole in the centre. Now I understood why she had made *that* comment about my eyes, because, even staring at them myself, I felt my attention pulled into them.

My hair had also changed a bit. It still had the same black colour, but it was fuller and messy, as though untameable by any comb. Even my skin was spotless and perfect, as though I was looking at a filtered image of myself, like those from a photo booth.

"I look like a model," I blurted out, which made her laugh.

I blushed a bit, when I realised how conceited *that* sounded. "Does this happen to everyone?" I asked.

"The way I understand it, your changes are according to your Attributes. Height and build are governed by Dexterity, Strength, and Vitality, while your face and hair seem to be governed by Soul, Acumen, and Intelligence."

"What about Pact and Luck?" I asked.

She shrugged in response.

I frowned. No wonder Harleigh had such a perfect appearance, since his stats were high all around... *Life truly is unfair.*

"I feel like I'm staring at a different person," I told her. From the rest of my body I could tell nothing much had changed, but it was as though someone else's head had been put on my neck... It was very disorienting and damaging to my self-image, but maybe I could come to like this new face of mine eventually? After all, I did look markedly more handsome than before coming here. Now that I thought about it though, most Adventurers I had seen were quite good-looking. Master Owl might even had looked decent, if he hadn't seemingly abandoned personal hygiene and welfare.

"My face didn't change much," she said. "For me it was just my build that changed. I was kind of pudgy before I came here."

"Pudgy?" I asked and couldn't help but chuckle.

"Hey!" she complained with a smile.

"Nothing wrong with pudgy," I replied.

We stood outside a small island connected to the rest of the Noble Ward by a single bridge. Around the island was a four-metre-wide moat and upon the island itself stood a horse-shoe-shaped castle, with a large central building and two smaller wings. At the centre of the island was a large courtyard

with a garden, which featured a small hedge maze and perfectly-trimmed trees and bushes, as well as flowerbeds in dozens of colours.

At the opposite side of the bridge from us stood two imposing guards, whose aura was comparable to Rana's, meaning that, if they were Adventurers or Mercenaries, they'd be Vanguard. As though reading my exact thoughts, Rana said, "I recognise those guys. They're in the Mercenary Guild. I think they're at least Seeker rank, might even be Eminent rank."

"Why would anyone of such high rank work as guards?" I wondered.

She looked at me as though wondering if my question was serious. "It's probably well-paid. And just because someone is strong or experienced, it doesn't mean they wouldn't jump at the opportunity for an easy job."

"I suppose I can understand that," I replied after a moment. I looked back at the guards, then asked, "Shall we?"

Rana nodded and immediately adopted a screw-off-with-you expression like the first time I'd seen her in the Market Ward.

As we crossed the bridge, one of the men halted us with a hand and gave a curt nod to Rana, perhaps as a sign of respect for a fellow Guild member. She returned it with an up-nod. Giving her attributes, she was actually taller than them, though as guys they had bulkier bodies. I wondered if she could take on both in a fight, but one look at their stances made me feel fairly confident that she could. After all, they appraised her like one might size-up a dangerous foe.

"You're here for the Exorcism?" the right one asked in a gruff voice. Though I couldn't see his face behind the helmet, his voice made me think he was at least forty. Perhaps such a job wasn't bad to take once you got older, although, given that this was a fantasy world with magic absurdity, I wondered if retirement was really a necessity for Adventurers and Mercenaries. Master Owl looked like he was over fifty, but he still moved with far more athleticism than I.

I fumbled with the button of my belt bag, then extracted the folded-up quest flier and showed it to him.

"Guild Cards please," he said in a tone that invited no argument after reading the flier. I shared a tense glance with Rana, but then begrudgingly obliged.

The Guard looked at our Cards, seeming most interested in Rana's information, which, although it bothered me, made me feel that there was nothing wrong with my familiars. It was, of course, quite possible that they didn't know a lot about familiars and thus didn't notice that Armen, who floated next to me, was a peculiarity.

After handing back our Cards, the other Guard left his post to fetch someone from the West Wing. While we waited for his return, the other man said to Rana, "You really ought to give the Arena another chance."

My companion didn't deign him with a reply, so he instead turned to me and said, as though she wasn't standing *right there*, "*Lady Thorn* here is one of the best fighters the Arena has ever seen. I never lost a bet on her, but, for some reason, she decided to leave the scene. We were all very disappointed by that..."

"That's all in the past," she suddenly replied in a dangerous tone.

"Can't have been more than a year," he said.

I could tell she didn't want to talk about it. It was clearly some dark history that was better left unacknowledged. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, but I knew that it would be rude to pry, so I tried to square up my shoulders as much as I could and took on what I hoped was menacing and professional glare.

"We're not here to talk about the past," I said. "I have a job to do, and the more we talk the more time I waste."

The Guard let out a huff and seemed poised to make some scathing remark, but then the other man returned with a stern-looking woman in a fancy blue dress. She had a weak blue aura that seemed to take on the shape of thorns. Her grey-blond hair was done up into a shape most analogous to a beehive.

"Come with me," she said and the two of us walked past the Guards without another word.

As we entered into the courtyard, we walk past the colourful flowerbeds and the hedge maze, while being steered towards the East Wing of the Castle. As I truly appreciated the size of it, I realised how ridiculous it was for the Margrave to left it abandoned due to a Haunting.

We came to a stop before a large set of doors and she turned to face us.

"You may only enter the East Wing and you may only use this door. There will be consequences if you venture into the main Castle or loiter around the courtyard."

"Understood," I replied. The rules seemed arbitrary and controlling, but I felt that simple obedience would go further here than any sort of argumentative obstinance.

She then waved a young blonde boy over from where he'd been working on one of the flower beds, pruning the dead buds and removing weeds.

"Lukas here will be your guide and can be relied upon to answer questions about the layout of the East Wing and its rooms. Can't you, Lukas?"

“Yes, Madam, of course!” the blonde boy replied eager. He had a very intense light-green aura that seemed far stronger than any Lundia Native I’d encountered thus far. If I didn’t know any better, I would’ve thought he was an Otherworlder like me, although I had no idea what kind of Role his aura could indicate. But then again, he seemed only about twelve or thirteen, with a high-pitched voice that’d yet to undergo puberty, and, from my brief experience, all Otherworlders came to Mondus at my age or thereabouts, with puberty seeming to be the great decider. At least that’d been the case for all the people I’d seen stand in line at the Guild for their Role Assignment.

“Once you have completed your work, you may notify the Guards or you may send Lukas here to fetch me. You are to leave the premises immediately afterwards.”

“Understood,” I said again.

“Good. I leave you to it then,” she said and left.

Lukas did a mock bow in front of us and said, “I’m Lukas, nice to make your acquaintance Mister and Miss.”

“I’m Ryūta,” I said, “and this is my guard Rana.”

“I’ve never met an Exorcist before!” he said excitedly. “You have very strange glasses.”

Before I could reply, he turned to look at Rana who was almost twice his height. I had the sense that when Lukas grew up, he would easily stand a head above me.

“You look really strong!” he said in awe.

I indulged him and said, with a grin, “She can take down a goblin in a single strike and fight off a horde all by herself.”

“Wow!”

“Now, Lukas, would you mind showing us around the East Wing. If you know which areas are most affected by the Haunting, please take us there first.”

“Yes, Mister Exorcist!”