

144 – Humming Haunter II

Armen and I hurried down the stairs to the bottom floor, while the unconscious Bellany lay in his arms. The humming was shaking the entire building to its foundations, making dust and particulates drizzle down from the ceiling and walls.

However, before we had even made it out, the violent shaking stilled to nothingness, but the humming persisted vaguely.

“I think it must really not want us to go to the attic,” I said.

“With such a potent attack, it will likely be exhausted.”

I looked at him in surprise, “What do you mean?”

“As with anything, it must have an energy reserve that it can exhaust. It was quite a potent attack it utilised to burn through your wards, and thus I believe it may have overexerted itself.”

Despite the shock I’d gotten from the jumpscare earlier, I couldn’t help but laugh a bit.

“Do you find my guess amusing?”

“No, no. Quite the contrary. It’s a perspective I’d never considered, truth be told.”

“There is no such thing as infinite energy.”

“Not even for Saoirse?”

“It would be interesting to see how much it would take to exhaust her.”

“...Did you mean to make it sound... *suspect*?” I asked with a teasing grin.

Armen turned his head away, just as we stepped out of the doorway and went down the steps out in front of the apartment building. Immediately members of the Explorers Group came running.

“Just because I have this body now, do not make assumptions about me.”

“It’s fine if you have such urges,” I told him.

Armen halted in his step and for a moment I thought I’d pissed him off.

“Maybe we should visit the Pleasure district together then.”

Now it was my turn to blush.

“What happened!?” asked a man as he came over to where we’d stopped. He looked very worried as he took in Bellany’s condition.

I had to fight to suppress the heat colouring my face. Fortunately, Armen took over.

“She will be alright. Thanks to Exorcist Ryūta’s ward, she has not sustained any serious injury to her mental state.”

How can you tell? Do your healing powers work on the mind as well?

“I told them what they wanted to hear,” he replied through our bond.

I blinked. *You just lied!*

He let two men take Bellany to where their other comrade was currently laying in a sleep-like state, following Armen’s treatment.

“You seem excited about it. You are a bad influence.”

For the next hour, I sat near the entrance to the apartment building, keeping tabs on Jules with the crows I’d placed around the rooms on the different floors, as well as the one riding on his head. While I used my right ear and eye on what the crows observed, I used my left to read through entries while I flipped through my Encyclopaedias and the scattered notes I’d bought in Fortress Major.

The Haunter kept trying to scare Jules and break his spirit. Although he kept making little sounds or utterances every time he was jumpscared by arms flying out of the walls and ceiling at him, he seemed no worse for wear than when he’d started an hour before. I did want to lead him straight to the attic, but I was wary of the Haunter’s ability to kill any of the crows that set foot in there, so I was waiting for the time being.

“The censer is looking like a good thing to try,” I told Armen.

“I get the feeling that you will want me to carry it around within its lair, while you remain out here where it is safe.”

I nodded.

“Very well. It will be good for my image.”

“...Your what?”

“My image. I will be touted as a saviour and hero, while you will be called a slouch.”

I grinned. “You’re very prickly today. I bet I really got under your skin earlier.”

“I was momentarily wrong-footed by the suggestion that I might have recovered my... vitality.”

“And have you?”

“Why are you so interested in knowing? It is uncomfortable.”

“Don’t act like we’re strangers,” I told him. “You know *things* about me.”

“Not by choice!” he said quickly and with some distress in his deep voice.

“Isn’t it fair that I at least get to know a bit about you in return?”

“**Absolutely not. I will go find the censer, while you prepare the Gravebloom Incense,**” he said and then marched over to the Explorers’ stash of relics.

I shook my head with a smile still on my lips. He was surprisingly-fun to tease, though I was slightly curious to find out if a True Undead could have normal urges.

Saoirse, can you hear me? I’d like a status report on the Siren if possible.

No response came, which was worrying.

I guess I’ll try again later...

I’d gone through the various notes, and while there were a lot of variations of Phantasms, the consensus was that it was impossible to destroy them when they weren’t in a manifested visage. Given that I could see its body with my Observer briefly after it launched a scare attack, it meant that it was manifesting during those moments. The issue was how to exorcise it during those times, since it was only a brief window of opportunity before it went invisible and became immune to attacks.

I thought back to the ritual trap that Owl had made to catch the Skinstealer and pin it in place, but that one only worked on physical things, and it was hard to set up and use. Plus, it was only recommended for really niche scenarios, based on the various owners of the Encyclopaedias and their notes.

Fortunately for me, the fact that it was part Shade meant that I didn’t need to go chasing it across the city like with the Rotmaker. From the other few ‘pure’ Phantasms entries, it was clear that they weren’t a type of entity bound to a small area, rather seeming to flit about within large expanses, believed to be because they were created by emotions and thus were bound to anywhere humans existed in large numbers, rather than most other entities that were bound to specific areas of significance to them, such as place of death.

What I was truly curious about, however, was the way it came to be as a half-Shade half-Phantasm. From the Mare entry, there wasn’t really a specific origin, rather just being mentioned as appearing in cities, perhaps because of stress or strong negative emotions expressed during sleep.

I felt like there had to be some specific reason that two entity types mixed. And while there were limitations for the entity, due to its mixed type, it also had many strengths that was making exorcising it a difficult prospect.

Armen came back to me with the censer hanging from his black gauntlet.

“While I prepare *this*, I need you to play interrogator,” I told him.

“**What do you need me to inquire about?**”

“I want to know how long this Haunter has been here, and, if they know, the history of the apartment building, because I bet there is some cause for the Haunter’s emergence. Such as, what were the residents like? Did anyone die a gruesome death here? That sort of thing.”

“**Understood. You seem to be enjoying yourself,**” he then commented.

“I’m taking it serious, I swear.”

“**But you are smiling.**”

I reached up to touch my face and realised he was right. Plus, I *had* been in a surprisingly-good mood for the last hour or so, despite nearly having Bellany become afflicted with insanity.

“It’s been a while since I had a tough case to crack,” I replied, before realising it made me sound like a jaded detective, who’d been stuck as a traffic cop for years, until finally getting called in for a mystery only he could solve.

“**It is for the best that I handle the inquiries, given your current disposition,**” he said.

I nodded. “You can be my Watson.”

“**I do not know what that is.**”

“I’ll explain it later.”

He walked back to the Explorers, most of whom had returned from the errands I’d sent them on through Bellany. There was neither Sacred Ash nor Gravebloom in sight, but I hadn’t expected them to find either. It, however, meant that I’d have to use my own for the censer. I added just two of the incense sticks, since it was merely an experiment and any more would be wasteful.

How are you feeling, Jules?

“**Quite miffed, my Liege,**” he commented through my mind, his voice clear as a bell.

Through the vision of the crow on his head, I saw that he was looking into a dark kitchen. Silverware, cups, mirrors, pans, bowls, and such was spread all around, with the reflection of each filled with eyes. There were also enormous eyes outside the windows similar to the ones I’d seen earlier on the first floor. They were like black swirls around a brown iris that never blinked, but tracked him as he moved around the room.

Do you feel exhausted? Or some kind of pressure? Anything out of the ordinary?

“**Frustrated, mostly, my Liege. There is no adversary for me to fight! It hops through walls and then scampers away. Quite cowardly, I must say.**”

He obviously wouldn’t be able to strike the Haunter, even if it didn’t run away after every attempt to scare him.

What floor are you on?

“The last one, my Liege. Although there is a ladder in the bedroom here which leads to an attic.”

I chewed my bottom lip in consternation, before making a hasty decision.

I want you to have a look at the attic, to see if there’s anything up there. Even something small and seemingly insignificant might be important.

“At once, my Liege! If it hides itself away up there, I will drive it out!”

Try and protect the crow. The last several I tried to send up there were destroyed.

He did not respond, as he moved through the kitchen and lounge room, but he *did* pick the crow off his head and placed it on his wrist behind the shield, while holding his sword out like a spear, daring anything to attack.

As the *clap* of his feet against the wooden floor resounded through the rooms, the eyes tracked him, while the Haunter kept trying to scare him into submission with a cascade of arms, brief glimpses of a malformed humanoid shape, shadows against walls that morphed into monsters, arms reaching out from under furniture, the works. Strangely, it didn’t throw objects at him, like most shades normally would’ve, and it made me realise that, despite its Shade-half, it was maybe more like eight percent Phantasm and twenty percent Shade, instead of fifty-fifty, hence why there were so few traits of the latter.

In a way, the Shade seemed like a weak entity that the Phantasm had latched onto and was using as its vessel. As soon as I had that thought, I was starting to come up with a potential origin scenario for it in my head.

At the same time, Jules had put away his sword and was using his free hand to climb the ladder up to the attic, where pitch-darkness awaited. His shield was kept between him and the dark, though it would do nothing to protect him I thought.

Half his body emerged into the attic space before the crow I was controlling could look out at the interior. It was hard to see thanks to the darkness, except, it wasn’t just the absence of light. It was the Phantasm’s miasma in so dense a cloud that it seemed like tar.

“There is a dead body up here, my Liege,” Jules said, before something rapidly slashed out of the dark and my connection to the clone of Karasumany was severed.

Jules, are you alright?

“It took my head, I am embarrassed to say. However, I have gotten a good look at the body. It belongs to a child.”