

143 – Humming Haunter I

Karasumany’s clones were spreading themselves out in the various rooms of each floor’s apartments, while Bellany was helping me lay down thin lines of Sacred Corpse Ash in the doorways and windowsills. It was fairly clear that the entity could go through floors, but, theoretically, ‘sealing’ entryways should make rooms impenetrable, or, at the very least, harder to enter.

The Explorer was also leaving small piles of salt around from the pouch she’d brought, making sure to put them close to wherever Jules had discovered a strong signal with the Energy Stone.

I was seated on a chair while Armen watched the two go around the rooms. Given that he was a Priest Crusader, he was clearly the trump card against the Haunter, if it was indeed a Mare. Though I was leaning more Mare-adjacent with every new discovery.

As I sifted through every room of the apartment building, using each crow positioned within as security cameras that had vision greater than infrared, in that they saw the supernatural, I came to an uncomfortable conclusion.

I couldn’t see the Haunter.

Rather, what I *could* see was a miasma of sorts that grew thicker the higher we went, with a hitherto-unexplored attic space being the most densely-packed. Unfortunately, trying to observe the attic for long was impossible, as every crow I sent there only had a couple seconds to look around, before they were consumed by darkness and my connection severed.

This presented a problem though, because I’d assumed that anything that was a Shade-type was simply incorporeal and thus invisible to normal eyes, but not those of a Watcher or Observer familiar. However, it seemed that this entity, and perhaps the Mare described in my Encyclopaedia, were more Phantasm than Shade, and Phantasms were like a collection of emotions that only seemed to manifest when they had a vessel, or, in the case of the Mare, when they were performing their magic and became Shade-like.

As with the Rotmaker, or the Red Haze that Ludwig’s Succubus conjured, Phantasms *were* ‘visible’ as a vague miasma or energy, but seemingly impossible to exorcise unless bound to something physical. The problem with this was that I couldn’t tell exactly where it would appear in the building, since the miasma was draped all throughout it.

A shriek sounded from the bedroom that Bellany was in. I immediately broke off my connection to my crows and ran to find her. Armen had reached her first and was looking around, his weapon drawn but no enemy in sight.

I looked through the eyes of the crow on my shoulder and saw a fresh set of glowing dark-greenish-brown claw-marks on the window, as though something had been pressed against the glass, but was unable to get in.

“It was just outside the window!” she said, her voice cracking.

Her aura was in an utter disarray, but I still managed to pick up on the self-doubt she felt and the distinct fear she had of me not believing her or thinking she was crazy.

I nodded. “Jules, check the window with the stone.”

The wooden Knight ambled in and did as I ordered. “**My Liege, see how bright it glows!**”

“Did you hear it humming?” I asked her.

“Not this time.”

“What did you see?”

“It was like a warped man, with a large grin splitting a strange head and black pits for eyes, as well as clawed hands.”

I frowned.

I was correct that my first guess was wrong. This isn't a Mare, but it is similar in some ways.

“Show me your ward.”

Armen helped her to her feet and I had a look at the paper slip.

The bottom was charred slightly. It was clear that it had hit her with its magic, since my own was still untarnished. By my estimation, her ward would survive three more of such attacks, before it broke.

“This Haunter,” I said, “It feeds on fear and has the ability to break a person’s mind. I don’t think the insanity it inflicts is permanent, but I can’t say for sure. Also, the way it feeds means that it doesn’t want to kill its victims, just torment them.”

At my explanation, a tremor rolled through her aura.

“What do we do?”

“For now, avoid looking out the windows or into the hallway. It can’t enter anywhere we sealed with the Ash.”

At least I hope it can't...

She nodded. A lot of her earlier confidence had seemingly evaporated, but I didn't begrudge her. After all, this wasn't a task meant for someone like her. She was *just* a normal human.

We'd gone through all of the first floor and I was steadily collecting evidence for how to proceed with the exorcism. It was clear that it wasn't a Mare we were dealing with, but it was very similar in that it seemed to thrive off of negative emotions, which it itself sought to create through scaring and, possibly, making its victims see things.

It also seemed to dislike light, such as when Bellany had lit up the candle in the lantern, but it was possibly just a coincidence, since it hadn't happened more than once. The Sacred Ash also kept it at bay, though it was smart enough to still manage its scare tactics from outside sealed-off areas.

Though I didn't like to admit it, it had a lot of commonalities with Demons, but it was possibly thanks to the negative emotions that'd given rise to it in the first place.

I didn't know exactly what entity I was dealing with here, but the exorcism guide for the Mare in my Encyclopaedia had mentioned trapping it. This was done by tricking it into manifesting, by having someone go to sleep in its territory. It seemed clear that a similar thing was necessary with this Haunter, though instead of going to sleep, the trap would require tricking it into attempting to scare someone.

After managing to get the Mare to manifest, the next step was to somehow purify it, but this was where it got complicated, as there were several options mentioned: using holy magic to consecrate it; purifying the pillow of the sleeping victim, to which the Mare would be attached; or, somehow, using Contain Spirit on it and then purifying the vessel it was forced into. There was also a note about the potential of entering the sleeping victim's dreams, but it seemed more theory than practice.

Except for the one with Contain Spirit, the rest were seemingly useless here, and even that one was far-fetched as it required a binding name to be known. However, I thought that maybe getting to the root of the negative emotions that'd birthed the Mare-like Haunter would be a good start. Also, I wanted to check the attic, since it seemed thickest there. Part of me assumed that it might have some kind of small vessel that it was keeping up there and defending, hence why every crow I tried to send in was immediately destroyed. If this was the case, I might be able to get rid of it in a similar way as the Rotmaker, though hopefully with a less catastrophic fallout.

“Exorcist, come look!” Bellany suddenly called, pointing to the floor of the kitchen in the apartment across the hall.

I stepped over the line of Sacred Ash in the doorway of the apartment I was in, then hurried across the hall where I was exposed to the Haunter, before stepping over the Ash in the doorway and joining Bellany. Armen was next to her, while Jules was going through the hallway, taking the task of looking for energy spikes very seriously.

She was pointing down at a pile of the salt she’d placed around the rooms. It had been partially knocked over and something had dragged through it. It was possible that one of us had accidentally done it, but when I looked at the trajectory of where it led to, I spotted another pile of salt disturbed in an identical fashion. It was as though something invisible had floated through and knocked the salt over.

This made me realise something that was quite unsettling. The Haunter could traverse the rooms even though they were sealed. It was possible that it couldn’t violate the sealed rooms, but it could definitely still move through them while invisible and impossible to see with my Observer.

Jules, return to me.

A moment later the wooden Knight stood in the hallway.

“My Liege, what is your command?”

I took the lantern that Bellany had placed on a kitchen table and which lit up the room, handing it to him. Although it was bright midday outside, not much of the light actually seemed to make it into the building on this floor, and I expected it to be worse on the next. It would no doubt be entirely pitch-black on the third.

“Take this lantern and the Energy Stone to the next floor, I will be watching what happens through one of my crows.”

“Have I become bait, my Liege?”

“Yes.”

The Explorer looked at me as though I was heartless, and I felt it necessary to defend myself from such an accusation. “He will be fine. I want to see if the light will make the Haunter appear.”

With a gesture, I sent the crow on my shoulder over to sit on top of the tin helmet Jules wore on his head. Then he went to the staircase and climbed to the floor above, one echoey wooden *clop* at a time.

Bellany sat down next to where I’d planted myself, while Armen stayed close.

Through the eyes of the crow on Jules’ head, I saw as the surroundings became darker and the Energy Stone in his left hand glowed brighter. It wasn’t a very useful tool for a Phantasm in so small

as space, I considered, as it pinged out to even minor energy fluctuations. When the Phantasm was *everywhere*, its utility was really minor.

The light of the lantern cut through the unnatural darkness, casting a glow across the wooden floor and illuminating the stone walls. It wasn't the same as the Larder Keeper's shadows which actively ate light, but more like an oppressive blanket of malevolent energy that prevented outside light from entering the building.

As Jules feet clopped down the floor, the lantern's light reached the two doorways opposite each other, and a humming started to emanate from the same direction.

Then suddenly both doors shot open and dozens of many-clawed arms flew out of them towards the Knight.

“**Oh my,**” he exclaimed in surprise, before they overwhelmed him.

But then they vanished just as quickly as they'd come, and I noticed many of the arms being pulled through the ceiling to the floor above, as though wires being spooled in.

“I think it just tried to scare him,” I said out loud. “It must not be smart enough to realise it cannot feed on him.”

“**Are you sure it is unable?**” Armen asked.

“Well... no, but I'm fairly sure—”

My words were cut off by a loud humming that made my skin crawl, as it seemed to come from right behind me.

I turned around and looked out the window, nearly falling out of my seat when I saw what was watching me.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered.

Enormous eyes were pressed against the windows, staring directly at me.

Next to me I heard Bellany panic as the ward on her clothes smouldered.

I quickly pulled out my Barrier Ring Focus and started channelling Soul Barrier.

The pressure on my body increased, feeling like my robe-coat gained four kilos. Then my ward quickly smouldered and became ash.