

148 – A Two-Pronged Exorcism

I studied the intricate ward that Ludwig had crafted, while Finnegan was trying to psych himself up for accompanying me inside the haunted building. The ward was leagues more complex than anything I’d ever made, and while the ink was still drying, I pressed it against one of the pages in the back of the mostly-empty Encyclopaedia that I was using for taking notes. The impression was one I would be sure to study diligently, as the Incarnate had said it was great for dealing with Demons and their attempts to attack your mind.

“Are you ready?” I asked the Peacekeeper.

“Do you just want me to be an observer?” he asked.

“There is not much that you could do,” I told him honestly. “So, yes. But if you’d like to wait until I’ve completely exorcised the Haunter, then I—”

“No, it’s fine,” he quickly answered, before I could give him an out.

“Armen will be on hand, so no harm will befall you.”

The Priest Crusader nodded solemnly.

“That is a relief,” he answered, though his aura told me he was lying.

Ludwig was enjoying the show, sitting on one of the boxes the Explorers had brought and smoking his Gravebloom cigarette. “I’m keepin’ an eye on things from out here as well, Finny, so don’t you worry about a thing.”

The Peacekeeper frowned.

I got up from where I’d been sitting on the ground, dusting off the back of my robe-coat.

Do you remember the plan? I asked Armen.

“**I do.**”

“Follow me,” I told Finnegan. He immediately stopped fiddling with the ward attached to the front of his chestplate.

I was the first to cross the threshold into the building, with Armen right behind me, and Finn bringing up the rear.

That pressure I’d felt every time I’d entered the building was assailing me again, but the ward sigil quickly began to glow with a faint golden-orange hue, dispelling it quite effectively. It almost felt like the air around us cleared up a bit and made breathing easier.

Striding to the centre of the hallway, I pulled out my Blood Chalk and quickly got to work making first the ‘bait’ and then the trap that would force the Haunter to stay corporeal. The exorcism was two-pronged, as we had to first handle the Phantasm, which was dealt with by purifying the vessel it was occupying, i.e. the Shade of Emil. The second part was to exorcise the Shade by performing the proper rites for the body in the attic.

My hope was that luring the Haunter to the bottom-floor would make going into the attic less dangerous, but it was still a worrying prospect, as I would be leaving behind Armen to purify the Phantasm, while I made my way to the attic to perform the second half.

Although I didn’t know exactly what kind of Shade we were dealing with, Ludwig had said that a general funerary rite, such as the Ritual of Obsequy, would work. This was, however, based on the belief that the Shade was relatively-weak. If we were wrong, the second half wouldn’t work and we’d have to take a step back and wait to figure out what kind of Shade it was. Fortunately, there was no way that a failed exorcism with the Ritual of Obsequy would result in something like a Condemned Ifrit, as it didn’t involve fire or any other sort of potential catalyst for change.

I finished the bait and moved on to the trap itself. The bait was a halfmoon shape with the name of the Haunter inscribed on it, alongside a tangled-but-beautiful sigil that Ludwig said invoked a feeling of nostalgia that could draw in any apparition whose name was known. I wondered exactly what kind of nostalgia I’d be invoking in poor Emil, but I guessed it might be his memories of playing with the neighbourhood children.

The trap was more complex than what Owl had used to freeze the Skinstealer. I hadn’t paid close enough attention to what he’d made at the time, but could recall that it had only utilised one sigil. This trap consisted of a large central sigil that was shaped like an abstract flower, within which was the ‘bait’. Around the flower was four orbiting circles with a small sigil each, and which connected to the flower’s ‘stem’ with swooping lines.

When I was done and stepped back, sweat beading on my forehead, Armen looked it over, with Finnegan casting it a brief glance, before continuing to look around with a worried expression. I understood why he was worried, because the humming had begun. Soon the Haunter would try to break our minds with its scares.

Armen gave me a nod. **“You have drawn it well.”**

I knelt back down at the base of the flower and put my hands on the linework, before infusing some of my energy into it. A tiny bit of violet light flowed through the bloodred lines.

After about a minute, the trap was set, ready to trigger. The energy in the trap flowed into the bait in the middle and immediately the humming stopped.

Getting to my feet, I took several steps back and brought the Singing Branch into my hand. Armen hadn't drawn his weapons, but his gauntleted hands were splayed and ready to cast Consecration.

Quiet like a shadow, a shape came down through the ceiling at the far end of the hall. It hovered half a metre off the ground and was slowly moving towards us.

“What...” was all Finnegan was able to get out as he took it in. It was already corporeal, which I hadn't been expecting.

Armen remained still like a statue, and I clenched my teeth and tried not to breathe.

The Haunter had left the attic and its figure was hideous. The air around us darkened as well, as if it'd brought its miasma along.

There was a vaguely-humanoid aspect to its brown-translucent body, which had an uneven and bloated head, thick branch-like arms, and a pot-bellied torso. However, planted diagonally into the head was a large almond-shaped eye with an iris that held three more irises within, and in place of legs were long jellyfish-like tendrils capped with seven-fingered claws.

It drifted across the ground as though carried by the air, dragging its limbs behind it, before reaching the centre of the trap, where it stopped and planted all of its tendril-claws into the floor, as though reaching for the feeling the baiting sigil was emanating.

Then the trap sprung, the flower and its four connected circles lighting up and casting the dark hallway in a violet glow.

Unnervingly, the Haunter did not move nor struggle, as though it hadn't even noticed it was trapped.

“Now!” I yelled to Armen.

A golden light spread across his hands, before he intoned the spell.

“Consecration!”

His magic formed a circle that overlapped the flower trap, its glow making the sigil invisible with its glare and casting the Haunter in stark relief. But, even as its body began to let off white smoke and its clawed limbs burnt away, it did not struggle.

I turned and ran for the stairs, pulling Finnegan along for the first few steps, until he understood what was happening.

While we ascended to the top floor, I had Meigetsu orbit close and prepared to bring out Jules. I thought there might be a slight possibility that, once the Phantasm was gone, the Shade might awaken the ability to throw objects at us to protect itself, like a Poltergeist.

My breathing was laboured and my knees were burning, but I persevered as we hurried up the steps. The sounds of our boots echoed through the building like thunder.

As we got to the fourth floor, I pulled Jules out of the pocket he’d been confined to and placed him on the ground. He quickly grew to his full height, much to the horror of Finnegan.

“He’s our protector,” I said. “Just in case.”

“**How do you do, fellow Knight?**”

Finnegan blinked, dumbfounded by the fact that the wooden human-sized, and headless, puppet spoke.

“Come on,” I said, heading for the room with the ladder to the attic.

The air up here was less dense than it had been previously, making it clear that the dark miasma emanated from the body of the Haunter and thus was currently confined to the bottom levels where it was trapped.

Has the exorcism of the Phantasm completed?

“**Almost,**” answered Armen in my head.

As I made it to the apartment that Emil’s father had owned, I paused for a moment, as those horrible memories resurfaced. I took a deep breath and then went through the doorway and found my way to the ladder.

The obscuring darkness was mostly lifted here, but the attic was still incredibly dark as I looked up at the square hole in the ceiling.

“The body is up there?” the Peacekeeper asked, his face hardened into a serious expression.

“It is,” I said.

Kōtama, light up my surroundings.

Pure white light blossomed to life on my ring, before spreading and banishing all the shadows around us.

Although there shouldn’t be any danger, I sent Jules up first, before following behind him with my staff in my right hand and my left pulling me up the rungs.

“**Ah! My head. I have found it, my Liege.**”

Finnegan was below me, also climbing up, but at the words he froze and cast me a strange look.

I returned his expression with a shrug and a forced grin.

As I came up and out onto the floor of the attic, I had to stoop slightly, as it was no more than one-and-a-half metres in the centre, with the sides where the roof sloped down outside being even shorter.

I swallowed hard as I saw what awaited us, but quickly got into position.

Let me know as soon as the Phantasm has been exorcised, I told Armen, as I wouldn't start on the second half before he was done, in order to prevent the Phantasm from somehow breaking free of its Shade vessel.

The next two minutes felt like an eternity, as I was forced to look at what had happened to poor Emil.

A dry corpse lay on a bed that'd been soaked with putrid rot. It was so much smaller than I had expected, and the metal collar was tight around its neck and connected to the ceiling with a chain that was so short that there was no slack in its links. The sight infuriated me, and I could tell from Finnegan's aura that he was appalled by it as well.

Although most of the flesh and fat had melted away, it was still possible to see signs of the boy's original appearance, and it was clear that he'd been afflicted with something like Elephantiasis, which had caused his limbs to be misshapen and had given his head an uneven bulbous form. His abandonment by his original mother and subsequent abuse and neglect by his father and stepmothers had all stemmed from his appearance, something he'd had no say in.

Part of me wanted to believe that something as heinous as this was confined to this world of Mondus, but I knew that cruelty existed anywhere that humans were, as though a Demon that infected the minds of people and turned them into monsters.

“Thank you, Exorcist,” said Finnegan. His voice was even, but trembled with rage. “If not for you, this truth would not have been brought to light.”

Armen's voice came through our bond, filling my mind.

“The Phantasm is no more.”

I took up a stance as best I could in the narrow confines, then aimed my left hand at the body and held out my staff in the other.

After a deep breath, I began to recite the Ritual of Obsequy.