

## 146 – Humming Haunter IV

“I see,” was all Finnegan said after I finished recounting the case and what we’d found. He paused as he thought it all over, his brow furrowed. He’d actually taken notes in a small notebook that he’d pulled from a back pocket in his leggings-like pants, and he kept looking through these as he considered all the things I’d told him.

“**He seems very thorough,**” Armen said privately through our bond.

After a moment, he looked up from his notes and asked, “Only your familiar has seen this body and the state it was in?”

I nodded slowly. “That’s correct.”

“Do you believe you are able to exorcise the Haunter and retrieve the body?”

“I think so, yes. Although, the body will need a proper burial with rites to be fully laid to rest.”

“That is no issue, I would just like to see it for myself. I am afraid that currently, the eye witness statement of a ‘wooden knight’...” he paused and looked at the tiny headless Jules in my front pocket, “No offense—”

“**None taken. I am indeed wooden and a knight.**”

The First Lieutenant cleared his throat awkwardly, from his aura it was clear that he was apprehensive around my familiar. “As I was saying, such witness statements are not considered reliable.”

I didn’t argue. It made sense.

“However! I will track down the former tenants to collect statements in the meantime. Or rather, I’ll have my men do it. They need the exercise. Easthall does not often have use of them, peaceful as it usually is.”

“You would do that without a body or concrete proof?”

“Of course. I see no reason not to believe you.”

*Why does such a response actually surprise me?*

“When do you plan on attempting to exorcise the Haunter? I would like to be there when you do it.”

“Today,” I answered.

He blinked. “You don’t waste any time, do you?”

“I’m confident I can do it.”

“Could I ask you to wait until I return?”

“Of course. I’m waiting to hear back from a more experienced Exorcist about something, so don’t feel the need to hurry.”

“I see. Thank you.”

With that, the Peacekeeper Lieutenant went back the way he’d come, heading for wherever the barracks of his order lay within the district.

“I wonder why they don’t use horses?” I asked as we watched his spirited jog down the road.

**“In my time, people only used horses in some districts, while others seemed off-limit in some way. Perhaps this is one such district.”**

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t noticed many horse-drawn carts here. I think the Explorers lugged all their equipment by foot, which probably explains their numbers in some way. Just a shame most of what they brought is useless.”

About an hour later, a simple carriage drawn by one horse came rumbling down the street towards us. It was controlled by a coachman and had enough room for two to sit behind him. Slouched across the entire length of the passenger bench was Ludwig. When it came to a halt out in front of the apartment building, near where the Explorers had their stuff piled up, the Incarnate hopped down off the carriage after handing the coachman a coin.

As it spun around and returned back the way it’d come, Ludwig walked over to where Armen and I were sitting. The Explorers immediately began talking amongst themselves, either because they knew him or because of the way he looked. If you didn’t know him, Ludwig Pawn definitely looked like someone who was bad news: his large muscular frame, metallic right arm and leg, as well as the metallic eye and the wrap-around of metal on his neck, plus the horn. All of it combined made him look like he enjoys bathing in the blood of virgins as a pastime, although I knew that, when it came down to it, he was rather careful and contemplative, rather than the hothead guns-blazing look he gave off.

“Did you miss me already?” he asked with a grin.

I ignored his joke and immediately got down to business. “Have you heard of such a Haunter before?”

He nodded. “They happen, but they’re rare. I think that, if what you briefly described in the message is true, this could be a unique entity.”

“I was thinking of attempting to exorcise it like a Shade.”

“That may work, but, eh, it’s risky. If you only successfully exorcise the Shade that the Phantasm is bound to, you may release the Phantasm and then it might roam wild across the city, which would turn into a much greater problem.”

“I haven’t dealt much with Phantasms,” I told him, honestly.

“They’re rare, fortunately, but yeah, total pain in the ass. Normally, you exorcise a Phantasm while it is in its vessel. Since its vessel is incorporeal, that does make it harder than normal. However, I have an idea, hence why I brought *this*.”

Ludwig handed me a velvet-like sack that held something the size and shape of a laptop. I pulled it out and saw that it was a board of sorts.

“Flip it over,” he told me and I did.

“It’s a Ouija Board!” I said, surprised.

“Pretty ingenious, right? One day I just thought: ‘Maybe this thing from my world could work’, and then I made it and it does. This is version four. Apparitions have a tendency to break tools like these, so I remade it with something a bit sturdier that can’t be destroyed easily. It took some tries to find the best material though.”

“I made a primitive version of something like this when I needed to perform a Ritual of Union for a Weeping Widow, but didn’t know one of the people’s names.”

He frowned as if I’d just told him something awful.

“And here I was, thinking I was all brilliant.”

**“Ryūta’s version made the Widow quite upset and nearly killed him.”**

“Thank you, Armen, that does make me feel a bit better.”

“But why did you bring this?”

“With Haunters that tend to slip out from between your fingers, like many kinds of Shades, you can use this to learn their name and then make a specific kind of locking trap.”

“And with that I can exorcise the Phantasm by cleansing its vessel!”

“Exactly.”

“But is the reverse true? If I exorcise the Phantasm, will the Shade be set free?”

“Possibly, unless they’re completely entangled in their souls. However, even if it is released, it probably won’t leave its established territory. Phantasms roam much wider than Shades, so it’s better if we are left with a Shade at the end than a Phantasm.”

I nodded. That made sense. I was glad to have his perspective on this, since if I’d gone forward with my idea, it would’ve only worsened things. I quickly wrote down the warning in the new entry I was making on this Humming Haunter.

“You also wrote that it feeds on fear and terror? What’s that about?”

“Come with me, I’ll show you,” I told him.

He frowned. “Let me prepare first.”

After Ludwig had made a small elaborate ward, which he painted on the back of his left hand with a thin ink stylus, he pulled out a flat metal ring with a handle through the centre and lots of tiny sigils carved into it.

“What’s that?” I asked him.

“A Ward Focus, which, as you can guess, lets me focus my energy into a Ward.”

“Isn’t that redundant?”

He nodded, “It would be if this was a Ward like Soul Barrier, but this one lets me go unnoticed by most apparitions. By using a Ward Focus, I can keep pumping energy into it.”

That sounded almost like a different ability. “I didn’t know you could make a Ward like that.”

“A lot of Exorcists overlook the versatility of Wards,” he replied. “Most just use it like a backup to their Soul Barrier or to avoid certain ailments like hallucinations, but you can use them against things much less obvious.”

“Like using Wards to make it impossible for anyone to spy on you?”

He grinned. “Who taught you that one?”

“A Genius.”

“Huh, they don’t usually give away their secrets. What did you offer in return?”

“I gave him a Music Box.”

Ludwig paled.

“A normal one.”

“Nearly gave me a heart attack there!”

“Do you often sneak past entities while doing exorcisms?”

“It’s easier to collect evidence on a Haunter when they’re unaware of you, but I don’t do exorcisms that much anymore, truth be told. Mortl has me whipped to the bone with all her Guild Branches I need to maintain. Speaking of, I heard from Letthorr that you fixed up Mortimer, thanks for that.”

“You can repay me by teaching me that Ward.”

“Sure.”

After some more preparation, we finally entered the apartment building together and Ludwig said that it was probably best we tried the Ouija Board on the bottom floor, since, if it enraged the entity, we wanted to be able to get out of there in a hurry.

I laid the metal board on the wooden floor of the hallway, more-or-less in the centre of the building. Then Ludwig added a Gravebloom Incense stick to a little hole made specifically for that, before lighting it with his Spark-Maker.

As a vanilla scent filled the air, I had Meigetsu come closer, and both Ludwig and Armen stood ready, though I was fairly sure the Incarnate was just looking for the first excuse to bolt out through the main entrance.

I placed my Black Tallow Candle in a spot made for it on the board as well, then looked down at the letters. They were in Chthonic, like my Encyclopaedias. It seemed that spirits didn’t really care what language you used though, so it could have been made with any alphabet, but at least the Chthonic script made the board look mysterious.

Putting both hands on the bottom of the board to establish a connection, I asked into the air:

“Thee who perished in the attic of this place, tell me thy name.”

The curling tendril of smoke from the incense suddenly quivered, even though I didn’t feel any change in the air. Then the candle wick burst alight with a brownish-looking flame.

The Ouija Board, which didn’t have a planchette for the entity to move around, started to glow, and the glow quickly manifested into one of the letters. It was as though there was something beneath where each letter was carved and which the entity could make glow with their attention. The glow flickered out, before lighting up another. Continuing with a new letter a moment later, then the last one, spelling out a short name: “E-M-I-L”

“Emil?” I said out loud and this time the building began to tremble.

“It seems you don’t know this rule,” Ludwig started, “But it’s a bad idea to call out a Haunter’s name without a plan.”

“We should get out of here,” Armen warned.

I had already picked up the board, with the things still on top, while mentally invoking my Soul Barrier skill.

As I turned around to head for the exit, a dozen hands shot towards me through the walls, making me take a step back in surprise, only for my foot to slip. I dropped the board with a clatter onto the floor and tried to project my Soul Barrier out in front of me to repel the Haunter’s mind attack, but it was already too late.

*I should’ve made myself a Ward...* I mused with regret, before the many seven-clawed hands grasped onto my arms, legs, and neck, then pulled me up into and through the ceiling.

All the while a sinister humming was resounding in my ears.