

145 – Humming Haunter III

Jules walked out of the entrance to the apartment building, his head missing entirely and just an exposed neck joint visible above the top of his tin torso plate. He was shrunk down to roughly the size of an eight-year-old boy, the same size as the body he had seen in the darkness of the attic.

“How do you feel?”

“**As though I am forgetting something, my Liege.**”

“The thing that attacked you, what was it like?”

“**It was a large tumorous growth with an eye in its middle and clawed arms flailing outward from it.**”

“I see, thank you. Shrink down to your least conspicuous form and get some rest. We’ll retrieve your head later.”

“**Hopefully it isn’t eaten before then,**” remarked Armen.

Jules, who was in the middle of shrinking down to the height of a pencil, gasped in offense, “**It would not dare!**”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t eat people.”

“**You know what it is then? Truly?**”

“I have a fairly good idea.”

“**Would you like to hear what I have gathered first?**”

“Yes please, also, I believe we should have one of the Explorers run to fetch the Guard, since this is now a murder investigation.”

“**The Peacekeepers, you mean.**”

“Does the name really matter?”

“**Yes. The Peacekeepers believe themselves above the Guard. They are the ones who maintain order and law in Evergreen.**”

I blinked. “So, they’re the Police? But, I thought the Guard in every city worked like that.”

“**The Peacekeepers are supposedly better at it.**”

“*That* I’d like to see.”

After a runner from Bellany’s Group was sent to the nearest Peacekeeper post, Armen began to tell me what he’d learnt from talking to them about the apartment building and its former residents.

“The Haunter has been here for three weeks, with all the former residents moving out on the same day, overcome by various fits of insanity and delirium. There were three families with children, two married couples without, two bachelors, and one empty apartment that the previous resident, also a bachelor, vacated about two months prior.”

“Who lived on the top floor?”

“A married couple and the empty apartment were on the top floor, a family and a bachelor on the second, two families on the first, and a married couple and bachelor on the bottom floor.”

I considered this. “Jules. Did you see what state of decomposition the dead body was in?”

“I did, my Liege. The body was dry and it seemed the rot was long past. I am no scholar on the subject of putrefaction, but it was not a fresh corpse.”

“Which means that it could have happened around the time the lone resident on the top floor left, raising the question of whether he hid the body away in the attic and moved out to hide his tracks.”

Jules had gone into the apartment on the right side of the building, and it had been furnished, albeit weirdly, which seemed to indicate that it was the one belonging to the married couple.

“Do you know if there’s a way into the attic from both of the apartments on the top floor?”

“I do not,” answered Armen, **“But it would be consistent with the architecture around here.”**

I nodded. “Good enough. We probably can’t rule out that either of the residents of the top floor could have been responsible then.”

“Many buildings such as these are often quite communal,” he added. **“It would not be unusual for them to be close and allow others living in the building access to their apartments, and potentially the attic.”**

“That does complicate matters. Although...”

“What?”

“It does answer a different question I had. Phantasms are born of negative emotions. Like the Rotmaker, it is a conglomeration of strong emotions or the souls of the buried dead. If the building and its residents were close, perhaps they knew of the death, which would explain how a Phantasm could come to be, as their guilt and regret compounded over time to form it. Although it does seem a bit fast for a Phantasm to form in the span of two months.”

“You think that all the residents knew?”

“It’s a possibility,” I said. “I think that the child was probably someone they all knew, if they’d lived in the same building for a while. So, when the child disappeared, maybe they realised what’d happened, but, for some reason, didn’t raise the alarm.”

“It may have been that they did not know, my Liege,” said Jules. **“The body was chained to the ceiling of the attic and there were bits of furniture around.”**

I frowned.

“That is... horrific.” Armen looked absolutely furious, but also sad, with his aura a jumbled mess.

“So it’s a case of abuse and, potentially, torture then,” I said, hating the words even as they left my mouth. “This changes things. If it was a body being left there to cover up a murder, then that’s something that potentially all the residents could’ve orchestrated. But, if the child was kept as a prisoner in the attic, that would require frequent visits to keep them fed. Not to mention, it would make it impossible to hide it from those living below where the child was chained up, since I don’t think the flooring is soundproof.

“I also think that if this theory is right, then it is likely that the married couple were the perpetrators, and that the resident in the other apartment on the floor likely knew about the abuse, leaving when they realised the child was deceased.

“It is then also possible that the negative emotions that created the Phantasm were all from the child and the neighbour who moved out. This would put it more in line with other Phantasms, as they are born over a long period of compounding emotions and negative energy, and... abuse and suffering create a fertile seedbed.”

“The Explorers did not mention anything about a child living on the top floor, and perhaps none of the other residents on the floors below were aware of its existence?” Armen speculated.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m thinking. It may be worth trying to find the former residents and asking them about this married couple, but we definitely have a solid theory for the Peacekeepers when they arrive.”

“We will still need to actually show them the body,” Armen replied.

“Indeed. I’m still considering how best to go about exorcising this Haunter.”

“Do you still believe it is a Shade and Phantasm mix, such as the Mare you first believed it to be?”

“I do. I think that the boy’s soul turned into a Shade that, before it could become something like a Poltergeist or other vengeful territorial apparition, was consumed by or merged with the Phantasm born of its long period of abuse. I’m not entirely sure how to exorcise it, but I think the Shade is at the core of it.”

“So you will exorcise it like any other Shade?”

“That’s what I want to attempt, yes. However, I think I’ll consult Ludwig first.”

After sending one of my crow clones off with a brief letter attached to its leg and heading for the Adventurers’ Guild, where I knew Ludwig would be day-drinking, I waited around for the runner to return with a group of the Peacekeepers.

Fortunately, we did not have to wait long. However, there was only one man accompanying the Explorers’ Guild member as he returned, out of breath and a slightly worried look on his face. Meanwhile, the Peacekeeper hadn’t even worked up a sweat from jogging here on foot.

“**That is a Lieutenant,**” Armen commented, noting the man’s attire.

He was tall and dark-skinned, with pale-white irises, which was a look I hadn’t seen up close before, though had noticed on occasion in the crowds of the city.

Is he from Asra? I asked Armen.

“**Possibly, although in my time there were a sizable minority of Natives with similar appearance in Evergreen. This may still be the case.**”

The Lieutenant was clad in a white form-fitting long-sleeved shirt that seemed to be made of cotton, and leggings of the same fabric. Over top of these was grey lightweight-looking plate armour, which covered his torso and neck, arms, groin, and legs, with grey leather boots on his feet and his head exposed. His hair was a mess of dark-brown curls and he had freckles below his right eye, but not anywhere else on his face.

Without needing to ask, he ignored the group of Explorers looking after Bellany and the other man, jogging up to us with the scabbarded shortsword on his hip clapping against his thigh armour. I also noticed that he had a round metal shield on his back. His aura was yellow like that of a Paladin, but faint and vague like most Natives’.

Extending a hand towards Armen, he put on a charming smile that showed his dimples and said, “Well met, Adventurers, I am Finnegan, First Lieutenant of the Evergreen Peacekeepers Corps.”

His voice was deep, but still had nothing on Armen’s, and his aura seemed to indicate that he was curious, *and* relieved for some reason.

After shaking Armen’s hand, he then shook mine.

“I’m Ryūta, an Exorcist, and this is my companion Armen, he’s a Crusader.”

“Well met. It is rare for Adventurers and Mercenaries to consider us, so I just wanted to say that I appreciate you reaching out to us with your discovery. We take murders in our residential districts very serious, particularly those involving children and women.”

I thought it was a strange specification that only murders in residential districts, and those of women and children, were given priority. Though I supposed that it was due to lacking manpower or something.

“Why don’t you catch me up to speed on what you have found?” Finnegan said. “I’d like as many details as possible.”