

147 – Humming Haunter V

He was unwanted. His mother had told him so. She had told him to his face and she had told it through her abandonment. The man who called himself his father was little better and had a penchant for finding cruel women to dote on. Every new wife he took was worse than the one before, as though it was a competition.

It was not Emil’s fault that he was born the way that he was. It was the fault of his lineage, so the Church Priest had told him. Perhaps that was why his parents resented him, because he was living proof of their tainted blood.

The other kids in the district were not as cruel as they, and a few even let him join them for their games. That he always had to play the monster and they the heroes was a given, but Emil secretly enjoyed it. He could tell that when he chased after them, their terror was only partly put-on, as his countenance was so awful that the other kids often forgot that it was all just pretend.

When his father took his fifth wife, he somehow managed to pick a woman worse than all the previous ones combined. Ever since she moved into their apartment, he was not allowed to play with the other kids outside, for she feared what others would say about her. Every day, she would tell Emil how much she loathed the sight of him and how much his voice made her sick.

So he began to hum. Singing was not in his repertoire of talents, but he could hum as though it was his one gift in life. And his voice was unnaturally-deep, perhaps thanks to his malformed features, which made it all the better. Even the floor would quiver when he hummed the right tune.

But the woman revealed herself to be even crueller than Emil had thought possible, when she opened up the attic and had his father install a chained collar fastened to the ceiling of that dark space. After securing him there, they left naught but a bowl of water and a plate of food scraps for him to live on. The length of the chain was such that he could not lie down flat, which did not give him many options for sleep.

Worst of all was the voices from the apartment below, which he could hear through the cracks in the ceiling. They were *so* close, but had no intention of saving him. And he could smell the food that they ate, as its scent wafted up to him. It made his stomach curl and shake in desperate longing.

But, despite it all, he kept humming throughout the pain and the gnawing hunger.

Two days later, after being so delirious from hunger that he tried to chew on a bit of wood that had peeled from the rafter above, the attic trapdoor leading to the neighbour across the hall opened

up. As if a Saint who had seen his plight came to his rescue, the neighbour found him there and attempted to free him. When that failed, he brought a few things from his own apartment that Emil could use, such as a simple bed that was high enough off the floor for him to sleep on comfortably.

But it was the food and water he brought that helped Emil the most, and though it was a meagre thanks, he hummed his best songs for his saviour, who, unlike his father and stepmother, said that it was beautiful.

With tears in his eyes, the man apologised profusely to Emil, saying that he could not go to the Peacekeepers, as he was in the city illegally. He didn't even own the apartment he was using, he had just moved in when he realised it was abandoned.

The man had his own problems, but vowed that he would save Emil from his imprisonment in the attic. Together they came up with a plan. The neighbour would try to get his hands on the tools that would allow him to break open the metal collar. And when he was free, Emil would seek out the Peacekeepers himself. In return, Emil promised that he would not mention the neighbour to them.

Over the next week, the neighbour came by several times, always bringing food and water with him, and every time they talked and Emil hummed for him. Their plan was slowly coming to fruition, said the man, as he had found a place with the exact tools he needed, but he had to wait until the right time to steal them.

When he left for the night, Emil felt so happy and thankful that he hummed until the early morning.

A day passed where the neighbour did not show up.

Then another.

The gnawing hunger returned, along with the painful loss of hope.

On the third day, the trapdoor to his father's apartment opened and the cruel woman came up the ladder, only to tell him that she'd heard everything he and the neighbour had plotted. She confessed to him that she had told the Peacekeepers about the man and his would-be robbery, and they had caught and punished him.

Delirious from the lack of sustenance, her every word sounded like the screeching of a spiteful harpy, and as she closed the trapdoor and left him there to starve, he wished every curse upon her that he could imagine.

The fourth day came and Emil could not rise from his bed. His tongue was stuck to the dry interior of his mouth and his eyes felt as though they were shrivelled up. The sun bore down on the building from outside, heating up the attic like a furnace, and the metal clamped shut around his neck was like a scalding brand made to torture him.

The fifth day never came.

“Kōtama!” I yelled. The light from my ring bloomed forth, pushing away the encroaching arms.

I’d broken free of the hallucination through sheer force of will and perhaps a little luck, but it felt as though I’d experienced a lifetime in the blink of an eye. It was obvious why the Explorers had gone insane, because no mortal mind was made to handle such intense negative emotions and pain.

Bolstering my Soul Barrier, I had the Gravelight spread out even wider, as Ludwig and Armen made for the door. I followed after them and dropped to my knees as soon as I came down the steps outside.

My legs were weak as though I hadn’t eaten in days and my stomach felt like a hole straight through my body.

“Holy shit,” I gasped breathlessly. My throat felt raw as though I hadn’t had a drop of water in days.

“You okay, sprite?” Ludwig asked. “Thought it got you there for a moment.”

“It did,” I told him. “But I got out of it.”

“Can’t have been more than a second it had you,” he replied doubtfully.

“You don’t understand,” I told him. “It was like I relived the life of that boy in the attic. As though I *became* him and experienced what he went through.”

“That sounds—”

“Like a Demon, I know.”

“You know, it might very well become *just that*, if given enough time. I haven’t heard of any Haunter that lives off of emotions that *wasn’t* a Demon.”

“I don’t think enough of the boy’s soul is left for that,” I said.

“That’s fortunate. A sinister Haunter like this would be a bitch to deal with if it became a Demon.”

“I’m going to exorcise it,” I told him. “I won’t let him suffer anymore.”

“Do you need help?”

“No, but I would like to know the trapping ritual you mentioned.”

“Sure, I’ll teach it to you.”

Ten or twenty minutes later, Finnegan returned to the apartment building. As soon as he spotted Ludwig, the Incarnate made a sound.

“What’s *he* doing here?”

“I called him here.”

“Aren’t you a model citizen...”

“**You are the one with the city permit?**” Armen asked him.

“I’d rather not get embroiled in local bureaucracy, thank you very much.”

“Ludwig, can I have the Ouija Board?”

The Incarnate turned to look at where I sat on the steps to the building. “Sure, why not. I don’t really use it.”

“Really? Just like that?”

“What? You want me to wring you dry of Crowns, is that it?”

“No, but—”

“You’ve helped me a few times already, so it’s only fair. You’ll obviously put it to good use, so why not? It was just collecting dust in the Necromancy Guild anyway.”

“Thank you,” I said and meant it.

“Salutations, Savant Pawn,” greeted Finnegan as he came up to us.

“Howdy, Finn. Still haven’t bought a horse, I see.”

The Lieutenant smiled amicably at the joke. “Is he your mentor?” he asked me.

“I don’t take apprentices,” Ludwig replied.

“That’s a comforting thought,” commented Finnegan, jabbing back.

“Oy.”

“I must remind you that you still haven’t paid the fine for illegally bringing Cursed Artefacts into the city.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll go pay it later today, pinkie-promise.” Just then Ludwig sounded like a total delinquent that’d been caught smoking outside the school by a teacher.

“It’s illegal to bring Possessed Items into Evergreen?” I asked, realising I might’ve committed several crimes.

“Of course,” Finnegan said, narrowing his eyes. “Do you have anything you would like to confess?”

I frowned. “... Yes.”

“He’s fucking with you,” Ludwig explained. “They don’t care about items like yours. But they’re mad about the Demon Door I made, cause, you know, it has a Demon in it. Oh, and I guess Letthorr. And probably his failed primogenitors... Your Music Box would’ve been an issue, but Mortl got permission for that one on your behalf.”

I released a sigh of relief. Then tried to bring things back on topic.

“Finnegan, I am prepared to exorcise the entity. Would you like to accompany me inside as I do it?”

Ludwig grinned at the put-off expression on the Lieutenant’s face. “Don’t you worry, Finny, I’ll personally make your wards.”