

Someone else was singing. It was too slow-paced for my taste but I still wanted to join in if I could. Through the doors was a veritable jungle gym! I danced and climbed and ran along the narrow footholds like a combination dance floor and rock-climbing wall. There were a few more dance partners too, large and small, and some cute chubby things just begging for affection. Fuzzy puppies hopped and begged for attention and how could I deny them?

I danced and sang and cheered, trying to get the distant singer to match the peppier pace of my songs, but I suppose he wanted to be boring. I pouted, my cheeks puffing out. I couldn't find where this singer-man was, so once I'd explored everything I could, I came back inside. It worked for me: outside was too uneven, hard to paint. Inside I could see the beautiful coats of crimson, the splotches where I'd splatted and slid along the wall myself, my little finger paintings. I was no artist, that's for sure, but I gave myself points for enthusiasm.

I went down to the staircase and, well, I tripped. After so much dancing, eventually my feet tangled in themselves and I hit the steps face-first, tumbling down again and again. I honestly wished I could've seen it from the outside: it would've been like a comedy movie! Bonk, thump, thwap, smack, clonk, bump, SLAP!

Thankfully, the floor broke my fall. Upon confirmation that I could still dance, I headed deeper into this new place. It seemed boring but maybe there was something hidden within. I liked to squirrel things away so nobody could find them, after all. I shuffled and moonwalked past elegant pottery, admiring the glow of my eyes in the occasional mirror. Then I heard something else. It wasn't quite singing: I couldn't say for certain what it was. But it was mostly rhythmic and I skipped across stone. It was almost certainly a voice, and a voice meant a new friend and dance partner!

I found her, hunched in the corner as usual. Taylor always ran away, always went to hide somewhere and hope nobody saw her. Even though ~~she was pretty and people liked to see her smile~~ she was so ugly nobody could miss her walking from place to place, staring at her with morbid fascination. Her black ringlets were tied up with a gray silk bow and looked shorter than usual, which was odd. Normally she let it spill down her back due to how pretty it was, ~~a way to connect with her mother even when her mom was still alive~~ the only pretty thing about her and even that was stretching the definition. Now it rested just past her shoulders. She wore voluminous black robes to hide her body the way she always hid nowadays, ~~even though back in the day her best friend said she had the build to be a high-fashion model, something they could do together albeit with different specialties~~ deservedly so with how lanky and pathetic her frame was, an insult to the female form.

Taylor looked over her shoulder and saw me. Her blue eyes widened, her breath hitched and she started to silently cry. Big teardrops spilled from her eyes. She'd always cry when she hid, too afraid to try anything about it. Too weak to stop it. Oh, she told herself that she was enduring it, that it was a sort of test like that of Job: that she couldn't tell her father because he'd destroy himself. But that was all varying levels of false. The truth was that Taylor was weak. She'd only tried to fight back twice and had given up complaining to the staff not long after. She didn't leave, she didn't do something drastic as she easily could have with the various gangs in her city. She just kept going and took it. Did the little freak get off on the abuse?

I felt my lips curl downward. I hated Taylor, hated her with every fiber of my being. Not a day went by when I didn't want to kill her, feel the life leave her with my hands around her neck. She was such a weak coward, too afraid to do anything except suffer. Yes, she was right here in front of me. I could

finally kill her without worrying about the consequences. I could be rid of her! She'd be dead and gone and I could be free without her as the albatross around my neck!

She was talking, pleading, but I didn't hear a word of it. She hadn't begged in a while but I knew just what she'd say, more hollow pleas from a helpless creature – no, something that willingly made itself helpless and then wallowed in self-pity. I closed my ears against Taylor's entreaties.

Yes, I could be rid of her. I didn't want her, I didn't need her. I hated her so much that my veins burned with anger every day she was alive. *Nobody wants her here. We'd all be better off if she just died.*

Why were my eyes burning? My vision was getting hazy, I could feel moisture on my cheeks. Was it raining? I looked up at the ceiling to see dry stone, rubbed my eyes to clear them. It didn't work much. They quickly blurred over again and my face was only getting more wet. I looked back down to the black-haired girl, but as my vision cleared, I realized it wasn't Taylor. They were superficially similar – tall, pale, black hair, wide mouth, terrified – but her eyes were the wrong shape and color. She held herself differently, more delicate as opposed to Taylor's gangly and awkward stance. But if this girl was here, then where had Taylor escaped to? I swept my gaze around the room, once again spying my reflection in the mirror...

“...Oh.”

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Adella stared at the maddened hunter. Her pleas had fallen on deaf ears, perhaps literally so. Those eyes, glowing like the yellow moon, stared down at her as the hunter's face adopted an expression of disgust, loathing, outright hatred. And then the hunter's eyes began welling up. She looked toward the ceiling and when she lowered her gaze, she looked at Adella as if it was the first time she was seeing the nun of the Healing Church. Then the hunter's eyes swept the room and she looked at herself in the mirror.

“...Oh.”

That one word held so much emotion. Disappointment, disgust, anger, and so much pain that Adella worried she would drown in it just from proximity.

And then, Adella the nun witnessed a miracle.

The hunter slumped to her knees, shoulders and chest heaving in great trembling sobs. When next her eyes opened, she stared at Adella with bloodshot hazel eyes radiating pain and guilt. “I'm so sorry,” the hunter whispered.

It took Adella far longer than she would have liked in order to find her words. She'd never even heard of a blood-maddened hunter showing any sign of remorse or reversal such as this. Compound onto this the fact that the pain in this woman's voice was so deep it was all Adella could do not to sink to her knees and mourn with her.

“...Who are you?” she finally asked the hunter.

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The question threw me. I knew the answer I should give by reflex, but was that even true anymore? Moreover, should it be true, since now I'd experienced...what, some aspect of my subconscious? I couldn't deny that those had been my thoughts. I'd never known, not consciously, just how much I despised myself. I hated myself with an intensity eclipsing my antipathy for Emma, Sophia, Madison, Julia, Blackwell, Gladly... Everyone in the world combined, and it still didn't compare.

"C...can I get back to you on that?" I asked jokingly with mirth I didn't feel, forcing the corners of my mouth to turn up as best they could from my face set so solidly in an expression of despair.

"You...you came back from madness," the black-robed woman stated, her voice holding an almost reverential awe that surpassed her fear. "How? What happened? You were ready to strike me down, and then...?"

And then I recognized Emma's voice in my own thoughts. "...I realized I was being someone I'd never wanted to be," I hedged.

The silence stretched on until she finally decided to break it, realizing I wasn't going to volunteer anything else. She gave an elegant bow as if it was tradition. "I am Adella, a nun of the Healing Church. Were you brought here by those monsters, as well?"

I swallowed hard and nodded. "I was trying to find a way out. It...it didn't go well."

"I have been hiding here for hours at the very least, possibly longer. I'll not make it much longer on my own. Please, Lady Hunter, may I accompany you?"

On instinct that was being honed by my time in Yharnam, I sized her up. Adella was shorter than me, delicate and rather pretty without being a stunner like Doll or Arianna. With how frail she seemed, swimming in those robes, she probably wouldn't be much help in a fight. "You'll want to hang back. If anything jumps out, I won't be able to protect you because I'll be too busy dodging. Keep a good distance between us so anything that attacks will focus on me."

It was with a mostly-clear mind that I went back to the top floor, and if my stomach weren't empty I would have vomited again. Instead it felt like my spine was falling out of my body, utter despair seeping into my bones. My dance partners had been sack-men and feral huntsmen. The paint was their excess blood. I could see cave paintings in blank spaces where I had doodled with the blood.

Deep, familiar moaning came from behind me and I perked up. Little ones! They were here! Oh god, they'd been here. I'd ignored them in my stupor. I turned around and walked up several more stairs to another dais. Several chairs were arranged, one of which had a desiccated corpse seated in it. His clothing had long since rotted away but the strange iron birdcage around his head remained. I reached down and lit the lantern that the little ones offered, locking myself into this point in time.

"Can you use lanterns?" I asked Adella. She cocked her head at me in confusion. "Lanterns like this one," I clarified, gesturing at the purple lantern. Her bemusement only intensified. "...Shit, you can't even see it, can you?"

She squinted. “I see...some manner of haze which tells me you must see something rather than simply being mad. But no, I see no lantern of any sort before you.” Her eyes widened and she looked unsure if she should apologize: I had just recently been mad, after all.

“Well, that complicates things. Come on.” I needed to focus on saving someone. I could break down once we were free. I couldn’t allow myself to abandon Adella.

The top floor opened into a roadway reminiscent of an English suburb, narrow and tall houses on either side of the cobblestone street and numerous abandoned carriages left in the street or crashed into steps. Everything, from carriages to buildings to the streets themselves, was slathered with blood. I had massacred more sack-men, huntsmen, corrupted dogs and even several giant pig-monsters. The street terminated in massive double-doors at one end and a conspicuously bricked-up wall at the other. The doors wouldn’t budge and the bricks were left unmarked by anything I did, even getting one of the carriages rolling and crashing the whole thing’s weight into the wall left no mark at all.

Adella wandered the area, stepping gingerly through the smeared blood and staring at everything with a combination of wonder and horror. “What happened here?” Her whispered question was one steeped in sadness. It sounded like she knew something about this place, and it had once been vastly different.

“Looks like this is a dead end,” I muttered. I was afraid of that. In a place built on dreams, of course the only means of escape would be to face the giant monster. I led Adella to the lantern again, making sure to reestablish the time anchor. I wanted Adella to remember that she’d seen the street.

“Alright,” I said, both resolve and resignation in my voice. “If we’re both to get out of here, we’re going one floor down. There’s some sort of monster guarding another set of doors. I’m all but certain that those doors lead somewhere else and should open, mostly because it makes narrative sense.”

Adella looked at me askance.

“I’ll want you to remain in the tunnel and watch. If I win, there’s a good chance I’ll be too tired to come and call you, so I’d rather you were close enough to see and come down on your own.”

When we made it to the tunnel, Adella placed her fingers on the claw marks with horrified awe. “What manner of beast could do this?”

“The one imitating a hill down there,” I gestured with my saw spear.

Adella swallowed hard and fished in her robes. “H-here, Miss.” She began passing me bottles. “I stole these from this damned place. They were collecting them, hoarding them. Firebomb bottles. The flame is a beast’s natural enemy, so they may be of use.”

I gave her a nod and accepted her bounty, heading down the slope. What at first looked like a mossy hill resolved itself into a pile of bones, wispy fur still clinging to most of it. Of course, I couldn’t have been lucky enough for the thing to be dead.

The monstrosity rose up, its bones apparently held together by static electricity. Its face was snubbed, skull far too humanlike for my liking. It made no noise as it opened its mouth, having no lungs with which to scream. The crackle of lightning served as its roar.

It moved far too quickly for its size, its reach terrifying. The sparks danced across my coat for the most part but occasionally one found its mark through my clothes, leaving melted skin in its wake. Then it hunched in on itself and unleashed a spreading dome of electricity that flash-fried me. My blood cooked within my veins and I felt my body rupture before I died.

(BREAK)

I opened my eyes to see Adella stood before me on the dais. I led her back to the tunnel. “Adella, do you know about any beasts that are mostly bone and generate lightning?”

She actually gasped. “You speak of the Darkbeasts?”

“I suppose so. Best I can figure, one of them is guarding the door. Can you tell me anything that might help?”

Adella ran through a few different stories and allegories, hopeful that I might find something of use. Darkbeasts were apparently crystalized hatred given form, unleashing the wrath of the heavens which they had somehow stolen in their frenzied hatred. They were still beasts, their bones somehow still vulnerable to fire and serrated weapons, because of the symbolic nature. There were stories of Ludwig hitting a Darkbeast so hard it clattered apart and had to spend time putting itself back together.

Well, I drew the saw cleaver first. I didn't know if it would help, but maybe I could fight near a lightning rod.

The natural arena was at the end of a sloping path that overlooked what seemed to be a bottomless pit. Knowing Yharnam, I wouldn't have been surprised if it was indeed bottomless. On the far side, just before the depression wherein the Darkbeast awaited, was a set of small cliff-hill things. Before I challenged the Darkbeast this time, I jammed the cleaver's butt into the ground and left the extended glaive to serve as a lightning rod. I flicked the saw spear to full extension, opting for leverage to deal more impact damage. Maybe I could knock this damn thing apart too.

It moved so quickly I couldn't keep track, not consciously. But my body felt the sudden wind, the pulse of ozone, and I knew what to do. I relied on my instincts to dodge around the Darkbeast, at one point leaping through the gap between the colossal monster's radius and ulna. Its idle sparks mostly snapped at my glaive instead of at me, leaving me with its claws as my primary threat. I wove and juked, slashing when I could, and somehow striking this thing's bones still restored my wounds. Maybe its marrow served as blood?

It hunched in on itself and I braced. This was the make-or-break moment. The last time, the dome had primarily walked across the ground. Individual bolts connected like chains over the top, but it was a ring of lightning at foot-level. Presuming that these bolts were solid and it wasn't just aesthetics – not exactly a scientific conclusion, but I was fighting a gigantic undead wolf-monster that had formerly been a person – I could leap through them and over the ring and emerge unharmed.

I charged, tucked my legs, and sprang. The lightning singed my coat, I felt the air leave my lungs from the sheer static presence in the air, but I emerged overall unscathed. The Darkbeast was locked in a stance to continue pushing the lightning. I didn't know how long it would last, but I could get in some free hits. With my right hand I slashed at its ribs. With my left I drew firebomb after firebomb and hurled them at the monster's head. Its tail, barely more than a chain of bones held together by lightning

tethers, struck my back and sent me flying. I felt my ribs break but I wasn't worried: I could turn this to my advantage. I dropped the last firebomb, the fragile glass shattering into a useless fireball on the grass, and clutched the saw spear in both hands. The Darkbeast turned to look at me, claw raised to shred me.

Big mistake. It put its face right where I'd anticipated, and I swung for the fences. If I hadn't reinforced the saw spear with blood echoes and stones, I expect it would have shattered from the impact. As it was, I could nearly see the shockwave from the strike. The Darkbeast's head snapped back and then, just as its neck arrested the movement of its skull, the creature lost cohesion and collapsed into a pile of bones.

I snapped the spear back into a compact saw for speed of cutting, diving into the monstrosity's body to hack it apart. Electricity snapped at my body and I felt the creature's ribcage reassembling: I crawled free before its body could grind me up like rotating cogwheels.

Before my feet touched the ground, the Darkbeast was already on me. Its claw speared me through the chest and I planted my feet on its palm to leap free before it could pin me into the grass and dirt. I hit the ground and lost more of my breath, fishing in my coat for a blood vial to inject. I kicked off the grass just in time to avoid being crushed by its ribcage as it crashed down above me. I danced backward and drew my pistol, shooting it in the eye socket as a bit of a hail-Mary. No effect, as I could have anticipated. The Darkbeast spun around me, almost taunting me with its speed, claws digging divots in the landscape to arrest its momentum.

And then another firebomb crashed into its head. "Leave her alone!" Adella's shrieking voice, cracking from fear and volume, echoed to me. The girl was unarmed and unarmored, with one more firebomb in hand. The Darkbeast turned its head to assess the new threat, dismissing me as a minor nuisance.

Symbolism and metaphor had physical meaning here. The Darkbeast was going to kill the girl I had mistaken for Taylor – for myself. I was going to save her. More than that, I was going to save Taylor. I was going to protect Taylor. No more hating myself. I was going to drag myself out of the darkness! I sprang forward and went into a handstand, pushing off with all my strength. My legs tucked against my chest and at the last moment, as I felt the barest touch against the soles of my shoes, I kicked with all my strength. After the fact, I realized I'd been letting out one savage scream through the entire attack.

My kick caused the Darkbeast's skull to buckle, then the impact I'd given it before finally gave way. The bone cracked, then broke open, and the entire skull shattered. I flopped to the ground, both legs nothing but jelly filled with bone splinters. It took two blood vials to get my legs functional again.

"Thank you, Adella," I said as I rose unsteadily to my feet. "While that was brave and you saved me, in the future please don't risk yourself like that. I...I can take it. If you die, there's no bringing you back."

Her expression was resolute. "You're the only hunter who managed to save herself from madness. I'll not leave such a miracle to die in ignominy."

That... There was a lot said in that statement, more than I was willing to deal with in the moment. I pushed on the double doors, which ground open to reveal Old Yharnam. Taking a deep breath, I had Adella follow well behind me again as I hacked my way through the beasts until we made it to the surface, where I instead chased them off with a torch as Djura had requested. I'd have to stop by again

and speak with him, but for now I was too bone-tired. I could only compartmentalize for so long before I had to confront what had happened.

I got Adella back to Oedon Chapel and she was genial to everyone although her smile was strained when she met Arianna. I wonder if she too felt inadequate. The nun set up on a bench and began immediately reciting prayers, setting Desmond more at ease than I'd ever seen him. The soot-skinned cripple closed his eyes in the first moments of true peace he'd had since well before he and I had met.

I bid quick goodbyes to my little community: honestly I wanted to stay, but I couldn't handle what was happening. I needed to let it out and couldn't do that safely here. Arianna and Siobhan both seemed to understand at least vaguely, offering me sympathetic looks but not stopping me.

(BREAK)

In the Hunter's Dream, Doll was waiting. "Hello, Taylor," she said in her breathy, accented voice. "You appear unsettled. What has happened since we last spoke?"

"Is...is Gehrman around?" I wasn't sure if I wanted to speak to the old hunter about this: he was helpful but was obviously holding things back. Still, if he was an option, I wanted to at least contemplate it.

Doll shook her head. "He is sleeping at the moment. As before, I would request you not wake him. He rarely sleeps peacefully and so attempts to avoid it until he can no longer do so."

I took her by the hand, leading her back to the garden wall where we sat down together. "I...there's something wrong with me, Doll. Something deeply, genuinely wrong."

She sat, and listened. Never judging, never interrupting, asking only occasional questions when I was spiraling in on myself. I told her what happened in the Old Yharnam church, what happened in the prison. How happy I had been, until I'd seen Taylor, seen what I thought was myself.

From there I couldn't stop myself. It fell out in a deluge, the same as the tears that poured from my eyes. I told her about Emma, about Sophia, about Anne and Aunt Zoe and Uncle Alan. I told her about Mom and Dad, about how Mom died and what happened afterward. At some point I'd ended up with my head in her lap, my hat to the side as she stroked her fingers through my hair like my mother used to do.

At length, Doll spoke. "I am uncertain of what advice I can offer you. I am confined to this Dream: it is my world. While I have secondhand knowledge of many things, I cannot offer personal advice which I know to be accurate. What I can say is that it often helps me to organize my thoughts if I go for a walk through the headstones, contemplate those who have come and gone. Perhaps you should take a walk while I think if I have anything else I could offer you, aside from a sympathetic ear?"

I looked up at her and swallowed heavily. Was she trying to get rid of me? Was she genuinely trying to think of a way to help? Either way, she'd done nothing but help thus far. It would be rude to reject her suggestion. I wiped my eyes again and nodded, putting my hat back on and standing up, smoothing out my clothes. "I'll...I'll see you in a bit, I guess."

It was with unsteady steps that I strode across the slightly uneven flagstones, reading a handful of what had to be hundreds if not thousands of gravestones. The bigger ones had what appeared to be place

names – Pthumeria. Loran. Ashenport. The smaller ones were people’s names in every language, all Anglicized. Chinese names, Japanese, Spanish, Russian... So many, did they all pass through this Dream? How long had this place been in existence? Did time truly exist, or matter, in this Dream?

And then everything came to a stop. My eyes refused to process what they were seeing. I stood dumbly, staring blankly ahead, tracing my pupils over the embossed stone.

This...this was impossible. This was wrong. This was a lie.

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