

The Boardwalk was something that many residents of Brockton Bay, myself included, often took for granted. It was denigrated as a tourist trap and the Boardwalk Enforcers guarded it with military zeal, leaving many of us uncomfortable there. But I was uncomfortable pretty much everywhere nowadays, and had been even before ending up in Yharnam. So my existing discomfort sort of overrode what I might have otherwise experienced and I staggered along past numerous stalls hawking clothes and other knickknacks. Dad seemed happy to get me out of the house somewhere other than school or the library, and for me it was refreshing to smell open air not thick with the stench of rot, wet dog or blood.

While I hadn't been interested in new clothes (my build might have improved but who was I possibly going to look good for? And besides that, there was no way I could get into a relationship with my nightly horrors), the handicraft stalls were more my speed. One girl, with scarred hands and a burned welt on her cheek, was selling lopsided glass figurines.

I stumbled up to the booth, looking over the figures. "You made these yourself?" I asked stupidly, eyes roaming over what I was relatively certain was a penguin. It could have been a pelican, though. Or maybe Winnie-the-Pooh if you looked at it from a different angle.

"Yeah," the girl replied gruffly. Her voice sounded strained, maybe smoke inhalation? Did glassblowers suffer from smoke inhalation? She was short and squat, with brown hair in a pixie cut and dark green eyes. "I'm learning to blow glass but not everything goes right. So if it's cooling too much I try to prod it into a shape. Animals are pretty easy."

"What's this one?" I asked as I gingerly lifted a red-swirled figurine. "A lion?"

"I'd intended it to be a dog, but sure. It's a lion if you want it to be, especially if you buy it," she replied smoothly.

I smiled and called Dad over. The girl's work wasn't exceptional but there was something heartfelt about it that really resonated with me. Maybe it was that she had the chance to pursue what she loved and create something beautiful even out of her failures. The little maybe-dog maybe-lion was priced at \$40, which the crafter assured us was needed to recoup the losses. Fuel for the furnace as well as the various dyes and precious metals needed to color the glass were quite expensive. With an application of puppy eyes I hadn't even known my tired hazel orbs were still capable of giving, he caved and bought me the souvenir. I wished her success with her glassblowing and Dad led me toward the food stalls where we got corn dogs.

It was a wonderful day and even when Dad had to leave for a job he could no longer postpone I was still feeling good. This was the first time in a long time – the first time I could easily remember – that I remembered what it was like to feel hopeful. Something simple like this, it was something that could focus me. This was worth it. This was for what I was fighting through Yharnam. So that I could be free and happy, and eat unhealthy food on the Boardwalk while admiring adorable blown-glass figurines.

I loitered for another couple of hours before deciding to make my way to the bus stop. As I walked, I saw the glassblower's stall coming up. She was just packing up for the day – a bit early by my estimation, but then again I had no idea of her schedule or commitments – and stuffing her little strongbox into her backpack when a youngish guy who'd been puttering near her stall broke into a run and slammed into her, ripping the box from her hands. She went down with a cry of indignant protest.

I didn't know what this moron was thinking. The Boardwalk had plenty of Enforcers with stun guns and billy clubs. It would be easier and safer to try breaking into a jewelry store at night or something. I also don't know what I was thinking, because I set my glass lion's bag down on a stool and juke'd out to cut the thief off.

I moved too quickly, too smoothly. My practice against the beasts translated well to the real world, considering it was my same body in proportion and strength. He was moving too quickly, and I was late in realizing that I didn't have my weapon – nor would I have wanted to use it. Typically in this situation I'd dart into a running beast's way, bring the saw up in a smooth arc to split open its chest, hopefully sever tendons in the pectorals or open a major vein in the neck, then circle behind it before the creature could counterattack.

Instead I made a noise like a distressed goose as he crashed into me and we went down in a tangle of limbs. I yelled something like, "That's not yours!" He swore and spat. He pushed me away. I grabbed his jacket. He reached into his pocket and then slashed my hand with a knife.

The next thing I knew, two large men were pulling me off the thief, whose face was a mess of red from a broken nose and split skin in several places. To hear the Enforcers explain it, when the man cut me I grabbed his knife hand with my left and pulled it across his body, then tackled him to the ground – pinning his arm between our bodies – and began punching him with my right fist over and over.

I didn't have to fake the shakes as they ran me through the events, looking down in fear and distaste at my split knuckles. Of course, the reason for my fear was different than they expected, but I saw no reason to disabuse them of their preconceptions. I told the entirely true story that I was being bullied at school and feeling helpless, and my dad had brought me out here to help me feel better. That seeing someone else get walked all over made me act before I knew what I was doing, and that him cutting me somehow pushed me over the edge.

Apparently I looked haunted enough that what must have been the senior Enforcer told me to get my stuff and go home: he could give a police statement and they didn't need me. I got some napkins from the nearby burger joint to clean the blood off my knuckles, retrieved my glass lion, and caught the bus home.

Once I was home and the door was locked, I examined my hand. There were no longer split knuckles, no visible cut from the knife. I sank to the floor of my bathroom and cried.

(BREAK)

I'd seen no point in telling Dad what happened at the Boardwalk. We ate a quiet dinner and I did my best to smile, to pretend that things were still as good as they'd been that morning. Once it was bedtime, I placed the glass lion on my nightstand with the hope that it would help me have better dreams.

I returned to the Hunter's Dream anyway.

"Welcome home, good hunter," the doll said in that breathy voice of hers.

I opened my mouth and then cut myself off. I didn't need to get angry with her: none of this was her fault. "Listen," I said at long last, "I get that you're trying to make me feel comfortable but this place is

not my home. It's barely better than a prison, no matter how you dress it up. I didn't ask to be brought here, and the only thing that makes me not hate it is that at least it's better than Yharnam."

The doll nodded. "I am sorry you feel that way. This is my home, the only I have ever known, and I find it quite welcoming. It is...disconcerting to find that you have so different an experience."

...Damn it, why did she have to be so precious? "It's a place completely foreign to me, and I was brought here against my will. Moreover, it represents that I'm still tied to Yharnam, and I want to escape from there as soon as I can. So I'm sorry that I can't appreciate your home like you do. I'm not...not trying to disparage it." I sighed. "And my name is Taylor."

For the briefest of moments, I could swear I saw her eyes widen. "I will endeavor to address you by name then, Taylor," she favored me with one of her tiny smiles.

"What's your name, anyway?"

"I do not have one," she replied. "I am a doll. I was created to be a companion, to soothe and to guide. Attaching too much to me would hinder my ability to help others."

"I guess I can see that." I could only imagine my reaction if she'd said her name was Emma, or Sophia, or Annette. "Do you want a name?"

"If you mean a name by which you address me, I am not opposed. But it would not be my name," she said softly.

That sounded like a protestation by someone trying not to be disagreeable. "Then if it doesn't offend you, I suppose I'll just call you Doll."

"It is what I am: why would it offend?"

I noticed Gehrman creaking around in the cabin and said my goodbyes to Doll. "Gehrman!" I called. "The doors on the bridge were...were shut." Why did that still hurt so much to acknowledge? "A friend of mine, Gilbert, said that maybe I could take the aqueduct into Cathedral Ward."

"And you want me to draw up another map," he finished my thought. "Come on in and have a seat then, lass. Is this the same friend you got the book for?"

I nodded, smiling at the memory. "It gave him a good laugh."

"More good than it ever did me," he chuckled wryly, beginning to sketch. "I saw you talking with the doll."

"Yeah. Why didn't you tell me she was alive?" My tone wasn't accusatory: I was genuinely curious.

"Would you have believed me? Or just written it off as an old man gone stir-crazy? Some things you need to experience for yourself. And the hardships you faced out there made you ready to accept this particular truth."

“So does she keep you company, then?” I could imagine him regaling her with tales of Yharnam’s glory days.

“No,” he said, clipped and firm.

That brought me up short. “Um, mind if I ask why?”

“Yes.”

I blinked. “Uh, then I’ll change topics. Any idea what this is?” I presented him with the sharp charm when he took a moment to refill his pen.

“One of the old badges,” he replied, eyes going back to the parchment. “You’d wear them, like necklaces or medals. When you were awarded one, it gave you the right to requisition new equipment from the Workshop. Or, well, that’s a Church badge, so you’d get your tools from the Healing Church instead.”

I tilted my head. “Workshop?”

“Hunters’ Workshop,” Gehrman replied, still sketching. “When beasts started popping up, nobody knew what to do. Eventually some of us got together and set up a place to craft weapons and equipment. And the scouring of Old Yharnam, the Church assembled its own hunters and the Workshop fell into disuse. Everyone was working directly with the Church, and they had far more resources than a simple shop.”

“Were you there for all that?” I asked. “Considering the city’s so big, I’d have thought it was a long time ago.”

“Yes, it probably was,” Gehrman chuckled mirthlessly, rolling up the parchment. “Here’s your new map, girl. Off you get, leave an old man to his memories.”

(BREAK)

The aqueduct sucked ass.

Not only did it stink of mold and shit and rotting, bloated flesh, but it was crawling with gigantic scabrous rats and actual deformed corpses that came to life just to puke on you. I swore up a storm as I climbed the ladders back up to the ruins of civilization: I was going to find a gate leading from Cathedral Ward to the rest of Yharnam and wedge it open if I had to, just so I didn’t need to do that ever again. By the time I ran into a giant fucking *pig*, of all things, I was thoroughly done. Thankfully the pig was huge and stupid so I dodged its charge and then shanked it while it couldn’t turn around. Thing could only do so much by lunging backward at me, no matter how fat and heavy its ass was.

Rising up higher, I heard the gentle creak of a music box. It was the first soothing sound I’d heard since getting here. The tune was a bit melancholy, but still pretty. Naturally, at this point I’d come to the conclusion that most things in Yharnam want to eat your face, so I approached the window with caution. It didn’t have bars nearly as thick or latticed: maybe this was a higher-class area?

I rapped on the glass and I heard the clack of wood, the music stopping. “Hello?” came the voice of a young girl, probably no older than ten. “Is someone there?”

I blinked. “Uh, hi there?” I honestly hadn’t been prepared to meet someone so young.

Several thumps, like things were being methodically stacked. A few seconds later, the window slid open a crack. I could see a pale girl with long blonde hair, able to make out one bright blue eye. She looked me up and down, appraisingly. “I don’t recognize you, but I know that smell... You’re a hunter, aren’t you?”

I blinked. “I, uh, what smell?”

She giggled a little. “Daddy would say the same thing. I can smell the blood and beasts on you. But you also smell like the flowers, like Daddy used to. Miss Hunter, could you please look for my mum? Daddy never came back from the hunt, so Mum went to find him and now she’s gone too. I’m all alone here, and I’m scared.”

Well shit, how could I say no to that? “I, uh, sure. I’ll do my best. Do you know where they might’ve ended up?”

Even through the cracked window I could see the girl’s radiant smile. “Thank you! Um, Daddy and Granddad like to meet up in the graveyard outside Oedon Chapel, so maybe start there?” I unrolled my map while she talked. “Mum wears a big red-jeweled brooch. It’s so bright and, and beautiful...you won’t be able to miss it! Oh!” She hopped away from the window, feet hitting the floor. I could only presume she was standing on books or a box to reach the window, since this street seemed higher on this side. “Mustn’t forget the music box,” her voice echoed before stocking feet pattered back toward me. She pressed the tiny box through the window, through the bars.

“This plays one of Daddy’s favorite songs,” the girl explained. “And when Daddy forgets us we play this for him so he remembers. Mommy’s so silly, going out without it,” she giggled again, hope bubbling within her while mine dropped into my toes and through the ground.

Her father would forget them? And he was on the hunt? Worse still, her mother went out without the one thing that might save her from a kill-crazy husband? I swallowed heavily and tried to sound reassuring as I accepted the music box. “I’ll have a look around. Hopefully I’ll find them both,” I said with a forced smile.

“Be careful out there,” she chirped while closing the window.

I couldn’t close the pit in my stomach no matter what I did. I had a feeling I knew exactly what had happened.