

Monday came, and with it came the abuse. Body-checked in the halls, mostly by Sophia and a few other girls but even some of the bigger suck-ups among the guys got into it if there were enough popular-girl witnesses and not too many otherwise. I guess they were still afraid of getting in trouble for being guys hitting a girl. Glue on my seat – classically Madison, a stupid and childish prank. I simply tore two pages out of my binder and laid them over the glue. If there was one thing that killing and being killed night after night did for me, it was to give me perspective on how overwhelmingly petty these little actions were. Sophia's hits didn't hurt so bad now that I knew the pain of having my throat torn out, my bones split apart. They still bruised, and knocked the air from my lungs, but they didn't stop or really even slow me.

Before, I would trudge through school because I was so beaten-down. Now, with a better understanding of just how much worse things could be, and not in the ephemeral 'I see other people in pain' way but actually having experienced such hardship, I trudged simply because I was too tired to do anything else. I slept, but it wasn't exactly restful. Oh, my body got all the sleep it needed. When I examined myself in a mirror I looked healthier than I had in a year. But emotionally and mentally I was drained to a level that rivaled the immediate aftermath of my mother's death. I answered questions when called upon, not caring enough to raise my voice above an even monotone.

"Oh Taylor!" A sickly-sweet voice interrupted my transition from one classroom to the next. Emma was there, affecting a cartoonish level of friendship and familiarity, flanked by several of her hangers-on. Julia, I think, was the brunette's name. I couldn't place the stocky blonde who looked like she'd have a good career bouncing nightclubs later in life.

"How've you been?" Emma continued. "We've all been so worried about you, since your stay in the hospital. With how you came out of that locker, I thought you'd end up in the psych ward. If you're not feeling alright, a little screw-loose, it's okay to check yourself in. I'm sure your dad will be able to deal with losing you too."

If she only fucking knew. I had a lot of things that I might have wanted to say to her. I wanted to convey just what I'd been suffering, to make her understand the horrors I'd witnessed, that I'd been party to. If I could take her by the head, pin her against the wall and work my tongue through the seam between her eye and its socket I would translate the darkest recesses of my mind directly into her thoughts. Instead my response came in the form of a sharp, braying bark of a laugh, eyes jerking open so wide that I worried they'd pop out of my head. Before anything else could happen, I shouldered through the gap between maybe-Julia and Blondie. Weirdly, they didn't stop me, nor did they follow.

A few more hits and idle comments as the day wore on. I was a junkie, I was a whore, I was giving Mrs. Knott sexual favors for preferential treatment. That last one got me a bit steamed, the heavysset older woman was the only teacher here who was somewhat decent. Still, I was just too exhausted to do anything about it even if I knew what to do. I had no idea how to navigate this sort of social situation. All I'd learned to do was to fight, and I wasn't properly equipped for mortal combat in the Winslow halls. Besides, these were just stupid kids, not bestial monstrosities: they didn't deserve their lives ended for the sake of my ego.

Once home, I puttered around until Dad came home and we had TV dinner. I was even less talkative around him than usual. It was bad enough when I was just covering up my bullying and Emma's betrayal. I feared the revelation would break him again and he'd never put himself back together. The only thing worse than an absent parent was a missing one, and without him I'd be homeless and subject

to the predations of the Brockton Bay foster-care system. Foster care produced a lot of villains, and considering the state of the Bay I suspected it was worse than the norm.

Now I was also hiding from him that his daughter was either insane or traveling to a nightmare world when she slept. If he couldn't do anything about the bullying and abuse, then he was even more powerless to deal with a threat he couldn't even physically affect, something where he couldn't even travel. We exchanged empty pleasantries over microwaved meatloaf. I felt as alone as I had in front of Iosefka's door as I heard her footsteps echo away from me.

(BREAK)

I didn't want to sleep that night. I definitely didn't want to travel to Yharnam. But my pacing soon slowed and my limbs became too heavy. I couldn't keep myself awake: it physically hurt to do so. And unlike in Yharnam, I didn't care to see what happened if I died here. So reluctantly I climbed into bed. When my head hit the pillow, the world dimmed.

My eyes opened at the gentle scent of flowers. I still didn't understand how they smelled like moonlight, but it was the only conclusion I could draw. I sat up from where I'd been rested on a bench and looked around. The cabin was open. If there was someone else here... Fear gripped me. I didn't have a good record with strangers in Yharnam. I gripped my pistol and saw, and headed toward the cabin.

The first thing I noticed was how tiny it was. A cramped interior, barely enough room to move, with several desks and what looked like two workbenches. And all over the floor, piled to heights that rivaled my 5'9", were stacks of books. Leave it to me to notice the books before the inhabitant. Facing away from me, slumped in a chair, was a man. The top of his hat poked out above the high, ornate back of his wheelchair.

*Wheelchair Man!* I stalked closer, trying to keep my steps silent. I wanted to be within striking distance before I confronted this bastard, interrogated him as to why he did this to me. My coat caught one of the piles of books, which scattered to the floor. The man moved slowly, almost lazily, unafraid. As he turned, I realized this was not the Wheelchair Man. Wheelchair Man had a face broader than it was tall, with a wild scraggly beard and full apple cheeks. His lips spread easily into a wide, frog-like smile with a mouth packed full of too many crooked yellow teeth all jostling with each other for position. His skin was flush with life and his clothing, including the bandages over his eyes, was dirty and greasy.

The man seated before me radiated an aura of sadness, an abyss so deep that just looking at him made my own pains feel almost selfish. He was sallow, almost gray in coloration, with limp hair gathered beneath a pitiable top hat. His mouth was narrow and set at the bottom of his long jaw, resting in a morose line that suggested he didn't know what a smile was. His eyes were deep and soulful, and it hurt to look into them.

"Ah," he spoke, and his voice was soft, almost soothing despite the pain lingering at the back of his words. "You must be the new hunter. Welcome to the Hunter's Dream. This will be your home, for now." He opened his mouth to speak further but my questions wouldn't permit it.

"None of this makes sense!" I cut him off. "I come here when I sleep and now you tell me *this* is a dream? Then what the fuck is the rest of Yharnam!? *Where* the fuck is Yharnam? What's going on?"

What is this Hunt? And what do YOU know about it!?” My breath was coming in ragged heaves, and at some point I’d shoved the pistol into his face.

The man looked up at me with those sad, tired eyes. I stepped back, feeling guilty for having gotten so aggressive. His clothing was homemade but well-kept, hand stitched and many rips sewn back together. His right leg was missing at some point, likely below the knee, as a peg rested on the wheelchair’s footrest. “I am Gehrman,” he said at length. “A...friend to you hunters. Seems you’re in a fine haze right about now, young lady. I suggest you don’t think too hard about it. Just go out and kill some beasts. It’s for your own good, you know: it’s what hunters do! You’ll get used to it.”

“No.” My voice was firm. “Iosefka, Gilbert, they didn’t know what’s going on here. In Yharnam. Fuck, whatever. You know more. And I want answers!” I brandished the saw threateningly. Gehrman only briefly looked at the weapon before turning his gaze back to me. “Why am I coming here? Why do I come here when I sleep? How...” My voice hitched. “How can I get out of this nightmare?”

His eyes softened and, for a brief moment, I could swear I saw tears welling. They were gone and his stare was once again the gentle blank as before, the transition so quick I questioned whether I’d seen anything at all. “One side, lass, and follow me.” He rolled forward and I had to get out of the way or get my feet run over. His chair bobbed on the stone steps but Gehrman kept perfect balance, even bobbing his head to keep his hat safely perched. He pulled into the grass before the birdbath. The old man took a deep breath. “It’s nice to have fresh air in your lungs for a talk like this. For a given value of fresh, at least.” He looked up at me. Gehrman must have been tall: he didn’t have to look up terribly far despite being seated. “I doubt that I can tell you nearly as much as you think I can, but I’ll explain what little I am able.”

I steadied myself. It wouldn’t do to get angry at someone who was offering to help, even if I wanted more than he could give. I asked about the Hunt. Gehrman explained about the beastly scourge, how it had almost killed the city-state of Yharnam once before and hunters were licensed by the Church to pursue corruption. He spoke of the ashen-blood plague and how those cured often became beasts.

On the subject of the Hunter’s Dream, he was more cagey. It was some manner of anchor, letting exceptional hunters survive death and learn from their mistakes. When I asked if it was some sort of precognition effect, he scratched his head. “Child, you’re not seeing the future, you’re living the present. You just get the chance to try again.” So it was time travel. “What does time matter in a Dream?”

I could tell I wasn’t getting anywhere with this line of questioning. All of his answers were so vague and esoteric, but I couldn’t say anything was a lie. Finally I asked what he meant by this being my home for now. I didn’t want to live anywhere in or adjacent to the hell that was Yharnam.

“This was once a haven for hunters,” he replied, leading me to wonder why it was ‘once’ such, “a workshop where hunters used blood to enhance their weapons and flesh. Until you find a way out of this Dream, you’re welcome to rest your head here. We don’t have as many tools as we once did, but you’re welcome to use whatever you find or bring back. Even the doll, should it please you.” My first instinct was to be offended, but for the first time I saw an expression on his lips. One corner of his mouth was curled in the approximation of a wry smirk, the type seen on a person who’s just made an inside joke he thinks is funny.

I decided to take the bait. “What would I use the doll for? Art? I don’t exactly have the means to paint a portrait.”

“Oh, I have no doubt you could find a means to bring the proper equipment back here. But as for your question, can you not...? Hm, how interesting.” Gehrman looked me up and down again. “Forgive an old man’s lack of propriety, lass. All this time and I’ve not asked your name.”

“It’s Taylor. Taylor Hebert.” I stalked back up the steps to the cabin. “Come on.” Gehrman followed, bemused. I pulled out a roll of parchment from one of the stacks against the wall. “Do you have a pen?” This kicked off a little search.

“I haven’t had someone send me on a fetch errand in a long time,” Gehrman commented. “It’s almost refreshing.”

At last we found a pen, an actual iron-gall fountain type, and I put Gehrman to work drawing a map of Yharnam as best he knew it. I really didn’t want to wander around that hellhole lost and confused any more than I already have.

“Why couldn’t you have just listened to me and gone out to kill beasts?” the old man grumbled goodnaturedly. “That’s the problem with the youth: no respect for their elders. Least that’s what my father used to say.”

His penmanship was impeccable and the little sketches he made of landmarks were the kind of thing you’d see in the old masters’ collected works. Perhaps I’d see about getting ahold of paints after all, just not for myself. “Say, Gehrman, could I take a book or two off your hands? I have a friend who’d really appreciate some new reading material.”

(BREAK)

I knocked on Gilbert’s window again. “Hey Gilbert. I hope you’re not napping. I brought you a book, if you can take it.”

A soft laugh turned into a hacking cough. “From my only friend who can still visit me? How could I refuse? My door around the corner has a mail slot. Slip it through there: I have a little system set up to grab things just in case, though this is the first time I’ll make use of it.”

I pushed the book through the slot and heard it land with a soft clatter, then other noises of wood skidding across wood. I went back to the window just in time to hear another laugh.

“*How to Pick Up Fair Maidens?* Taylor, I’m not certain if—” He was interrupted by a cough that lingered. “...Not certain if this is an indictment of my personal charisma or a vote of confidence that I’ll improve. Either way, though my lungs don’t thank you, I needed that laugh.”

(BREAK)

The way Gehrman described it, there was a massive bridge that led directly into Cathedral Ward. Normally the doors were shut and only opened on orders, but there was a good chance the doors would be unmanned or even left open due to how frenzied the hunters were. Each time I got the chance, when enemies were dead, I’d unroll the map and study it to figure out where the hell to go next. It was

anything but a straight shot, many doors barred and elevators non-functional. I was honestly surprised at the elevators even being a thing. My journey took me past more of those big troll-people, more deformed wolves, plenty of mad hunters, and even freaky crows that undulated on the ground and made the most horrific noises when they flapped through the air. They didn't really fly, just fluttered and wailed on anything in their reach. It was both terrifying and embarrassing when one almost killed me, tearing huge rents in my face and arms.

Between deaths, Gehrman taught me to harvest additional blood vials from fallen enemies. I was understandably leery about using blood from deformed monsters, but he promised me (just like Iosefka) that the treatment process would make the blood subsume into mine rather than mutating me. Since it was either take blood or face a guaranteed death – and, according to Gehrman, such a lack of progress would see me trapped here forever, I really only had the one option.

The final stretch to the bridge was beyond brutal. Two of those wolves, a troll, crows and a few hunters all gathered on the bridge. Like they were purposely blocking my way. I leapt, rolled, dodged between claws and teeth, felt them shear through my flesh. I bit back with saw and pistol, hacking through them and coating myself in their blood to heal myself. I was a woman possessed. I could see the massive walls, the enormous double-doors. The bridge gate was right there, and my answers were on the other side.

A scream rent the air, the sound of a woman being pulled apart. It came from the other side of the doors. Great, more bastard hunters to fight.

Then it leapt over the wall.

It leapt in a single bound over a three-story wall, only using its claws to help it pass over. It was massive, gray and shaggy, humanoid only in that it had two legs and stood upright. At least ten feet tall, probably bigger given that it was crouched. Its right arm looked more human, covered in only a short layer of fur, while the left scraped the ground and bristled with long clumps of hair like the rest of its body. The head was longer than a dog's skull should be and boasted massive antlers. Its ribcage burst open, splitting through its fur, leaning outward like an additional set of teeth. It *screamed*.

The sound of a woman being torn apart, that sound ripped forth from the monster's throat! I actually staggered back, both in fear and worry. It sounded in such pain, so frightened. Was this a monster I needed to kill? Did...did it need help? It saw me and bounded forward, smashing its fists into the brick where I had just been.

*Alright then.*

I ducked between its legs, sawing at its hamstrings. I kept to its blind spots, back and right whenever I could manage, away from that giant left arm. It swung and spun, moving far more like a person than I liked. It clawed, sure, but the actions seemed like what a person would do if he (she?) found himself with a claw. Far too often it punched, or slammed a fist down, or grabbed at me. It got me around the ankle and slammed me over the edge of the bridge, folding me in half. I felt my ribs and spine snap and if it weren't for Iosefka's special blood vial I think I would have died there. I recovered the rest of the damage by hacking into the creature as it screamed and screamed.

Finally it clutched its head, pulling at the antlers, letting out one last scream. Dropping to its knees, the beast slumped forward and went still. Then it dissolved, dissipating into fog. Something glittered where the creature had been, and I plucked from the brickwork a strange sharp cross-shaped charm on a chain.

I went to the doors and pushed. They didn't budge. I beat on them, smashed the saw into them, shot the doors. I yelled for anyone on the other side to hear me, not that it would do any good. I was so close, the people who could actually give me answers were just on the other side of these metal doors! I swung the glaive again and again, bouncing off the reinforced barrier. I slammed my fists into the wood and metal.

"No! No! They're right there! On the other side! I need to get out! I can't stay here!" I wiped at my eyes as tears spilled down into the face covering I wore to protect myself from stray fur and other debris. "Please! Anyone! I don't care! Come try to eat me! Just open these doors!" I slumped against the recalcitrant doors, my goal only feet away yet I was unable to reach it.

The next scream that shook the night was my own.