

I don't know how long we sat there, on the stone floor, crying. What finally jarred me out of my stupor was when I took a moment to sniffle and my ringing ears detected a different tone in my mother's sobs. I had been blubbering in a sort of distraught joy, but she sounded utterly broken.

I pawed awkwardly at her face, partly due to tears obscuring my vision and partly because at the moment I was barely a functional person. "You're crying," I at last managed to say, "and you're not happy. Why?"

"H-how can I be happy?" she stammered back. "My baby's trapped in this hell!"

"But you're here too," I protested. "Can't we go home?" How I managed to delude myself...

Tears welled again and the saddest smile I'd ever seen stretched across her face. "Taylor, sweetheart, if you're here then you've been in Yharnam for a time. I've never seen you there, never seen you in the Dream. The doll never spoke of you..." She swallowed hard. "These Dungeons, they're repositories of memory. So my best bet is that I'm... That I'm not real. That this me is a snapshot, a memory, of who I was when I entered this Dungeon."

I felt cold, colder than the cell phone I once held in my hands, my last sent message marked as 'Received'. "No," I squeaked, pleading. Pleading to her, to the Dream, to the gods of Yharnam, to whomever would hear me. My voice sounded so very small, even to me. "No, please, you can come home. We can be a family again..."

Now she was hugging me, resting her head on my shoulder. "Little Owl, what do you mean? What happened while I was gone?"

On some level I knew she was redirecting me. "I-I don't..."

She could tell it hurt, but she pushed regardless. "Please, sweetie. You've been bottling up all this pain. I can tell. I..." She grimaced. "I can smell it."

"Yeah," I chuckled, the sound hollow. "I got the sharpened senses too. At least the Bay smells better than Yharnam."

"So you go home?" I could feel her relax in my arms.

"Yeah, I come here when I sleep. I don't know the time conversion, because sometimes it feels like I'm here for days and then I wake up in the morning."

And from there, the floodgates opened. One admission turned into everything. I told my mother how long she'd been dead, how Dad had fallen apart and only barely put himself back together with help from his friends. How I'd fallen apart and Emma had put me back together. How we'd begun to drift apart, both hiding in our own little sarcophagi of pain.

Then I spoke of Emma, of what had happened. I don't know when, but at some point my voice rose to a level that I was screaming. I told of how my best friend, my sister in all but name, had suddenly turned against me. Resolved to make my life a living hell. How I'd been stupid enough to go to Winslow to be with Emma, and now my every day was torture. Her new friend Sophia was a monster, brutal and sadistic, and Emma seemed to be constantly trying to one-up her.

Insults, beatings, hate-mail. I knew one of them had gotten some of the jocks to try something: I'd escaped, but seeing as it was three thuggish boys with duct tape in Gangland, USA, I automatically presumed rape.

I settled down, my voice again becoming quiet. I wasn't calm, and my wide eyes confessed that I wanted anything else than to share this, but I couldn't stop myself. The words were coming and I was a prisoner in my own body. I told how over the fall and beginning of winter I'd met a new girl, Julie, how she'd been sweet and understanding, excited to know a fellow bookworm. She even comforted me after some of the insults, telling me I was better than them. She never visited over winter break, but our home wasn't in the best part of town so I didn't suspect anything.

It was something I'd honestly not thought about, perhaps I'd blocked it out because it hurt so much. But on the day when I came back from winter break Julie was there, with Emma. She told me we'd never been friends and she'd been looking forward to my face when she revealed it was all a lie. They all laughed, sniped a few more insults, and then when I trudged to my locker I was attacked and shoved inside. Into the filth and the darkness, where I first heard the Wheelchair Man's voice.

That made her start. She asked me to describe him, and I felt my mother growing progressively more rigid in my arms.

"I saw him too. After...the crash. Only once. He talked about a contract, and then I woke up in Yharnam."

I swallowed hard. "What've you had to face? I've... Almost everybody's turned into beasts. I even had to kill the Church's vicar, Amelia."

Her eyes lost their luster and she began to stare off into space.

"...Mom?"

She startled. "I...I'm not sure, honey. I can't remember." She sounded more confused than concerned.

"W-well, how did you get free? Both Doll and Gehrman say I can't even know before the time is right, whatever that means."

Her brows knitted together. "How did I-? I'm still..." Her eyes glimmered with understanding. "Ah. I think I get it now." A long, strong finger poked me in the chest. "You're of my blood. Blood can hold memories, echoes. Yours called out to mine, and somehow we converged. But, well, I'm a memory. And I think I'm not even a complete memory: some of what you remember of me, and some of what I was here. I...only exist here."

"I can find a way to bring you out!" I protested before she was even done speaking. "I'll find--"

My parents never struck me, not even spankings. Mom thought physical discipline was a barbaric act and Dad feared his wiry strength and temper might cause true damage. Instead they came up with different punishments, making me 'work off' any debts I accrued.

My mother slapped me across the face hard enough to snap my head to the side.

I looked back at her in shock and saw tears pouring from rage-filled eyes. “You’ll do nothing of the fucking sort!” she bellowed at me. “You’re going to find your way out of this endless nightmare and back to the real world forever! If I have to cut my own throat to ensure you save yourself, I will! You are not going to risk your safety, your soul, for a dead woman!”

She lunged forward and gathered me in her arms, her demeanor changing. She felt fragile, defeated, as if she was clinging to me for comfort just as much as she was offering the same. “Taylor, baby girl, Little Owl... Don’t you dare try to save me. I died that day of the car crash: everything else has been an extended purgatory. If you don’t focus everything you have on making sure that you get out of here, free from this place and as intact as you can manage, I’ll never forgive you...”

I clung to her and cried. Once again my pain began to spill out. “I killed Iosefka,” I stated, the words rising unbidden to my lips. The explanation tumbled forth like a waterfall. Iosefka was the first person to show me genuine kindness in so long: she felt almost like a mother figure, singing me to sleep. To find her turned into that thing, having to end her suffering at her behest...

By the time I finished talking, I’d screamed myself so hoarse that I could barely hear my own words rising up from my throat.

“I don’t know if this is what you want to hear, or even what you need,” my mother said softly, “but I’m so proud of you, Little Owl. You’re a wonderful person, and a strong one. I wish so badly that you could’ve found a good ending to that horror. But you did everything you could manage, and you thought of nothing except for saving a good person. I love you so much, Taylor.”

The room around us rippled like a pond’s disturbed reflection. I was on my feet instantly, weapon in hand. Mom was only a split-second slower. “What’s happening?” I asked.

“Nothing good. Come on, let’s find you a lantern.” As we walked, we saw more odd stutters in reality. “At a guess,” she muttered, “somehow sharing these memories is disturbing the memories that hold this Dungeon intact. I don’t fancy the idea of seeing what happens to you if you stay while it falls apart.”

“You can at least try to come with me. I want to bring you with me, back to the Dream.” I grabbed for her hand but didn’t find it: her warmth was gone from my side. I spun and looked around, but she was nowhere to be seen. “Mom? Mom!?”

The room around me shuddered more violently, colors and patterns swirling on the walls, like a dreamer experiencing a psychotic break. The Little Ones waved their lantern frantically, getting my attention. I’d never seen them agitated like this before, and their fear at last spurred me to action. I touched the lantern and appeared in a heap before the headstone. My face was buried in the grass and I made no effort to get up. My chest heaved in forceful, wet sobs.

“Gods above, girl,” Gehrman’s voice met my ears. “What happened in there?”

I heard Doll’s delicate footfalls approaching from the opposite side.

Sucking up my tears, and then spitting out dirt, I finally sat up. “I met my mom in there.”

Gehrman's memory was clearly acting up again because he simply asked, "Your mother?" His tone was one of confusion, of the elderly who know they should recall something.

Doll's response was far more jarring for me. I heard a sharp intake of breath, or whatever passed for that in her artificial body. "Annette?" she asked in surprise. Gehrman's eyes widened when she spoke, recognizing the name and once again putting things together.

"She's... No, that's not right," he mumbled. "I freed her. She's gone." I could hear the desperation in his voice, the concern. Even in this time of pain, it warmed my heart. The thought that she was still here, still suffering, it terrified him.

"Sh-she thought she was a memory. Maybe me being her daughter let us meet up?"

"Memories are carried in blood," Doll said, almost as if reciting an adage with sagely certainty. "The echoes may have resonated within you. I have never heard of this occurring before, but you are a special girl, Taylor. I believe it may have."

"She said to find my way out of here, to get free. D-do you have any advice?"

"Aye," Gehrman nodded. "I'd tell you to head straight to Byrgenwerth, but I'm unsure how you'd fare. The woods are full of terrors the deeper you go, and the shadows of Yharnam yet lurk in the dark corners. You might be better off pursuing other ways to strengthen yourself before you go there."

"You will likely not wish to hear this, but I recommend you return to Iosefka's clinic and find things important to her, important to you. Honor her memory and make use of what gifts she would surely have given you in life."

(BREAK)

Once I'd gathered my wits and steeled myself, I returned to the clinic. The imposter was still dead, and Iosefka's body was thankfully gone. I don't think I could have survived having to see that again, to face what I'd had to do. I did a quick checklist of things that might help me. There was that stone in my pocket, given me by Patches – in hindsight I should have asked Doll about him, whether he was helpful or a dangerous maniac, but I had been too emotionally drained at the time. I could find my way around through the forest to Valtr, so-called Master of the League, and hopefully avail myself of his caches of resources – and perhaps his assistance, as well. A veteran hunter would be of great help.

I retrieved from the wall a proudly-displayed plaque, carved bronze mounted on a dark hardwood, proclaiming Sister Iosefka to be a curate of the Healing Church. That would be a good thing by which to remember her. I then broke a gurney apart and carved her name into one of the metal panels, intending to use it as a headstone to commemorate her here. I gathered a few of her books. She had no introductory texts on the Healing Church, but maybe I could try to parse these dry academic tomes to learn something.

The final thing I took, I overlooked several times. As I looked around the office, the small dark-red envelope seemed to blend in with the dark leather stools and overall dark atmosphere. But finally I looked down, the gold ink catching the light and reflecting into my eyes. It was a small, square letter, the type that held an invitation. On the back was a wax seal, stamped and everything, with a strange pattern I didn't recognize at all. It looked like several snakes converging on a sun, which was partly out

of frame. On the front, in what seemed to be gold-laced ink, I found my name elegantly written: *Taylor Hebert*.

Already I was shaken. I couldn't remember having given my surname to Iosefka, and I'd quickly stopped doing so around Yharnam once I realized it wasn't how things were done. Biting my lip and preparing for something to jump out and bite my face, I broke the seal and opened the letter. The contents were short but confusing, but despite my confusion I felt a kind of fear settle into my stomach.

*Mistress Taylor Hebert is cordially invited to attend Queen Annalise and her court at Castle Cainhurst. Present this invitation for safe transit. No guests permitted.*