

## Cinders

Consciousness returned to me slowly — a crawl, rather than a sprint or a jump. At first, I was floating, drifting aimlessly from thought to thought, each of them stray and fleeting. They might have been something like dreams, but I didn't dwell on them long enough to know, and any memory I might have had of their contents left me just as easily as they did.

After an eternity of that, touch returned to me, and I discovered I was laying on something hard and unyielding, most certainly not a mattress, face down. My cheek was pressed against something rigid and cold, smooth, but speckled with a film of some kind of sediment.

I breathed in, and the old, musty smell of dust and decay filled my nostrils, crawling down the back of my throat.

I gagged and rolled and discovered PAIN as the back of my head cracked against a solid, sturdy wall. Sound returned at last as my moan echoed off the surfaces around me, bouncing back to my ears.

A hiss escaped through my teeth as I reached up and felt at the throbbing ache in my skull, but there was nothing wet underneath my fingers, so thankfully, I hadn't literally cracked my head open, it just felt like I had.

Everything stopped.

I rediscovered sight when I opened my eyes and looked upon the fingers and hand of an arm that was supposed to be missing.

Except it wasn't.

“Oh.”

And when I focused past it and at the stone behind it, I came to the sudden and funny realization that I was in a tomb.

Funny, because I wasn't supposed to be waking up at all, if I'd been buried. In fact, that was what I'd been expecting, at the end. I'd pushed myself too far, taken too much, shed too many pieces of myself, and all that had remained was a machine, a thing dedicated to killing Scion and which hadn't had a purpose with him gone.

Death would have been a mercy. I would have welcomed it. Relief, release, *rest* after spending two years frantically sprinting towards one goal after another. I'd saved the world — *all* worlds, from the barren wastelands to the sprawling metropolises to the lush gardens — and I could finally just be *done*.

Except even death couldn't be the end of me, could it? Although why anyone had bothered to restore the body of a corpse was beyond me. What was the point of giving me back my arm if they were just going to bury me?

I sighed and sagged against my grave. It was really quite uncomfortable, but it wasn't like people were often buried with a plush mattress and pillow set.

First things first.

*Passenger?*

There was no answer, but there never had been. When I stilled my mind and stretched my senses, however, the world unfolded around me and countless thousands of bugs rose from the distant buzz I'd felt so long I'd forgotten it was there into a dull roar at the forefront of my mind.

So. My powers were back, mostly as they had been before, although the range was about half of what it had been back during my days as Skitter. I had that going for me, at least.

Something was...off, though. The bugs, many of them were of the kind I recognized, the sort of common, everyday insects I'd enthralled everywhere I went. Others, though, were odd. Weird. They were new and unusual and seemed only partly related to the kinds I'd controlled before, even on those alternate Earths I'd had access to during Gold Morning.

And putting that aside, what their senses told me, what I could see and hear through them, muddled and unusual and strange as it had always been, showed not some reverent mausoleum dedicated to the fallen of our final fight against Scion or unmarked grave meant to give me the peace of anonymity, but instead a kind of...swamp.

I frowned and pulled myself up from my tomb. Mercifully, the heavy lid was already pushed to the side and I didn't have to try and leverage it off of me. That was probably why I wasn't flipping out about being trapped inside a confined space.

But when I stood and looked around, it didn't show me anything new or familiar. I had no better idea of what I was looking at than I had looking through the eyes of my bugs.

“Where am I?”

It was indeed a cemetery of some kind, because there were headstones scattered around, all in various stages of decay and disrepair. Some were so crumbled and weathered that the names on them had long since worn away, and some were nothing but chunks of rock sitting in a pile to suggest there had once been something there.

And more still were like mine, roughly hewn marble or whatever — I wasn't exactly a geologist — cut into the boxy shape of a coffin and left above ground, almost as though the people inside of them had been interred with the expectation that they would rise from their graves.

Considering me, and considering some of those graves looked like their occupants *had* pushed aside the lids and left — because those were empty — that might not have been a completely unreasonable expectation.

Wasn't that a fucking trip? I'd been buried in a graveyard where people were *expecting* the undead. What kind of backwards, sideways, fucked up world had I been buried on?

And amongst all these tombs, I seemed to have been given a place of prominence. My stone coffin stood at the crest of a small hill, marked by a tall but withered tree, and behind it was the wall of what might once have been a crypt when the bricks were first laid. Many more gravestones were arrayed around it in a rough circle, and it stood at the end of a pathway that cut through the rest of the cemetery and off into the distance.

That begged the question, though.

How long had it been since I died?

I almost wanted to laugh at the absurdity. How could I have died if I was still alive? But I'd been buried long enough to apparently collect dust, although something had kept my costume intact enough to prevent it from decaying, because the spider silk and armor pads were a little musty, but otherwise fine.

Speaking of which, what about my flight pack?

...No go. Whether it had run out of juice or just degraded from going so long without maintenance, I had no idea, and it didn't really matter. All that mattered was that it didn't work. I hated to leave it behind, but it was nothing but dead weight to me now and there was no point in lugging it around this...wherever this was...when I had no idea how far I was from civilization, let alone whether there'd be a tinker nearby who could fix it.

I could come back for it later, if the time and opportunity ever arose. I had a distinct feeling that this world had no tinkers around who could possibly fix it, though. I might even be the only cape around.

So it was with something like regret that I detached it from the rest of my costume and set it unceremoniously inside the coffin that had been my tomb. I put it out of sight, under the shadow of the lid, where no one would stumble upon it and steal it.

Although who in this graveyard I was expecting to take it... Yeah. It sounded crazy even to me, but either this place had had a rash of grave robbers already, in which case a seemingly empty tomb might discourage any others from looking too closely, or I wasn't the only one who had woken up from my dirt nap.

It was still throwing me for a loop that the second one was the one I found myself believing more likely.

When my flight pack was sufficiently hidden, I rummaged about my clothes and inspected the rest of my kit, only to find most of it gone, my packs and compartments empty.

Guess whoever had buried me hadn't been reverent enough to leave behind any of my other supplies.

What I did find was the nanothorn knife Defiant had gifted me — when I briefly turned it on, it still functioned, although I'd have to ration that because there was no way of knowing how long it would last before it needed maintenance I couldn't give it — another regular steel combat knife, a handgun with one full magazine, and most strangely of all, a large, heavy flask, filled to the brim with some

sort of swirling, glowing orange liquid that radiated so much warmth I could feel it through the thick, green glass.

Where it had come from, I didn't know. What the liquid inside of it was, I hadn't the slightest clue. A part of me thought I should just toss it and forget about it, because strange flasks containing strange fluids was like the beginning of a cautionary tale against date rape. More practically, whoever had buried me had obviously left this flask behind for a *reason*, and whatever it was and whatever was inside of it, it must have had some kind of purpose.

So I put it back where I found it, in the compartment at the small of my back.

Alright. Recap: I woke up in a tomb in a rundown graveyard inside a swamp who knew how long after the battle against Scion. My powers were back, but my range was maybe half of where it had been at my best, and some of the bugs here were of a kind that only vaguely resembled ones I'd seen before. My flight pack was busted, but I still had a regular combat knife, the nanothorn knife Defiant had given me, a pistol with one full mag, and a flask filled with some kind of warm, glowing liquid.

Oh yeah. And I'd come back from the dead. Apparently. Maybe. Fuck, hell if I knew.

Not much I could do about any of that, right now, in any case. Unless I wanted to lie back down in this coffin and wait, hoping I died of hunger or thirst before one of my neighbors decided to get up and pay me a homicidal visit.

Fuck that.

I balanced myself on the lip of my tomb with one hand and leveraged myself out until I was standing on the soft, loamy soil, then turned my eye more critically to the landscape of the cemetery and considered my options. But whoever had buried me — I was beginning to wonder if it even *was* Contessa, at this point — hadn't given me much in the way of options, and whoever had planned this place out had done a piss poor job of it, too. Hell, depending on how long I'd been lying in that tomb, maybe mine was simply the oldest and the groundskeeper or undertaker or whatever had just haphazardly expanded the place as needed.

Because there was only one way forward.

The tombs and headstones arrayed around me were tightly packed and awkwardly spaced, to the point I doubted many of them actually denoted a buried body, because there was just no fucking *space* for it. There was no way for me to climb over them, not the least of which because I seemed to have been buried in a narrow crevice or valley; even ignoring the headstones, the ground quickly rose into steep hills on all sides but one. They weren't impassable, but trying to go up them would be closer to rock climbing than hiking.

That left only the gentle downward slope into what looked like a swamp, with an eerie mist that hovered above the shallow waters.

Yes, the fact that there was only one way out was ringing every alarm bell in my head. Yes, I was super fucking suspicious about how conveniently it was all arranged. Yes, I also didn't have much choice except to spring what seemed like a very obvious trap.

In the distance, a church bell pealed, and it seemed to rattle me all the way to my bones.

Nothing for it, I guess.

I gathered as many bugs on my person as I could, secreting them away in all of the usual places, in the folds and compartments, in my hair, squeezed in the gaps of my armor panels. The rest, I spread out to give myself as much coverage as possible. The last thing I wanted was to be surprised and ambushed.

When I was ready, I set off down the slope of my hill at a sedate pace, walking with a leisure and a confidence I didn't quite feel.

At the bottom, a skeletal figure dressed in rags leapt out at me, wielding a broken sword — it was little more than a hilt and a foot-long slab of jagged steel.

This thing? This was what I'd been expecting. A thin figure that was little more than skin and bone, colored the pasty white of the dead and decayed, with a stench to match. What little flesh remained was rotted and barely clinging to atrophied muscle and long-gone sinew, and its eyes were sunken into its head and its lips had shriveled and drawn back over its teeth.

A zombie.

I dodged the blatantly telegraphed attack and drew my knife, and with a single motion, I stepped in close and cut open its throat.

Honestly, I hadn't been sure it would work. I doubted this corresponded to tropes, so I hadn't even seriously entertained the idea that they would only die to holy weapons or headshots, but a thing already dead seemed like it would be more resilient than to die to something so simple.

But it went down, gurgling with a raspy voice, and stopped moving, and as it did, something flowed out of it and into me, settling in my chest. It felt like *potential*.

What?

No, just... What? What kind of Highlander bullshit was *that*?

Nevermind. Just... Figure it out later. Worry about crazy Trump bullshit once you're out of the desolate swamp, Taylor.

I glanced right, down a short pathway that traveled parallel to the hill I'd come down from, but a cursory inspection with a few bugs revealed only a motionless corpse and a dead end, so I left it alone and stepped out into view of the rest of the cemetery.

That was what I assumed it was, anyway. There was a pathway made of what looked like flat cinderblocks, all uniformly cut and placed, only now as decrepit and disheveled as the rest of the place. Gnarled trees jutted out along the sides as though to frame it, and they were dead-looking, sparsely flowered with leaves and blossoms that seemed one bad winter away from starving. The path itself was sunken in some places, upturned in others, mottled with puddles and cracks and the odd root.

I almost wished I could have seen this place in its heyday. It probably would've looked spectacular.

In the distance, a little ways ahead, I spied a stone archway, equally as broken down as the rest. Almost half of it was missing. Any sign of the building it might once have marked the entryway for was long gone.

How many years of neglect did it take for a place like this to reach this point? How many centuries, how many millennia, before time and the elements wore down the stonework and the masonry and tore the buildings apart, brick by lonesome brick, until only this husk remained?

How long had I been lying in that coffin?

The possibility of it disturbed me. It wasn't impossible, exactly, that Contessa had fixed me up, dropped me here, and I'd only been asleep for a day or a few hours. It wasn't impossible that it hadn't even been a full twenty-four hours since my battle with Scion.

But there were too many capes I'd met or known who had access to time-based powers or effects. Any number of them could have put me in stasis for a thousand years, for a million, for a *billion*. Bonesaw could have put me into a sort of cryogenic sleep, to wear off after...however long she decided to make it last. Glaistig Uaine had enough capes that at least one of them would have the power necessary to do essentially the same thing.

Hell, I'd been assuming Contessa had chosen some random world and dumped me there, but who was to say this wasn't Earth Bet, or whatever Earth we'd wound up on at the end? Who was to say this wasn't Gimel or Aleph or any of the others I'd pulled people from for that final battle?

Everyone I knew and loved could be long dead, by thousands of years.

I swallowed and resolutely forced that idea away. It was another thing I'd have to think about once I got out of here, and another thing it would do me no good to worry about now.

I stepped forward, exploring outwards with my bugs as I walked the broken and beaten path. Almost contemptuously, I opened up the throat of the next zombie that stood and made to attack me, and like the one before it, it groaned and gurgled and collapsed. More *potential* gathered in my chest.

Just behind it was another corpse, this one dressed in medieval armor, lying against the broken lip of some sort of giant basin. I approached it cautiously, and when it didn't rise up to attack me, I knelt down and inspected it.

Sometimes, you had to do gross shit to survive, and all I had on me were two close range weapons, a single long range weapon, and a flask of mysterious liquid whose purpose I could only guess at.

The knight wasn't much better off than me. He didn't have any rations — none that had survived the ages, at any rate — and everything on him was falling apart. I eyed his sword, but decided against it: one, I had no idea how to use the thing, so I was more likely to cut myself than an enemy, and two, it was so rusted and pitted that it would probably break the first time I swung it. The shield was much the same; the leather straps had been worn down into nothingness, and I didn't know enough to make replacements that were worth a damn. Even the armor was too bad off to be worth it.

Plus, you know, a moldering corpse had been sitting in it for who knew how long. That was a whole new level of ick.

The only thing of any worth he had on him was another flask, much like the one I'd found in my pouch, only his swirled blue instead. I didn't know what it was for, but I pocketed it and put it in with the other.

When I was done with him, I stood and made my way through the area, trying to see if there was anything else of worth sitting around. Along this little circuit of the cemetery, I ran into another three zombies, and I dispatched them much as I had the first two. The only one that proved anything like a threat was the one wielding a crossbow that had — the fucking hell kind of world was this — flaming bolts.

Whatever.

Even that one proved weak and easily killed, and with each one dead, their *potential* swirled into my chest to join the rest.

With all of them gone, I turned away from the obvious path out into the sunlight — it seemed a little *too* obvious — and started down the pathway that jutted off from the right side of where I'd entered.

I wasn't even halfway down it before my bugs landed on something and —

*Nope, nope, fuck the hell no.*

I spun back around, away from the gigantic lizard twice my size covered in jagged crystals, and just as importantly, away from the dead end behind it, and took the obvious path, this time, through another pair of rows of old headstones and out onto a cliff.

*Well, I thought, I guess 'valley' isn't all that inaccurate a description, huh?*

It turned out I was on some kind of mountain, because far off in the distance, I could see more, each of them snow-capped and craggy. It looked like it must be some kind of range, although I had no idea whether it was the Appalachians, the Rockies, or hell, the Himalayas. For that matter, it might not be any of them, if this wasn't an Earth that looked anything like mine.

I didn't recognize them, either way, so they told me not much of anything except that I was on a mountain myself.

I peered down the cliff, but no, that was way too steep for me to try climbing by myself without proper gear. Would make a pretty surefire way to die, though, if I ever decided throwing myself off a cliff was the way I wanted to go.

There weren't any other options, so I turned left and started up the hill there and trudged up the slope. There was something strange at the top, and I wasn't sure what to make of it.

It turned out to be a sword. A strange sword, too, with a charred, brittle-looking blade that had been twisted into a spiral. It was stabbed into a pile of white ash and...I think that was bone. A flickering

ember smoldered like a funeral pyre that hadn't quite gone out, and when I reached out to it, to see if the sword was worth anything at all, that ember sparked and leapt and grew into a roaring bonfire. I staggered back, even as a pulse of warmth answered from the flasks in my pack.

What?

Just... You know what? I was done questioning this shit for now.

Tentatively, I stepped back to the bonfire and reached out, and against all logic and my understanding of the world, the fire got hotter and hotter but never reached the point of *burning*. Instead, it swept into and through me, wiping out aches and pains and fatigue, and as it left, I felt renewed, rejuvenated, like waking up on a warm summer day after an afternoon nap in the sun.

I was beginning to think this might be a dream. Maybe I was in a coma and this was just what my brain had come up with. Or maybe I'd been hooked up to some kind of simulation after the fight against Scion and this was just some computer program, because I didn't know how else to make sense of the fact that apparently *fire healed me, now*.

Testing a hunch, I pulled off one of my gloves and nicked my thumb with the blade of my knife, then I pulled out the flask of glowing orange liquid and dribbled a drop over the wound.

Like the bonfire, warmth swept through me, starting in my arm and going up to my chest. I felt renewed and rejuvenated again, only less so than before, and in front of my very eyes, the cut in my thumb sealed up and healed over. There wasn't even a scab or a scar.

Okay. Bonfires heal me, now. The orange flask is like a bonfire, but less potent, and apparently, I can... what, replenish my stock of the liquid in the orange flask by stopping by a bonfire? Why not, right?

My glove went back on and my flask of orange fluid was put back in its place, and just to be sure, I reached out for the bonfire again and let it replenish that little bit I'd used to heal my thumb.

Whoever had made this simulation had obviously played too many video games. Dragon was the only one I could think of who could do that, but as far as I knew, she was gone. Dead, for whatever that word meant when it came to an AI.

Guess that would put me in good company.

In any case, there was no point in trying to pull the sword out. I was a little hesitant to try it, now, considering I had no idea what impact it might have on my magical healing bonfire. And again, I hadn't the first idea how to use a sword.

With a sigh, I turned around and looked out across the land I could see, now. Around me, there were more graves, but they were sparser than they had been in that little swamp. There were pathways that looked to have been carved by people, because there was almost no way they were natural, and about fifty yards away, another archway stood, only this one was intact and attached to a wall that cordoned off... I wasn't quite sure how to describe it. Another grave, maybe? A monument? There was a giant of a man at the center of an open space, kneeling and decked out in



heavy armor. A sword was stabbed through his heart and thrust into the ground next to him was an enormous halberd to dwarf even Armsmaster's best.

And of course, another half a dozen zombies sat listlessly between me and him. No doubt, they'd come to life and attack me the instant I got close. The giant probably would, too.

But it looked to be the only way forward that wasn't jumping off the cliff. On the other side of the giant's arena was a closed wooden door, and beyond that, another pathway to take that would hopefully lead...somewhere.

Dream was definitely starting to look more plausible. Either that, or this was some spiritual quest on the way to the afterlife, and if my spirit quest was this shitty, I planned on having words with whoever or whatever was waiting for me on the other side.

As I had before, I slowly and leisurely made my way down the slopes and carefully cleared out the way towards the arch. My bugs made it child's play to avoid the zombies' attacks and dart in for a quick slice to the throat, but even still, I made sure to never let any of them have a shot at my back and did my best to engage them one at a time.

Along the way, I found more of nothing. I was tempted to loot a weapon off of one of the zombies, but they were all decrepit and worn and looked like they would easily break, when they weren't *already* broken, so the only thing I took from them was that swirling *potential* that gathered in my chest.

Too bad I still had no idea what it was for.

I killed the last one right in front of the archway, another one of those ones with the crossbow that fired flaming bolts. I took a moment there to draw in a deep breath and prepare myself, because I had no doubt I was about to walk into a fight, and this giant probably wouldn't go down in one hit the way the zombies did.

So I did the sensible thing and cheated.

My bugs poured into his arena and crawled all over him, seeking out the openings in his armor, the holes in his helmet for his eyes, nose, and mouth, the gap between the plates, the cloth, and his skin, and once they had, I set them to biting.

Except they couldn't.

The flesh beneath that armor was like stone — tough, hard, and impossible to sink their mandibles into. I sought out the soft tissues, but there was no give. My bugs couldn't drive themselves down somebody's throat or up their nostrils when the flesh didn't flex or get pushed out of the way at least a little. The eyes, the eyes were shut beneath lids that couldn't be pried up, the nostrils narrowed, and the flap at the back of the throat was closed. The lips were like granite and couldn't be parted.

He was, quite literally, a statue.

Which meant my dinky little knife probably wouldn't faze him much, would it? I put it away and pulled out the nanothorn knife from Defiant, although I didn't turn it on, just yet.

For a moment longer, I hesitated and glanced back. But the only way forward was to go through this little arena, probably kill this giant of a knight, and open the doors on the other side. The only other place to go was back into my tomb.

There really was nothing for it.

So I took a breath and walked through the archway, through a short hallway lined with more cracked and decaying headstones, half expecting the giant to spring to life and attack me immediately.

Nothing.

My lips pulled into a frown, and cautiously, carefully, I stepped forward, always prepared to throw myself backwards at every moment. Still, there was nothing. The statue, the giant knight, remained still, motionless, and lifeless.

By the time I stood directly in front of him, there was still no reaction. Even when I waved my hand in front of his visor and rapped my knuckles against his thick chestplate, he didn't so much as twitch. He remained as still as a statue.

What the hell? Well, if I didn't have to actually fight this guy, then I wasn't about to complain about it.

Just as cautiously, I backed away and walked around him, making sure to keep at least ten feet away from him and no less than a dozen bugs on every part of his body. It felt like if he wasn't going to jump to life immediately, then it would happen when my back was turned and I was supposed to be vulnerable.

But even still, he didn't move. Not even when I reached the doors. He didn't rise up and attack to stop me from moving forward.

Probably because he didn't need to, I found out, because the doors were locked and shut tight.

Naturally.

I tried every trick available to open it. I tried to saw into the doors with Defiant's knife — nothing. I tried sending bugs into the lock and having them manipulate it that way — no dice. Either my bugs simply didn't have the body strength to move the mechanisms, or something, some force, some power or whatever, was making it so that the doors wouldn't open no matter what I did.

I let out a sigh and stepped back, turning to look at the giant.

I was going to have to beat him to make it past, huh?

Great. Magic locks on magic doors that only opened when the boss guarding them was defeated. Simulation was looking more and more likely, although spirit quest wasn't all that far behind it.

I made my way back towards the giant, still motionless, and circled his body. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but somehow, I doubted it was as simple or obvious as an on switch stuck in his back under the armor.

But it wasn't like there was anything else indicating what I needed to do to "wake him up," as it were. No panels on his chest or arms or whatever, no magic glowing symbols that lit up when I moved my hands close to them, no buttons or anything like that.

My eyes fell on the sword stabbed through his chest and a jolt of exasperation shot through my stomach. I wanted to roll my eyes.

*Oh, come on! A sword in the stone thing? Really?*

But it was the only thing that made sense to me.

So I took the hilt with one hand and yanked. It didn't budge.

What, was I not worthy or some kind of bullshit like that?

I yanked, harder. I dug my feet into the tiles beneath us and *pulled*, but although the sword wiggled a little, it didn't come out, so I stuck the hilt of my knife between my teeth — careful to keep the button that would turn on the nanothorns away from any part of my mouth — braced my other hand against his chestplate, and then I PULLED.

And like that, slowly and smoothly, the blade of the sword slid out of the giant's body.

I took steps backward and wrapped my other hand around the sword's hilt to keep pulling. Black, brackish blood spilled forth from the wound, splattering across the ground like oil, but I didn't let it stop me, I kept pulling.

Finally, the sword, spiraled like a corkscrew and as long from tip to bottom as I was tall, came free, and the giant sagged against his knees as though in relief.

I dropped the sword instantly and sprang back, muscles tense, and as I watched, the knight braced himself against the ground, and then with one move, pushed himself to his feet and grabbed his halberd. The bladed head came out of the ground effortlessly.

Definite Brute, which meant I did *not* want to get hit with any part of that weapon *or* his body.

And as though he were simply jumping back into action after a short rest, he turned to me and brandished his halberd defensively, his entire body coiled and ready to fight.

Carefully, I took the nanothorn knife from my mouth and gripped it in my right hand. With my left, I reached into my pack and pulled out my pistol with its single magazine.

Fine. This was how I'd thought it was going to be in the first place. If I had to destroy this giant of a knight to unlock the doors and move forward, then it wasn't anything I hadn't been expecting the moment I saw him.

I'd killed the closest thing Earth Bet had ever had to a god. I wasn't about to be beaten by a statue.

### **Worm x Dark Souls III**