

I staggered back to Gilbert's window. I could have used the lanterns but honestly I needed to walk, to burn off some of the manic desperation. I still swayed as I trudged, and surprisingly the few creatures I hadn't killed gave me a berth. Was I just radiating that much 'don't fuck with me' energy?

I rapped on my friend's window. "Hey Gilbert."

"Taylor? You sound like you've been run over by a carriage. A—" He was cut off by his lungs rebelling. "Any idea what that screaming was? I heard it echoing all the way over here."

"Some sort of giant beast, it jumped over the wall onto the bridge." I took a deep, shuddering breath. "The bridge was locked. Or barred. Or something. I c—" My voice broke. "I couldn't get through."

"Gods save you. I...when I first came here, I'd heard that Yharnam blood could cleanse any illness. That this land was blessed by the gods themselves. When the blood ministers told me that their miracle blood couldn't cure me, when even dear Iosefka told me that there was nothing she could do... I fell into despair. I set myself up in this bed and waited to congeal to death. So I know what it feels like to lose all hope." Gilbert coughed several times, softly. "I tell you this because while my case may be hopeless, perhaps yours still can be salvaged. An aqueduct carries runoff from Cathedral Ward, out through the commons, into the sea. If you cannot open the bridge's doors, perhaps there is a way in through the waterways. I have no other advice to give you in this case, as I was never the type to spelunk even in my healthier days."

I smiled and nodded, resting my hand on the window's armored grating. "It means a lot, Gilbert. You try to relax. I have another friend who might be able to help me navigate that aqueduct." Bidding my goodbyes, I went to the lantern and called for it to take me to the Dream. The experience was not unlike being my own tidal wave, sweeping up from beneath myself and pouring into my forehead. My eyes and face went first, the rest of my body joining in the crashing spray, until I materialized out of the mist at my destination.

The cabin was open but I couldn't see Gehrman from my position. What caught my eye instead was that the doll was standing. It was tall too, well over six feet. I was impressed that Gehrman had managed to get it to balance on two legs without something to prop it up.

Then it turned to look at me.

The face was different. It was the same overall design, very pretty if generic. The porcelain of her skin had the slightest flush of pink to indicate flesh and life, her irises were almost white but had the tiniest hint of amber or hazel. Her full, well-painted lips moved ever so slightly, mouth opening a fraction, and a voice rose from her.

"Hello, good hunter," she spoke in a breathy, whisper-like voice with an accent I couldn't place. It sounded East-European but I couldn't possibly say from where exactly. Her lips moved, it wasn't like a ventriloquist's dummy, but they moved so little that it was difficult to track. She spoke in such a controlled way...

Somehow, with everything else that I'd seen, this still shocked me. Perhaps it was that I'd walked past her inanimate form several times thus far; it could have been some level of envy, wishing I was as beautiful as this artificial being. But no matter how much I'd been through, how deeply I'd suffered

and how many countless hours I'd fought these monsters, the truth of the matter was that I'd only been in Yharnam for three real-world days. This was all too much for me to take.

I yelped and leapt back. She didn't seem offended, didn't approach me to offer apologies either. She just stared patiently. Like Gehrman. Except where he radiated a yawning abyss of sadness, I couldn't say what I felt from this...automaton.

Once it seemed that I'd no longer scream, she continued, like nothing had interrupted her. "I am a doll, here in this dream to look after you."

"Wh-where did you come from? Or, how are you moving? You weren't before," I protested.

"You were not yet prepared to see," she replied in her even tone. "Understanding takes suffering. Either you endure outrageous fortune to learn that which you must, or you find those who have already learned and glean their knowledge to sharpen your own."

"I...don't understand," I admitted, feeling foolish.

She took a step closer to me, gliding smoothly across the grass like a runway model. "Then you are not yet meant to." Somehow, the certainty in her statement was a comfort.

"I wanted to talk with Gehrman. Where is he?"

"Gehrman is sleeping," she replied. "He rarely does so peacefully, so I would request that you not wake him."

*Nothing ventured...* "Can you tell me about him? He didn't talk much about himself."

The doll returned to the little garden wall upon which her inanimate self had rested, and sat delicately like a turn-of-the-century portrait. For some reason it was infuriating to see someone so effortlessly beautiful and yet didn't flaunt it, didn't even act as if she understood her own beauty. "Gehrman was once a hunter long, long ago. Now he serves only to advise them. He is obscure, unseen in the dreaming world. Still, he stays here, in this Dream. Such is his purpose."

I raised an eyebrow. "Obscure? And the dreaming world...do you mean Yharnam?"

"That is the name which other hunters have mentioned. A land of wonder and sorrow, and horrors unimagined. I have never seen it myself, but the Little Ones express what they learn as best they can."

"You mean those things in the birdbath?" I looked past her to the luminous little weirdos jostling to and fro.

"The inhabitants of the Dream. They find hunters like yourself; worship and serve them. Speak words they do not, but still, are they not sweet?" The corners of her lips curled up in the slightest of smiles, and she spoke with a hint of...maternal pride?

"They find...?" My mind flashed back to when the creatures had crawled all over me, pulling me down into senselessness. The last thing I experienced...

*“Oh, you have found yourselves a hunter.”*

My saw was drawn and at her throat, though her dark-shaded eyes held no fear. Then again perhaps they were incapable of expressing emotion, but she didn't even look down at my weapon like Gehrman had. “Who are you? How did those things ‘find’ me?”

“The Little Ones seek those in need. Sometimes they are called, other times they are lucky. You were wounded, physically and spiritually. I balméd your wounds and sent you along. And now you have returned.”

That brought me up short. “S-so you're saying you healed me? What about the wheelchair man?”

The doll showed no sign of recognition. “Dreams may many times be layered, and who is to say what is to be taken at face value and what serves as allegory when we are not yet ready to face the truth?”

“Speak plainly,” I bit out.

“I speak as plainly as you do. I will not lie to you but neither do I have every answer. There are times when a question can only be answered with another question.”

I hesitantly lowered the saw. “Alright. Well, you're more forthcoming than Gehrman.” I shifted. If I had a chance at getting at least some answers... “What's up with this place? The sky, the gravestones, the flowers?”

“This is a Dream, a safe haven from the horrors of the dreaming world and the slings and arrows of the waking one. The stones I can explain: in the Healing Church's traditions, the dead are interred beneath a stone so that they may be remembered. Stones have also been used to memorialize lost cities, cultures, civilizations.” As she explained, she gestured to the headstone that I used to return to Yharnam. “The majority of stones are here to commemorate hunters who have come before and later departed the Dream, that we may never forget their contributions.”

Apparently she had no answer for the rest. Fair enough. “So what do you do?”

“Hunters pursue the echoes of blood, wrested free from their prey. I can channel those echoes into your strength. You hunt beasts, and I am here for you, to embolden your sickly spirit,” she responded with a soft smile.

“...I don't get what any of that means,” I confessed.

She reached forward slowly and took my hand in both of hers. Her gloves were soft, the artificial fingers not quite as cold or alien as I'd expected them to feel. “An explanation would likely confuse you more than letting you experience it directly. Now shut your eyes, and let the echoes become your strength.”

I could see something flowing from me, coalescing into a foggy cloud of red. With the soft yet high-pitched noise, I suspected she was drawing out that same essence I'd been absorbing from my enemies. It was making me sick to look at it. I shut my eyes.

I needed to be stronger, faster. To hit harder, take more abuse. I wouldn't survive here otherwise. These thoughts swirled through my mind as I drifted off and awoke in my bed in Brockton Bay, feeling better than I had the previous day. I was rather peckish, though.

(BREAK)

Physically, I felt good. I looked great. Checking myself in the mirror, my skin looked more vibrant, my body was tighter, that little paunch on my belly was all but gone. Of course, mentally I was still exhausted and reeling from one revelation after another – nearly all of them horrible, and not a single one I could call entirely good.

Dad made some comments about how I was looking better. "I'm glad you're bouncing back," he said, or something like it. I made a noncommittal noise, thankful for the eggs and toast filling my mouth. It was the first time he'd broken routine to try really engaging with me, and I didn't know what to even say in return.

It hadn't registered at the time, a slow decline, but I'd forgotten how to even genuinely talk with my father. He'd had the same but at the least he was making an attempt. I was so lost I didn't even know what I'd say. "*Thanks Dad. Seems that being dragged into a literal hellscape every night does wonders for my complexion*"? I eventually settled on selective truth, like Gehrman had used with me.

"Physically yeah; mentally I'm exhausted. I could go back to sleep right now." I flinched, almost violently, upon saying that. Sure it was true on some level that I was tired enough to fall back asleep, but sleep would just take me back to Yharnam and not only would that not be good for my rest, but it would only exacerbate all of the problems I was already barely balancing. I didn't need to add a flaming tightrope to the act too.

Either Dad didn't notice, to which I would've chalked up his lack of reaction before his communication attempt today, considering how hard he'd been trying to ignore reality; or he thought it was some kind of symptom. I was still a recovering girl, after all.

"...Do you want me to call in sick for you today?" he asked at length. "I don't think it'd be a good idea to just let you go back to bed, but if you're that exhausted then maybe you shouldn't spend your day at school. I can make some time to bring you down to the Boardwalk, maybe spend a bit window-shopping before I have to get to work."

I froze. I was terrified. If he interacted with me, surely he'd begin to see what was going wrong. He'd look at his daughter and see a stranger. I wasn't the same: I knew I was already breaking from everything I'd seen, everything I'd done. I couldn't handle it. There was nothing that terrified me more than being rejected by the only loved one I had left. So of course there was only one answer I could ever give.

"I'd love to," I smiled wetly.