

“Ambivalent” is a term that’s misused almost constantly. People for some reason think it’s synonymous with “apathetic,” when it has more in common with “indecisive.” Its root is in ambi-, meaning two or dual, and valent, meaning polarized as with magnets. Roughly defined, it means to be pulled in two directions at once and therefore unable to make a decision. If you have two close friends who want to do two mutually-exclusive activities, you’ll probably be ambivalent as you can’t decide who you’ll have to disappoint.

I go through this trouble of defining the concept because I was very much ambivalent about my reaction to Annalise’s welcome. There was something primal about her that frightened me, like staring into the eyes and maw of an ancient predator of prehistoric humanity – the sort of visceral reaction that I imagine a neolithic caveman might experience upon noticing golden eyes watching him from the tall grass. The small, willowy creature resting sickly in that throne was a predator, a hungry beast, and I could all but see the drool spilling from the monster’s maw. The only thing that kept me from turning around and casting aside the crown was a combination of curiosity and another primally human reaction, the urge to fall when staring down from a great height.

Ultimately, it was that curiosity – and perhaps an unhealthy amount of self-destructive instinct – that compelled me to step forward. I strode forward, making note of the dusty surroundings and the empty, bloodstained throne beside the queen. Though I couldn’t see her eyes through the dark mask affixed to her head and shoulders, I could feel her piercing gaze upon me.

“Kneel before us,” she commanded, her voice carrying the imperious tone of one who expected her orders to be immediately followed, despite the state of her castle and throne room.

I stepped forward and remained standing. “You invited me here. I want to know how and why.”

Her decrepit form, like an anorexic beneath her weathered dress, shifted slightly and I once again felt the danger. My neck bristled and I bared my teeth behind the face covering. “You insult us in our own throne room, and then expect favors?”

“You invited me here, thus I am a guest and afforded hospitality. In addition, I’m a foreign national. It would be bad form to kneel.” That little factoid was a gift from my father, a memory dredged up from an impromptu ‘take your daughter to work day’ years ago. We’d been talking about all manner of weird things and I’d gotten to the topic of the fine china in a high cabinet and what we might do if the Queen of England came to visit.

I could feel her assessing me, eyes gliding along my frame. “...Normally, we would refuse to treat with such a defiant one. Despite claiming no subjects any longer, we are still Queen, and due respect. However, you make an interesting argument. Very well. Ask thine questions again, Taylor Hebert.”

“How did you know about me? My full name? How did your invitation end up in Iosefka’s clinic? And why did you call me here?”

She went through the effort to lift her head a bit more, the enormous helmet clanking slightly. It was a beautiful and terrible thing, black metal decorated with gold filigree. At the top of the helmet, the metal was molded in a tiny and almost cartoonish imitation of a crown. “We are aware of many things, and though our power has waned in our starvation, we can still reach out. We dreamt of your arrival, and sent out an invitation where it would be found. We know nothing of any Iosefka: worry yourself not with explaining her – we care not in the least. Only of concern is that the letter found its way to you.”

“Alright,” I nodded along. “That still doesn’t explain why.” Did she expect me to free her?

“You are the first hunter in ages that we might call cousin,” she replied simply, as if that answered my question.

“That...tells me nothing. Look, I know a lot less than you think I do.” It was all I could do not to pinch the bridge of my nose.

“Do you? Or do you simply not understand? We believe that you know far more than you think you do.”

“I don’t like when Gehrman and Doll talk in riddles, and I actually like them. I have no reason to stand around and talk in circles with you.”

That brought a girlish titter from within her helmet. “Headstrong, as well. Yes, this was a good choice. We cannot properly explain why we summoned you, not directly. You may come to understand.”

I huffed, then pulled out the registry book. “Your quote in here... What do you have against the Healing Church? Well, before you went to war?”

“...Would that I could, I would respond crassly to that name spoken here. Laurence was a snake and a self-obsessed maniac, endlessly experimenting upon others for his own benefit. You have heard the story, yes? A scholar from Byrgenwerth brought forbidden blood here and we became accursed monsters?”

That was pretty spot-on to the blurb Alfred had told me. I nodded.

“A partial truth, to hide the damning part when it could not be brushed away altogether. Byrgenwerth’s provost was a strange and aloof man, but a wise one. We did not begrudge terribly when our dear cousin fled to his flock. But Willem’s caution caused many of his more ambitious acolytes to chafe.” She leaned forward, the weight of her helmet threatening to topple her out of the throne. “Chief among those was Laurence himself, future First Vicar.

“Before discovering their Holy Medium, they found a different kind of blood. Ancient and powerful, steeped in pain and forbidden knowledge, and horrors untold.” Annalise gestured at herself. “The Blood of Pthumeru runs through our veins, and those of every true child of Cainhurst. But the blood of the Pthumerians, of Queen Yharnam, of Oedon’s favored...it is too potent. We became mighty indeed, but we follow the same path of our predecessors. Laurence sought something different, and thus disavowed us. Not that it mattered to our people, of course.” Annalise gave a low, throaty chuckle. “The Healing Church continued with its deceptions until I discovered its hunters. Those great men and women, half-cut with the strongest blood, were ideal for us to follow in Pthumeru’s footsteps. Poor fools, sacrificial lambs all, were lucky to be claimed by our Knights rather than the ultimate fate that otherwise awaited them.”

“You killed people.” My tone was half-inquisitive, half-accusatory.

“In its own way, it was a mercy, though that was a side benefit. Even if it had not been, we would still have ordered it done. Our needs were, and are, greater.”

“Did you call me here to eat me?” Had this all been a cat playing with its food, before this monster pounced me?

She tsk’d at me. “Even were we not inconvenienced with this mask, we would not so sully a cousin in blood. You have taken your own steps on a similar path.” I could hear the smirk on her voice in her next statement. “We had hoped for you to kneel to satisfy our vanity, more than anything.”

“I have to ask. What’s up with the mask?”

Another, more forceful tsk. “A last, desperate gambit by a madman. Logarius and his Executioners stole into Cainhurst like thieves in the night, attacking under cover of darkness and offering no quarter. Knight and servant; man, woman and child; none were spared his wild-eyed fury, nor that of his adherents. By blade and blood we cleaved soul from body, bleeding his forces, but they had surprise and numbers on their side.

“They played on our vanity and desire to preserve our legacy. When they began destroying statuary, we ordered for our favorites to be brought here and protected. And in leaving the doors open, we likewise left an entrance.” The slight jitter of the helmet implied that she was shaking her head in self-disgust. “Logarius and his surviving Executioners fought their way here. Our bravest and dearest knights at last fell, and it was only us against the wild man and his followers.” I could hear her feral grin. “They were woefully unprepared.

“Logarius survived the onslaught and struck back, leaving us crippled. But our life is not so easily forfeit. As we healed, he used some manner of alchemical rite and our own destroyed statues, and created this helm. We can no longer properly feed, leaving us to wither. But we struck in return, and ensured that our rotten blood mixed with his. He would be condemned by his own people. His last petty act of defiance was to steal the Crown of Illusion and hide our throne room, leaving us to starve. We are left here, Queen of a dead land, trapped upon this throne.”

I knew that I’d regret asking, but I had to know. “Why did you kill hunters in the first place?”

“Only certain hunters, though it is difficult to identify who carries the right blood until they are already dead. Some carry greater purpose within their blood, which I can consume. I will thereby conceive a child of blood, usurping the legacy of Pthumeru and fulfilling my destiny as heir of this ancient blood.” I made note of her change to singular there.

I managed to hold my tongue for the moment. “And what fate were you ‘saving’ the hunters from?”

“Oh you poor child.” While her tone was still distant, there may have been a hint of genuine pity in her voice. “We will tell you not. We are not nearly so cruel.”

I took a long several seconds to assess the woman before me. This was a monster, unequivocally. However, it was a defanged beast. I knew that I would have to make my way back to Yahar’gul eventually, and face more of the Church’s experiments. “Do you still want revenge on the Healing Church?”

“Oh my. An odd hunter thou art indeed. Wilt thou then offer oath and join us in the ancient blood?”

I gave my head a sharp jerk. “That’s not the deal I’m offering. I’m offering to take your fight to the Healing Church, to let Cainhurst be the last edifice standing. The question is, what do you offer in exchange for my power being brought to bear against your enemies?”

She straightened in her throne as best she could, sagging and lolling under the weight of that helm. “And now we negotiate? You intrigue me. You stink of fear and yet you approach our throne with the attitude of a privateer. You are willing to do battle at the slightest provocation, yet still insist on acting solely in defense. And that which clings to you...” Her helmet jerked with a sharp nod. “Very well. We will offer you access to our store of weapons, and to our library. The library, you are not permitted to remove any books from the premises.” She extended an emaciated arm, wrist limp. “Take mine hand and seal the pact.”

I took her by the wrist. She would call me a distant cousin? Then we’d agree like equals, rather than me taking the position of subordinate.

---

For generations uncounted, their civilization had stood. They had grown tall, beautiful, elegant and powerful. Those peoples with whom they interacted were small, ugly and weak by comparison. While their contemporaries lived in mud huts and ramshackle towns at best, they carved a might empire from stone. When war came to their land, they struck back with fire and blood. Soon enough they were seen as near to gods, and rightly so.

The more powerful the blood, the greater the effect. The nobility stood quite literally head and shoulders above the commoners, and the royal line even greater than that. Queen Yharnam was the greatest monarch their people had ever seen, wise and mighty beyond even her centuries of immaculate life.

Then she fell pregnant, despite having lost her husband long before. She was even more shocked than the populace, declaring that she had been celibate since her spouse’s passing, as was only right. And by the emotion in her voice, no man or woman could dispute her assertion.

Then the child began to cry, despite still being within its mother. All could hear it, burning in their minds rather than their ears. Finally the wisest of their civilization were forced to question just why they were so different from their contemporary nations. Had this power that set them so far beyond their peers been a poison pill, not truly empowering them but rather changing them, to make them more compatible with something outside their understanding?

Doubt gave way to panic. Their queen was shackled, placed inside a circle marked with ancient sigils of warding. It did nothing to prevent the cries. The royal guard battled the queen’s shadows to keep her imprisoned. The blood that was shed only seemed to further panic the child.

By the day of Mergo’s birth, the Pthumerian empire was crumbling. Existential dread and madness gripped every corner of the land. And, as the earth itself rebelled to swallow the nightmare that extruded into reality, a question was answered that had never been asked.

What happens when a god is stillborn?

---

I fell back onto the red carpet, gasping for air like a fish out of water. Yharnam – no, Annalise – had collapsed back into her throne, breath likewise shallow and weak.

“...As we had said,” she intoned, her voice still raspy and frail, “you know far more than you understand. You are welcome to make use of the library when you care to. Those poor wretches that haunt the castle are not under our aegis: you will have to dispose of them. Now, leave us to our thoughts.”

“W-wait, what was that!?” I prepared to insist for more information. What were these visions that I’d been having since arriving at Cainhurst? How was I seeing them? Was our blood truly somehow...related?

“Get thee gone, both of you, and leave me to my contemplations!” she snapped. A powerful psychic pressure sent me reeling and the throne room seemed to distort, extending and contracting, until I staggered back out of the door and into the snowy exterior. The door slammed shut before me.

I shook myself off, then paused. “Wait... ‘Both of me’?”

---

*I’ve finally met someone in the dreaming world who knows things and is willing to talk. The problem is that she’s an insane monster. Our conversation made less sense than I’d hoped, but more sense than I’d like. If that makes sense. I managed to make a deal with Queen Annalise and got out of it without having to take her blood into myself. After seeing what it did to Logarius, I don’t want it anywhere near me.*

*What did she mean, though, by “Get thee gone, both of you”? Has someone, or something, been sneaking along with me?*