

The only creatures in my way were several groups of crows. I killed them with my cleaver, trying to off them before they could take flight and make a commotion, and I certainly didn't want to use my gun: the purpose of this rear entrance was stealth, after all.

I found a gap in the tall spikes that guarded the sides of this building's roof like lethal railings and dropped down, my landing muffled by the coating of fallen leaves. Tired old trees swayed lightly; more gravestones gathered here and there. The clinic's backyard had benches and other sections for relaxation, likely to give patients some time outside and away from the claustrophobic conditions of the same ceiling.

The rear door was much more elegant and fragile, much like the double-doors on the clinic's front exterior: beautifully carved wood fitted with some frosted glass, a polished brass handle permitting entry. I depressed the lever with my thumb and hoped to any god listening that the door would open – and do so quietly.

It did.

The clinic's halls were empty, my soft footsteps still echoing in the hollow void. It was a perfect Victorian or Edwardian building, painted or papered upper walls and wooden slats on the lower half of the wall, with a protruding chair rail running the length. The upper walls in the main hall were all a soft teal that looked almost gray in the washed-out lack of light. I switched on the tiny lantern at my belt.

The building split like a T: it went to the left and right, and forward led up a set of stairs. I opted to check the side corridors first. Turning left, I made my way past bookshelves and racks of equipment, test tubes and pipettes and beakers full of strange liquid. Calipers and pliers and less pleasant bronze constructs also decorated the various shelves.

Some of the doors were locked and I hesitated to force them open for fear of disturbing Iosefka's captor (or killer). Others opened into empty rooms, and only my sharpened senses told me that anything had happened. The rooms looked like the kind of creepy turn-of-the-century surgery rooms, with a table that had straps to restrain the patient and could pivot to allow easier access to different parts of the body. Whoever had been in here, I couldn't say – likely one of Iosefka's patients, and it disturbed me that he or she was gone, because it was certain that he hadn't departed pleasantly. I could smell potent cleaning detergents, but beneath that stench was the smell of shed blood.

I also smelled moonlight...

The other rooms in the leftward corridor were the same: either locked or empty and scrubbed, stinking of blood and cleaner and moonlight to my enhanced senses. I went to the right and found much of the same, until I rounded the corner: the right side bent further back, turning rightward more and more, either following some natural line in the land or just making the most use of the space available. And standing there, leaning against the wall and looking depressed, was one of the strangest creatures I'd ever seen.

I don't know if I could ever do it justice simply through description, but to try my best, it was varying shades of blue – not blue like paint, but blue like shimmering water or a starry night sky. Some parts were a pale periwinkle, others were almost black. I could almost make out a shimmering and starry texture on its skin. Its face was folded in on itself like a cartoonish pucker, somehow layers upon layers

of excess skin concealing its barely-visible mouth and skeletal nose. Its eyes, sunken into its face, were pinpricks of light.

The thing was oddly shaped, like a jellybean, with gangly noodle arms and equally skinny legs that should have been too weak to hold it up. Its arms ended in lopsided hands far too large for those needle-thin arms: broad palms and bulbous knuckle joints, emaciated digits, and enlarged fingertips like a tree frog.

The top of its head was the worst part. I'd seen pictures of babies with water on the brain, where their heads were overfilled with liquid and sloshed around. This thing was even worse. I didn't know if it simply had no neck or if its deformed head took up the space where the neck should be, but the excess head hung back over its shoulders like some sort of hunch. It turned to look at me, audibly bobbing and sloshing as its head moved.

I gripped my saw tighter but it made no move to attack. I sidestepped around it and continued investigating the rooms. For all I knew this thing might have been Iosefka's pet, and I didn't want to hurt anything that was hers. The rightward corridor eventually proved to likewise be a dead-end, and I sidled around the blue thing again. It didn't pursue me, but I could swear it looked sad.

I grit my teeth and ascended the steps. I would find answers, no matter what, but those answers promised to be more and more grim by the second. At the top of the steps, I could see what looked like the reinforced clinic door at the end of a long hallway. Several doors were between me and there. The first door was locked, but the second – on my left – clicked open.

My world lurched. The layout, the chair, the table... My memories told me that this was where Wheelchair Man had met me, where the blood beast had taunted me and the Little Ones took me. Had I ended up here? Was this a common room design? And where – and who, or rather what – was Wheelchair Man?

A woman stood over the table, washing blood from the leather. She wore white robes, with sandy blonde hair, and hummed a tune to herself. It took me a moment to realize that she was humming Mergo's Lullaby, as Henryk had called it – the tune from Siobhan's music box. The woman sniffed at the air and turned to face me, her face a mix of confusion and consternation.

"Ah, moonlit scents... How did you worm your way in here? No matter. Taylor, I presume? I won't make any excuses. Would you mind leaving us alone? Things need not change: you do the rescuing, and I'll do the saving." She turned to face me, and withdrew a threaded cane and double-barreled pistol. "However, if you refuse to leave, well, I've always wanted to try my hand on a hunter..." She trailed off into throaty, almost taunting laughter.

"I'll only give you one chance to answer," I bit out. "Where is Iosefka?"

She spread her arms, "Why, I'm right here, dear," she replied in that same confident tone that I had instantly known to be an imposter.

"Don't bother trying to lie to me. I know what Iosefka sounds like. I know how she acts. You're not her." I began to stalk forward.

“The woman who used this name before me no longer has claim to it,” she almost purred, sweeping around the table, keeping it between us. “Therefore, I am now Iosefka, and this is my clinic. It’s all quite nice and logical, don’t you think?”

I flicked open the cleaver.

She threw her hands to her sides, palms facing me. “We call the watchers to turn their gaze upon us,” she intoned, as I lunged over the table. “Feel our sorrow...and weep with us!” She crossed her wrists above her head and the last thing I saw was a cascade of stars before my body was torn apart in the explosion.

I woke up at the lantern in the Forbidden Woods. It was too far to make that trek all over again, I was in no mood to do Indiana Jones acrobatics. I took the lantern back to the Dream and returned to the clinic’s front room. Iosefka was dead, so there was no point in being subtle.

I stomped up to the reinforced door and grit my teeth, calling on every ounce of anger within me. I could smell ozone before I lashed out and kicked the door off its hinges! My knee ground in protest as I stomped inside, but it quickly healed.

“Oh my,” the imposter cooed. “We have a visitor, and one in such a state!” She stepped out into the hall and brandished her cane. “Hush now, hush. We’ll have you right as rain in no time. Just stay still: this won’t hurt a bit,” she purred, lunging toward me. I parried, slapping her cane against the wall and trapping her weapon. My pistol snapped up and fired, and she spun to plaster herself against the same wall. Hers came up and I slammed the barrel of my own gun into her wrist to knock it aside, the bullet embedding into the ceiling.

She released her cane and pointed her right palm at me. The woman made a strange whalesong sound, which I instinctively understood: *“I call upon the memory of the Firstborn of the Formless, the Holy Medium. Ebrietas.”*

A rift opened in space before me, glowing brilliantly purple and blue and silver. Tentacles emerged and lashed against me, and I could feel my ribs and shoulders shatter. I flew backward and spilled down the steps to collapse through a few gurneys. She skipped after me, tapping her cane on the ground to disengage it into its whip form. “Now stop this, dear. I’ve had just enough of your combativeness,” the bitch taunted.

“Fuck you,” I snarled. I injected myself with two blood vials and holstered my pistol, drawing the flamesprayer instead. I juke to the side, brought up the fire weapon, and at the last second changed my angle of attack. In one smooth motion I dropped the flamesprayer, bridged my cleaver from my right hand to my left, and drew my saw spear with my right hand.

The imposter’s eyes snapped wide: she had been in the middle of a swing and pirouette out of the way of the presumed spray of fire, and now my cleaver bit deep into her wrist. I added more leverage to wrench her backward, lining her torso up perfectly for a thrust from the spear. While her voluminous and thick robes certainly caught on the serrations, the spear still bore her to the ground and left a bleeding wound in her gut. I stomped on her chest, audibly and viscerally shattering several of her ribs. With my foot on her torso, I wrenched the spear free and drove it into her left wrist to nail her arm to the floor.

“You have two options,” I snarled, my voice thick and guttural. “You die fast, or I kill you slow and painful. And it all hinges on your answer: what did you do to Iosefka? The original Iosefka.”

She coughed, splattering blood on my shirt and face cover. “She, and her patients, were given the privilege of helping Choir research. All experiments, sadly, were failures. Though the poor dear came the closest to success.”

I knelt down, making sure to keep up the pressure on her broken ribs, and to keep her right wrist pinned with my cleaver. I rested my hand on her face, gently at first, then firmly cupped her cheeks and squeezed with my long, strong fingers. “Iosefka was the first person to show me kindness in years. She sang me to sleep. She offered me everything she could and never asked for anything in return. She was a good person.” I swallowed hard. “I lied, you know, when I said there were two options. You’re going to die in agony.”

She looked toward the ceiling, past my face. “C-curse this...oblivious fool,” she mumbled past my hand.

I snarled, drawing on the injustice of what was done here, of what was done to me again and again. The injustice against all of Brockton Bay, all of Yharnam. The imposter’s skin began to sizzle, turning red where my hand and fingers touched, then searing to black as she screamed. Electricity crackled from my hand, my eyes blazed red with my hatred. I let it all pour out, every ounce of rage and misplaced aggression, at this acceptable target. She screamed and screamed until her lungs popped. I stood and crushed her blackened sternum under my boot.

I headed deeper inside to find something that would count as a keepsake of Iosefka’s. Preferably two: I wanted to make her a memorial before I left, and maybe I could keep something to remember her as well.

I was met by the sound of sloshing, the strange jelly-like bobbling noise as that blue thing approached ponderously, barely able to support its own unnatural body shape and weight. It stared at me and I began to feel uncomfortable. I moved to stalk past it and it grabbed at me – not suddenly, but gently, like a child tugging on her mother’s skirt.

I looked at it again. “...What do you want?” I asked at length.

It held out its other hand, clutching a vial of deep-red blood. A type of vial I recognized. “That’s one of Iosefka’s blood vials,” I said aloud.

The creature held the vial to its chest.

“Oh god,” the words escaped me in a wheeze as I slumped to my haunches, staring into this thing’s pinprick eyes. “...Iosefka?”

I can only presume that it – she – tried to nod, but that heavy sagging head proved too difficult. She bobbed slightly.

“No,” I whispered. “Oh no... What did she do to you? H-how can I help? We have to turn you back!”

She slumped.

“Don’t you dare say that,” I growled. “There’s a way! There has to be!”

Her gangly arm rose up, cupping my cheek. Her palm was so unnaturally warm, blood churning not in a pulsing flow but like waves in an ocean.

“I…” My voice was weak. I felt so small. “How can I help?”

She reached for the saw spear at my hip and gently tugged.

I shot backward out of her grip, covering several body lengths. She bobbed after me. “No! Don’t ask me to do that! Don’t you dare ask me for that!”

Iosefka placed her hand on mine, holding it with her far-too-warm grip.

“I can’t do it,” I pleaded. “Not to you.”

Iosefka briefly closed her eyes, then slapped me. It didn’t really hurt, but it shocked me. Then she slapped me again. Those narrow arms were surprisingly strong. She began to rain blows upon me, my shoulders and chest, slapping me across the face again and again. Somehow, in her body language, I knew she was crying.

“Stop!” I screamed, throwing my arms around her malformed body. Immediately she halted and her arms came up to embrace me. “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you. I was too slow, too weak, too stupid. I’m pathetic, worthless! How did I ever think I—”

Another touch to my cheek brought me out of my self-abuse. Iosefka caressed my face, gazing into my eyes through my goggles. I lifted them up so she could see me directly. Even in this monstrous form, I could feel her kindness. She rested her bulbous forehead against mine.

I unholstered my saw spear and flicked it to full extension. I stood up, caressing Iosefka’s sloshing head with my other hand. I couldn’t remember enough of the lyrics to the lullaby she had sung me, but I remembered the tune. I held her tight and began to hum it.

Iosefka did the same to me, hugging me tight, shuddering. Whether in fear or thankfulness, I suppose I’ll never know. I tightened my grip on the weapon and began to shake, my arm trembling. I forced it to stop, not for decorum’s sake but so my aim wasn’t off. Iosefka leaned against me, relaxing, trusting. Thankful.

I brought the spear down with all my might.

I don’t know how long I sat there, rocking the corpse as milky, pink blood drooled from the single instantly-fatal wound. I lost myself in the grief, humming what I could remember of the lullaby on loop.

Then I sprang to my feet and began to scream. I screamed loud enough to rattle the walls, to shake books off the shelves. I screamed again and again, barely taking breaths between the wails. I screamed my hatred at the injustice of the world. I screamed my sorrow for Iosefka’s fate. I screamed my self-loathing at my inability to save her, failing to make a difference yet again.

I tore out of the clinic and blazed a trail of destruction, screaming still as I ripped huntsmen and hounds asunder with my bare hands. I grabbed the massive assistant and beat it to death against the reinforced doors, then the other one I disarmed and killed with its own immense glaive.

It all turned into a haze of blood and gore, screaming so violently that blood flew from my throat.

When I came to, I was lying upon the chaise once more in the room that didn't always exist. Doll dabbed at my forehead with a damp cloth. "Your grief will break you, if you allow it," she cautioned. "It is no easy thing to set aside grief. Therefore, I will make a suggestion: before you continue your journey, and potentially make decisions colored by your despair, take time. Use the chalice, explore a dungeon, expend your passion upon the monsters therein. You will be better for it."

"How..." I croaked, my throat still in agony. "How did you bring me back here?"

"You are precious to me," she smiled. "How could I resist helping you?"

That may not have been a proper answer, but it still lifted my spirits just a tiny bit. And then I broke once again. No longer screaming, I fell into Doll's arms and cried quietly.

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*I don't know if anyone else will remember her. I'm not even sure if I should tell Gilbert, erode his hope in what he thinks to be the last days of his life. Iosefka is dead. She was a good person, a kind person, and her goodness was repaid with sadism. I will remember her, for the sake of everyone that should remember her. I know she wouldn't want me to say this, but Iosefka, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I was too slow to save you, too weak and ignorant to help bring you back. I'm sorry that the best I could offer was a release from pain.*