

I don't know how long I laid there, among the flowers that smelled of moonlight, curled up on myself and sobbing. The little ones had no feasible means of moving me, so I there I remained.

When next I opened my eyes, I was sprawled out on some sort of chaise. I hadn't seen anything like this in the workshop, but the ceiling was definitely the same high, dingy rafters. I felt a cold, damp cloth on my forehead before cool fingers removed it. Doll looked down at me, her expression controlled but clearly sad.

"You knew," I rasped. "You knew it'd go wrong..." My voice was raw from howling, screaming, crying.

"I suspected," she replied, voice even. "Those hunters brought to the Dream are never so fortunate as to find such a quick and easy escape."

"And yet you didn't say anything," I hissed, accusing. "You let me go with the delusion that I had a good chance to make it home!"

"I had hope that I was wrong." She dipped her head. "I wanted, wanted so desperately for you to find a way home. You deserve none of this."

What cut my anger off at the knees was the depth of emotion I could hear in her soft voice. Doll was moderately guilty, but the sheer sorrow – sorrow on my behalf – was shocking. Even knowing and suspecting what I did, it still threw me for a loop. "S-so what's next? The Church can't help, their Vicar is dead. What other way is there?"

"It seems that there is only one way forward." Doll's tone was severe once more. "You must continue on, facing the horrors that Yharnam has to offer, until you are ready for Gehrman to free you. As was the case for every other hunter who escaped the Dream."

As was the case for my mother. But Mom had no happy ending waiting for her. Just death, a final death after her crash. "Will I even be free? Or will I be trapped in Yharnam like Djura, like Eileen...like Gascoigne?"

"They all came to Yharnam before they began to Dream. You will return to your home." Doll ran her fingers through my hair, petting my head. "Before you return to your hunt, I would recommend two things in either order. First, the chalice that you yet possess: you can use that to travel to a dungeon. Within, you will face new threats and great rewards. As the dungeon contains memories of the distant past, it is a good place to work out pain, anger and hatred without consequence or regret. There is no questioning if you could have saved someone—" She knew me well. "—because they are no more than reflections of things long dead and gone. You should burn off your angst before you return to Yharnam and do something you may regret upon reflection."

"The second thing is more simple: you have slept long enough. Though the waking world is painful, there is yet love and happiness to be found therein. Return there, leave this night behind, and at least for a day try to be happy."

I swallowed heavily. Why would I wake up? Why would I go back to the real world and try to be happy when I knew I'd come back to this hell? Why would I risk joy only to have it ripped from me

every night? I found no comfort in Yharnam, but there was a dull certainty to it. The only thing that would hurt more would be to find hope in the waking world and have it taken away nightly.

Doll stroked my head again. “You are not of this world: your desire to save its people is beyond admirable, but you should not forgo your own home for this one that causes you such pain. You must not.”

My answer snipped out from my lips before I could stop myself. “At least here I can fight my problems.”

Doll gave me a sad smile. “You are far stronger than you believe yourself to be. Stand firm, approach your problems with that sharp and analytical mind. You will find an angle of attack. Perhaps not physical, but I have faith in you. Annette believed that you could do anything. My own faith is even greater: no-one will save you, because you will save yourself before they ever could.”

I gaped at her. “How can you say such things so casually?”

“Simple.” She patted my cheek. “When you take a stand, when you are unyielding, your strength makes others want to stand by your side. You bring out the best in others.”

I shrugged off her touch. “You’ve never seen my real life,” I spat.

“And they have never seen your true strength,” she replied with casual certainty. “Let them see. The world will change around you.”

“Yeah, for the worse.”

“Those are not your words. Not your thoughts.” Doll’s firmness brought me up short. Her pale eyes bored into mine, her expression stern. Her normally serene eyebrows knitted together. “When a beast tries to dominate you, to control you, do you roll over and allow it? When an eater of memories wishes to consume you, do you permit the creature its feast?” She paused almost long enough for me to answer, then cut me off. “Your instincts tell the true story. You are a fighter, a protector of the innocent, an implacable and unassailable fortress of will. You have only been harmed because you, in your mercy, have allowed it.”

Doll drew me into a tight embrace and stood, easily bringing me with her. She carried me out of that room and into the workshop proper: the room and the door vanished as we passed. Gehrman watched with quiet fascination, rolling out of Doll’s way as she dragged me around like some force of nature.

“I am altering my recommendation,” she declared. “Your first goal is to return to the waking world. I am ordering you—” She poked me in the forehead, “—to find hope within your home.”

Before I had the chance to protest, the Dream swirled around me. The only thing I could think was that somehow Doll was shoving me back into wakefulness.

(BREAK)

My eyes snapped open and I winced at the early morning light blazing into my pupils. I was in my soft pajamas, tangled up in my sheets and twisted with my face pointing straight toward the window.

Clearly I'd tossed and turned in my sleep, rather different from how I usually slept like a corpse while Dreaming. Perhaps it had to do with Doll shoving me out. I bit my lip hard enough that, had I not been enhanced by Doll's blood-echo thing, I would've drawn blood. As it was, I could feel the pressure and let up just before I broke my skin. I'd had enough blood, thank you.

I crawled out of bed and the tangle of sheets, heading for my dresser. Immediately I went to throw on the usual formless long-sleeve shirt, hoodie and baggy jeans. Doll's words reverberated within me, however. I wasn't showing my strength to the waking world: I was hiding, trying to play by my aggressors' rules. By those rules I'd go to school, learn nothing, be subjected to abuse the entire day with no recourse.

Fuck that.

I'd figure some way to deal with school. But, like any particularly nasty monster, the first recourse was simply to avoid it and come back when I was stronger, more experienced, better equipped. And so my first two decisions were made. I went into my closet and found a button-up shirt and a nicer pair of jeans. Dad had gotten me some nice clothes over the winter break. It was a strange effort, the generic gesture of "girls like clothes, right?" that didn't fit me really. But we'd grown so distant and broken that his attempt, while ignorant, was clearly still heartfelt. And in this moment it was helpful.

So dressed, my second decision was not to attend school today. I wasn't going to subject myself to abuse.

I emerged from my room and found Dad at the table, eating an English muffin with peanut butter and jelly. "Well don't you look nice today, sweetie," he smiled. "Something special going on?"

*Implacable*, that's what Doll had called me. I wasn't going to be deterred. And so as I fixed my glasses, I nodded. "Yes. I'm not going to school today. I learn nothing there and get harassed endlessly. So instead I'm hoping you'll take the day off and we can do something together."

Dad pursed his lips. He clearly wanted to argue, to push back for the status quo. It was safe for him, less pain that way. The same way I'd been hiding in Yharnam so as to avoid the agony of hoping and losing that hope. Best to just not hope in the first place. I locked eyes with him, hazel meeting green. He nodded. Initially forcing a smile, soon enough it became genuine. "Okay, kiddo. So what do you want to do today? While you figure that out, I'll call over and make sure nobody'll miss me today."

I froze as he turned away. Shit, what did I want to do? Mentally I saw us going outside, getting in Dad's beater truck, and driving...nowhere. There were no places that felt like ours anymore. Our worlds were both a series of tiny spheres, each one holding so much of our pain. And we bathed in it, soaked in it, until anything else was unfamiliar and frightening. Wherever we theoretically went, my mind's eye always had us hopping down past that bottom-most step...

"Taylor?" Dad's voice echoed from the kitchen when he returned, looking around for me. My sharp ears picked up his voice even as I rifled through junk.

"In the basement!" I hollered back. It looked like we had everything we'd need. Nail gun, drill, all the tools at least. I jogged up the stairs to see him looking at me with a bemused expression. "I think we have all the tools: let's go to the hardware store and get some wood and sealant. I want to replace that old rotten step!"

“That’s a nice project. What brought this on?” Dad was still lost.

I caught him by the wrist and yanked him toward the door, briefly taking him off his feet with my enhanced strength. “I’ll explain on the way: we’re burning daylight!”

He let out a strange, disbelieving noise from his throat that was rather like a yelp. It was close enough to a laugh that I counted it as a victory.

(BREAK)

On the drive I did my best to explain, in less dramatic terms, how we were marinading in our pain. The actual words I used were something closer to “If our home is in such a sorry state, what will that do to our minds?” Regardless, I think that simply having his daughter appear happy and energetic was reason enough for Dad to go along with this.

We found a worker in the lumber section and discussed what we wanted, and he cut us a nice solid plank of pine that – if properly braced – would support hundreds of pounds at a time and if properly treated and sealed would last for decades at least. We bought sealant and lacquer and a brush because neither of us could remember if we had any paintbrushes.

Both in the store and once we were home, I did the heavy lifting with the teasing joke that I was young and strong while he should be the experienced old master doing the precision work. Again, I suspected Dad was humoring me more than anything, but in truth I was easily several times stronger than him so it only made sense for me to move anything hefty. Not that I was going to tell him that. “Hey dad, I go to Hell when I sleep and I have superpowers. Also blood is really tasty now but I’m totally not a vampire! Oh, and it’s the same place Mom went when she died!” At the least, he’d sign me up for the Wards in a misguided attempt to keep his new cape daughter safe. At worst, he’d send me to one of the parahuman asylums (the technical plural should be ‘asyla’, but the English dictionary disagrees with me) due to my Dreams and what I’d learned about Mom.

In either case I’d have to break out and that’d be a big rigamarole that none of us really wanted.

So instead we had the radio on the porch by extension cord, blasting 80s hits as we removed the old rotten step. Dad was in charge of getting the old step off while I painted the new plank with sealant. I stood the plank on its side to paint both top and bottom as well as three sides. Once those were dry, the last side would be front-facing so I could paint it over after installation.

The pleasant energy seemed to radiate into the rest of the neighborhood, as several of the elderly couples that were our neighbors began to go on walks. Mr. and Mrs. Gutierrez came up to say hello, glad to see the younger generations hadn’t forgotten the virtue of hard work.

Mr. Gutierrez was squat and square-shouldered, the remnants of a strong frame on his septegenarian body. He’d worked his way up to some kind of management position in the trainyards before his retirement. He immediately began chatting Dad up over what other projects we might have planned. To humor the man, Dad began listing off the various repair concerns we’d had but hadn’t addressed for years.

Mrs. Gutierrez was a bit taller than her husband, though that was likely the result of less spinal compression. She too was stooped, only a few years younger than her husband, and ultimately shaped rather like a jellybean. “Taylor, dear,” she squeaked with a broad wrinkly smile. “I love your outfit. I always said to myself that such a pretty girl shouldn’t be swimming in such baggy and dark clothes. But of course I wasn’t going to be a busybody and come over to say that to you.”

That wasn’t stopping her now, of course. My expression must have given something away because she clucked her tongue and continued.

“Of course you’re pretty, dear. Who’s telling you you’re not?” Yeah, I definitely didn’t want to discuss this with a woman I barely knew, and whose acquaintance I mostly made from when Emma and I would charge through her garden playing pretend.

The elderly woman sighed. “Whoever’s telling you such nonsense, know that it’s just that. You’ll be awkward at that age – we all are. But Annette was a rare beauty and you’re on the way to at least match her. Let other girls have the assets that crude men ‘rap’ about.” She was careful to pronounce ‘rap’ as if it was a made-up word. “You’ll be the kind of girl that songs are written for.”

I had no way to respond that wasn’t some sort of vehement denial, so I just stared vacantly for a bit before returning to my sealing project.

Her skinny hand came to rest briefly on my shoulder. “I know you’ve been having some sort of trouble, dear. It’s never been my place to intrude. But if you need someone to talk to...well, I have little to do other than listen,” she smiled.

On its face it was a kind offer. But inside I seethed. I’d been in such pain for so long and only now, when I seem to be doing better, does she come over to compliment me and offer help. It’s certainly easy to offer to help someone up when she’s already pulling herself up. Where was this kindness when I was hiding away and suffering? Maybe if she’d been brave enough to offer help back then, I wouldn’t be in Yharnam!

A bolt of electricity snapped from the sawhorse to the metal of the brush and I yelped in surprise. I didn’t think that was static. If it had come from me... That had even more disturbing implications.