

Sunday passed much like Saturday had: my day was uneventful, recuperating from the nightmare to which I had been subjected, and bracing myself for the nightmare to come once my head hit the pillow. “Hey again, Iosefka,” I said when I felt the hard wood of the door against my cheek. I stirred to wakefulness and began to stretch.

“Another full night’s sleep in mere moments? I almost envy you, though getting trapped in Yharnam on the night of the Hunt is not an enviable position for anyone unfamiliar with things.” I heard cloth rustle and the door creak, likely the young doctor using the handle to help herself stand. “I’m sorry to have to bid you goodbye, Taylor, but I still have patients here. They need attending and so I cannot spend my evening here at the door.”

I didn’t like it but I understood. “Ah, wait! One question, before you go. You said that healing blood can patch up wounds, so how do you have patients?”

Iosefka made an appreciative noise. “Not everyone takes to the blood so easily. Some can only heal meager amounts. Others suffer from conditions which the blood can only mitigate. It is up to we healers to ensure that everyone is cared for, and not to simply deal out blood and hope for the best.”

I nodded, reflexively. “I get it. Thank you, for everything.”

“May the gods and Vicar Laurence watch over your steps and guide your path, Taylor.” And with that, I heard Iosefka’s footsteps retreat further into the clinic, away from the door.

I felt very cold, the sensation of my blood congealing and sinking into my feet. I was alone again. I was alone, my only contact – friend? – here had other duties, and I was doomed to face a monster literally out of my nightmares. I gathered up the blood vials and only now registered that I wasn’t in my pajamas. I was wearing one of my typical outfits, sweatpants and a baggy hoodie with a tee underneath. “...Huh.” Well, not to look a gift horse in the mouth, I stuffed the vials into the pocket on the front of my jacket and did my best to sneak back downstairs.

The wolf was still there, scuttling back and forth slightly, not quite pacing. It didn’t move right, like its limbs were in the wrong place. The creature crawled around, belly low on the ground, thick claws tearing into the floor in what seemed to me an attempt to gain purchase. The whole monster appeared ready to collapse, its bowed limbs prepared to splay out further and let the thing splat onto the floor. If not for the sheer horror of the creature, the unnatural way it moved and faltered would have been almost humorous.

I looked through all the gurneys. I could see dusk light coming from the doorway, but the sheer difference in illumination made it difficult to see past the doors. They were cracked open, one broken off its hinges – obviously how the monster got inside. Four wooden columns supported the ceiling and might provide me with some cover: at the very least it’d stop the thing from charging straight at me. The gurneys, maybe I could use them as a barricade or at least to ward the thing back, like a lion tamer with a chair. I’d have to move up the left-hand side, past the desk, to the door. The doorway was clear of debris, an open area where I’d have no defense. I would either draw the wolf’s attention when entering from the clinic, or I’d have to deliberately get its notice to get it tangled in the gurneys and other detritus. If I tried to make it out the door, with the wolf where it was now, it would have a straight shot to charge me.

I bit my lip, tasting blood. I pried my fingers from the doorway. I took a deep breath and held in the scream that desperately wanted to tear free from my lungs. I stepped into the entryway, sidling toward the left, keeping watch on the wolf.

*Creak.*

The beast turned with such speed that I couldn't help the scream. It whirled like a crab, limbs scuttling over one another to spin it in place. It let out a heaving, drool-filled growl and its luminous eyes locked onto me. The monster staggered forward, lifting itself up onto its hind legs almost like a squatting bear, and lunged for me with its forelegs, scything claws going for a bear hug.

I grabbed a gurney as I stumbled back away from it, shoving the wheeled contraption forward. The wolf fell, letting gravity carry it, and its claws bit into metal instead of my flesh. One of its claws got caught in the joints of the gurney and the beast spent precious seconds tearing the object apart. I scurried around the pillar as the wolf resumed its chase, grabbing another gurney and bracing myself. When the wolf rounded the corner I shoved with all my might and body weight, smashing the wheeled object into the thing's face. It actually staggered back! I shoved one more time, pushing off from the gurney to launch myself out of the doorway.

The light stung my eyes and I moved forward, aiming for what my still-blurry vision said must be a gate. It resolved into a massive, ornate wrought-iron construction hanging open, bent by obscene strength and marked with claws. Wood tore and splintered behind me, and then I heard claws sparking on stone. I threw myself past the gate with a yell, hitting the ground and springing back up. I grabbed the gate and wrenched backward: it opened into the little courtyard, so if I pulled it shut the wolf would have to work against the hinges, maybe giving me enough time to escape.

Claws slammed through the iron rods and one gouged a deep trench through my right arm, my fingers going limp as the tendons were severed. I screamed yet again and fell back, sobbing in pain and horror. The wolf tried a few more times to break through the gate, until it snapped one of its claws in the metal. Then, like the fox with the sour grapes, it made a chuffing noise and trudged back into the clinic.

Sitting there dumbly, bleeding out, finally I remembered about Iosefka's blood vials. I ripped one from my pocket and jammed it into my right bicep, depressing the plunger. What came next was utterly incredible. The sensation was what I could only presume to be similar to a high-quality drug. I was flying, dancing on clouds as my cut knitted itself closed before my eyes. After only a few seconds there wasn't even a scar, just drying blood to show that I'd ever been wounded. I came down from my high not long after, and didn't feel any lethargy or hangover. This stuff was amazing!

Drawn from my reverie by the sound of something grinding on stone, I looked over with chilled blood in the fear of seeing another wolf. Instead, the source of the noise was a tall, shabby man. He was thin rather like me, a lanky scarecrow, but his clothes didn't quite fit. Everything was too short on him, the chest too loose, but the collar was sized perfectly for his neck and shoulders. A waist-length duster coat, Victorian breeches, a scruffy but once well-loved shirt, and the outfit was completed with a broad-brimmed hat. His beard and hair were wild and stuck out in all directions, his fingernails untrimmed, and he was covered in scratchy hair. In his right hand he dragged a massive woodcutter's axe, the source of the noise as it ground against the cobblestone, while his left held a torch aloft.

*It's the night of the Hunt*, Iosefka had said. This guy, armed as he was, must be a hunter! Heh, he even had an axe like the woodsman in Little Red Riding Hood! Hope bubbled in my chest and my fear

washed away. I stood up, dusting myself off, and pointed at the gate. “I-in there! The beast broke in! I think I got it trapped but Iosefka needs help!”

I’d never seen an axe swung one-handed before, but as the man twisted I instinctively understood that he meant me harm. I leapt back with a squawk as he contorted, rolling his body forward, left side first. The momentum let him whip the axe into the air and bring it down in an arc, crashing between my feet when I landed on my butt. He raised his head to look at me as he waved his torch, and in the combined dim evening light and glow of the torch I could see his face. I wished I’d stuck with the wolf.

This man, this...thing, wasn’t a person anymore. His eyes barely focused, pupils dilated so far that I couldn’t see his irises and his sclera almost the same color as his ruddy, dirty skin from ruptured blood vessels. His mouth hung agape, drooling and missing teeth. What teeth were there...they were canine rather than human, dog teeth jammed into a mouth not built for them. “This is all your fault!” he screamed, the sound almost pleading, begging for things to make sense. I could imagine someone weeping as they yelled that, but his face barely held any expression other than animalistic malice. “Away, damned beast! Away!” He jabbed the torch at me while he wound up for another swing with the axe.

“Please,” I whimpered, crawling back from the torch. “I don’t want trouble. I-I’m not a beast. My name’s Taylor. I’m lost...” I ended up pressed against several empty carriages, the horse-drawn kind. I curled up, begging, crying, with nowhere to go.

He brought the axe down, splitting my ribs. I screamed. He screamed, sounding just as horrified and pained as I was, spittle flying onto me. He brought it down again.

(BREAK)

I awoke not in my bed, or in Iosefka’s clinic. A gentle overcast sky shone gray light down around me, and I was resting in a field of flowers. They smelled of moonlight. I sat up as quickly as I could, multiple memories surging through me. The smell reminded me of those things that had crawled on me, put their fingers inside my face. Then I squeaked and began to check myself over, realizing that I was unharmed. More than that, the rip in my sleeve from the wolf’s claw was gone.

I pushed myself to my feet and looked around. I was in a graveyard. Tombstones covered most of the available space, with little cobbled footpaths between them. It didn’t extend far, however: past the spiked fence everything dissolved into that same overcast sky. The field of flowers set beneath a massive gnarled tree, and a gate hung open to the stone path. Awkwardly, and with nothing else to do, I followed the path. It wended and wove through tombstones until it led up a little hill to a cabin. As there were literally no other landmarks available, I approached. Resting on the hill, on a little garden wall, was a young woman. Tall, like me, and even more pale. In a dour but elegant outfit with a poncho-like shawl and bonnet all in burgundy. But she didn’t move.

Approaching closer, I understood why. This wasn’t a woman, this was a life-sized doll. Must have been some sort of artist’s model, with the precise joints in the fingers and neck. Likely for locking poses in place. But why would someone just leave it out here?

Then I heard the moaning.

Like with the wolf's breath, I recognized the sound and went into a panic before steeling myself and looking around. The noises were the same as the horrid creatures that had covered me after the blood wolf had caught fire. I saw them again, but they were...tiny. About the size of my hand, and leaning out of a birdbath. They jostled with each other to be furthest in front and flailed excitedly, as if to catch my attention, splashing foggy water like dry ice over a lake.

The entire scene was absurd. Everything was absurd. I don't know how long I sat there in the grass, laughing, but by the time I was finished it had turned to tears. I hiccuped and wiped my splotchy face. The little nightmares were still flailing, every bit as energetic as when I first saw them. But unlike with everything else, they didn't seem violent or malicious. If anything, these monstrosities genuinely felt benevolent. Well, if a person could be a monster, maybe a monster could be nice. After all, I'd never seen what Iosefka looked like. For all I knew she could be a grown-up version of these things. The thought drew another burbling giggle from me and I had to slap myself – hard – to stop from having another fit.

The creatures stopped, freezing in place. Then they clumsily imitated me, wetly smacking their own deformed faces. They kept slapping themselves, and I began to feel bad for them. Against my better judgment, to get them to hopefully stop, I approached the birdbath.

“What do you want?” I couldn't keep the whimper from my voice.

They looked up at me with those eyeless, hideous faces. Then all began jostling against each other, pushing and shoving. It reminded me of a comedy routine, the kind of thing you'd see if the Three Stooges performed in hell. Several sunk into the water and then arose bearing clothes. Clothes that were completely dry despite having been in a fucking birdbath. *Don't question it, Taylor*; I told myself. *You have bigger problems*. “Uh, thanks.” The clothes were heavy, well-made. Maybe they'd provide some protection.

Another little horror dove into the water and returned with a burned, ratty and thoroughly ruined notebook – the moleskin kind. I accepted it with another tentative thanks. Then they started pulling more things but stopped. Not because they thought better of it, but it seemed like they were hindered – like a dog trying to get a big stick through a door. Most of them sank into the water and the one remaining began to flail more enthusiastically, like the inflatable men in front of used-car dealerships. It waved toward my right with such violence that I worried the little freak would fall out! I looked over and stifled a scream. They were coming out of the ground!

The tiny torsos swayed back and forth, floating in some sort of ethereal soup that replaced patches of ground. They waved what I was certain were weapons. Two firearms, a flintlock that looked straight out of a pirate movie and a flared blunderbuss; and three of what I could only guess were melee weapons: a crescent-headed axe, a cane with a hexagonal metal shaft, and some weird saw-toothed contraption with bandages wrapped around the handle. I reached to collect the flintlock and the ones holding the blunderbuss sagged, sinking lower. “Wait, I can only take one?” They churned and moaned in response, getting more active. Could they actually understand me? Well, since I still had no idea what was going on... “Which do you think is best?”

That started a full Moe Howard slap-fight. I began to giggle again, this time actually amused as they bopped each other and poked empty eye sockets. After a bit of squabbling, they seemed to come to an agreement and passed back three of the items. The cane, axe and blunderbuss sank back into the earth,

while they proudly held forth the pistol and that freaky saw-thing. I stooped down and accepted the weapons. “Thank you. Now, you wouldn’t happen to know how I get out of here, would you?”

They sank back into the ground, disappearing. Then I heard moaning again from behind me and to the right. The helpful little terrors flailed beside a gravestone, waving their stumpy fingers at it. I knelt down and touched the stone, feeling some sort of a connection. Then I pulled away, remembering the clothes. The new articles were thicker, maybe they’d help me survive this nightmare. “Wait here, please.”

The cabin was locked, so no way inside. Still, the little blind things and I seemed to be the only people here. Pressing myself against the door to the cabin, I shimmied out of my clothes and put on the new outfit that was somehow sized for me. Long black pants, sturdy boots, a buttoned shirt and vest, a long ragged coat that hung to my calves... It was completed by a triangular little hat that reminded me of Robin Hood, and a set of armored goggles. I tried them on, and they were my prescription! “Not gonna question it.”

I returned to the gravestone and placed my hand against it. I felt the world swim and fell into myself. My vision resolved in the dim gaslight of Iosefka’s clinic, and below me a little creature floated in the floor, holding a strange lantern proudly. I stepped back up the stairs and knocked on the healer’s door, hoping the beast hadn’t gotten her. “Iosefka?”

Her voice came immediately, from directly on the other side. “Another full night’s sleep in mere moments? I almost envy you, though getting trapped in Yharnam on the night of the Hunt is not an enviable position for anyone unfamiliar with things.”