

When I regained consciousness I was cold, bleary-eyed, and everything hurt. I'd been sleeping on hard stone and my every joint and tendon protested. I leapt to my feet in panic – and promptly fell over due to my hip joints not quite functioning – upon realization as to why I was cold: I was naked. Everything had been taken from me, all the way down to the tie I used to gather my hair at the base of my skull.

The area was comprised of uneven stone slabs, some nearly flush and others with as much as an inch or two of clearance or descent into the floor. At first I thought it was all some sort of orange sandstone, until I realized the place was lit by massive braziers mounted into the wall, crackling with miniature bonfires. They bathed the entire room in orange light. My enclosure was what could only be a jail cell, the metal bars reinforced and linked by crossbars. I grabbed and wrenched but these things were ridiculously sturdy. Then I tried the door. The bars were just as durable, but the hinges apparently needed maintenance: I tore the door from the wall, ripping through the hinges with horrible cacophonous shrieks.

Footsteps echoed down the only hallway attached to my prison. They were nearly silent, and only the echo of the enclosed hall and my sharp senses let me pick up the stealthy slap of bare feet on the stone. One of the sack-men entered. It squared its shoulders, clenched its free fist, and advanced on me.

Normally, my excessive anger frightened me. I'd inherited my passions from both of my parents. My father's side of the family were known for their tempers. Typically it was the men of the Hebert line, but as sole heir I suppose it came to me as well. My grandfather had been a good man overall but had a hair-trigger, and his only saving grace in that respect was that he came out of a rage as quickly as he entered one. For my father, his temper had an incredibly long fuse but when he at last ignited it was spectacular, and frightening. While it had ultimately been to our detriment in getting any compensation from the school, I did enjoy hearing secondhand stories of how Danny Hebert had literally kicked down Principal Blackwell's door after my hospitalization. It had been the first time he'd mustered any kind of passion since Mom's death.

My mother had likewise been passionate, a very cold kind of anger when she unleashed her temper, and she could rile herself up with ease. It was something that she worked to avoid, always vaguely citing something bad that happened when she was younger. I drew the conclusions that whatever had happened, it'd involved other people because Mom never seemed to trust herself to make friends on her own. She had plenty of friendly acquaintances, but the only people she trusted were those she met through Dad or other already trusted people.

As for me? The massacre in the church, where I couldn't even remember what I'd done to those beasts, was proof enough that I'd inherited the worst aspects of temper from both sides of my family. And ordinarily I would be terrified of unleashing that. The last time I had, it'd been against that brainsucker. And now, clutching a jail door in a white-knuckled grip, feeling equally horrified and violated in my nudity, I let it out.

The first hit swept the creature off its feet and sent it flying into the wall so hard it partly embedded there, prying itself loose and giving me the time to close the distance once again. I thrust the door instead of swinging, hitting with a narrow edge and smashing the sack-man back into the wall once again. I shifted angles, focusing on striking with the very corner of the door, and continued my assault. I didn't let the creature have a moment's respite. It wasn't until the resounding noise of many broken bones accompanied the monster slumping dead to the floor that I even considered letting up, and I smashed its head a few more times for good measure. By how I was sweating and panting, I'd been

beating the thing for a long time even before it collapsed. I wiped my sweat-slick hair back and out of my eyes, and got moving.

If not for ambient light coming through, the hallway would have been pitch-black. I emerged into a bizarre gray cylinder, some kind of colossal multiple spiral-staircase. It looked like there was one floor below and two floors above me. I'd have to explore them all to...escape...

I was an idiot. Doll had told me of the Hunter's Mark, imbued into my mind, that would let me escape imprisonment. All I had to do was close my eyes and envision the Mark. There it was, the upside-down trident thing, maybe emblazoned on a disk or within something like a soap bubble. I paused only for a moment, wondering if I should try finding my things first, but ultimately decided that nothing I'd had was irreplaceable. If I couldn't somehow retrieve it, it was an acceptable loss. I touched the Mark with my mind and spiraled in on myself.

*Maledictus...*

A distant chant, a call-and-response between what sounded like a guttural preacher and a choir, greeted me. My bare feet met cold stone. I was back in the jail.

My knees gave out. I sank to the hard floor. My hope had just been pierced and deflated. For as much horror as Yharnam gave me, other than Gascoigne there had been one common thread: I could fight back, I had agency in a way that I didn't in the real world. But now, I was somehow trapped here. My escape didn't work. The jail door was back on its hinges, the wall unmarred, the floor absent a sack-man corpse. I was locked into the moment I'd awakened, much like how I saved a snippet of myself in time at a lantern.

*A lantern, that's it.* I needed to find one. If I could focus on that rather than sliding into despair... I ripped the door from its hinges once again and waited for the sack-man. At the very least, this would offer me some catharsis in beating this nightmare to death once again. The black-wrapped creature's limbs were so thin, skin that simultaneously reminded of both leather and paper stretched tight over bone. Part of me wanted to remove the corpse's wrapping, to see its face and prove to myself that I was undeservedly frightened of this monster. But ultimately I couldn't bring myself to do so. The sack-man radiated an aura of fundamental wrongness, of something that should not be. I didn't want to see what features it kept hidden.

I emerged into the staircase-cylinder again and, on impulse, went up a level. As I headed cautiously down the hallway, door at the ready, something darted across the doorway at the far end. It was short and hunched, but I thought it was human. Or at least humanoid. Hoping for a fellow escaped prisoner but steeling myself to face an enemy, I stepped through and turned to my left to face the scurrying person. It was a horrifically stooped old woman, face tumorous and covered in bandages, back hunched like a camel. She was bent so far forward that her elbows scraped the ground, her hump pointed straight up, and her neck bent at a nearly ninety-degree angle.

I didn't need to speak. I'd gotten good at reading body language, or at least reading hostile body language. I yanked the door free of the hallway just as the old woman gurgled "More!" and struck out with a bizarre knife. I deflected with the door and beat her over the head.

Spindly fingers seized my neck, squeezing a nerve that made me lock up. Another old woman bent me backward, cooing unpleasantly. "These will be good for my collection," she rasped through too few

teeth, spraying me with foul-smelling and -feeling spittle. She raised her own knife, curved and featuring a divot trench sort of like a cesta for jai alai. That was what she used to carve out my right eye.

It came in at the inner side, the cold knife pressing against the bridge of my nose as she worked the bladed tip under my eyeball and wiggled it around, loosening my eye from its socket while slicing through tendon and nerve. I lost sight in that eye and she finally popped it free from my head, letting me drop so she could hold my eye up to the brazier's light and admire it.

The moment she released me, my body could move again. I hit the ground with a meaty thud, spasming for a moment from the intense pain. Then I lunged up and snapped her wrist, tore the knife from her weakening fingers, and carved open her throat with it. I lifted her up and pried my eye from her hand, placing it against the socket and hoping this evil bitch had enough lifeblood in her to make this gamble work. As her blood poured onto my face, I felt my eye wiggling like a tadpole. The nerve reattached itself and my eye slurped back into place. I staggered to the side and vomited noisily, pouring bile and stomach acid onto the stone. I never again wanted to feel my eye swimming in my own head.

This floor looked to be some other jail cell. Degenerate hunters from Yharnam languished in the cells, and of course the beastly excuses for humans tried to attack me when I passed by. Even with me naked and essentially unarmed in such a cramped space, they posed no threat and I broke their heads open against the steel bars. Passing through another door, I found two sack-men loitering around a massive table. Arranged on that table, almost like evidence laid out in a police procedural, was my gear.

I needed to press what little advantage I had. If they could flank me, or trap me somewhere I couldn't escape, I was doomed. The rooms here were tight, cramped. But the ceilings were at least twenty feet tall. Maybe I could use the verticality. I charged and at the last moment shifted my momentum, leaping toward the wall and bouncing off. I came in from above, wielding the door like a claymore, aiming for heads exclusively. Even if I couldn't kill them immediately, head trauma would hopefully disorient them. I hit the ground, bent my knees and leapt again, catching the other sack-man with a jail-door uppercut. I ricocheted off the wall and came back to the first sack-man, bringing the door down width-wise onto its head and smashing it into the ground. Choking up on the door, I lunged backward, catching my second opponent in the midsection. It doubled over and I spun to deliver my best haymaker to (presumably) its skull, following up by grabbing its head and slamming it directly into the wall several times.

Once again grabbing the door by its base, I lifted it up and slammed it down on my first enemy, knocking him back to the ground. This blunt object was decent for bludgeoning, but the sack-men were sturdy. The first one had taken more than a minute each time to beat it to death with this door, and I didn't exactly have the stamina nor was I willing to rely on my luck to hold for that long. I quickly scanned the table and found my weapons. The cleaver embedded itself in the head of the second sack-man as he staggered to his feet; the spear nailed the first's neck to the floor.

I strained over the pounding of my own blood in my ears to hear if any other footsteps were on their way. Once I was satisfied that I wasn't going to be ambushed, I let myself collapse and pant for air. My arms felt like noodles: I'd had to put every last ounce of my strength into each and every strike just to have a chance against these things. Slowly, shakily, I rose to my feet and began to get dressed.

Once I was fully clothed and armed once again, I continued exploring this lockup. From where the sack-men had been treating my gear like evidence, the room connected to what had once been a larger chamber. Now it was mostly rubble, leading to a tunnel excavated by claws. I placed my fingers over the scratch marks in the stone: it certainly looked like a beast's handiwork.

I crouch-walked through the tunnel and emerged into a massive clearing. At the far end was a set of colossal ornate doors, and the only thing that stopped me from making a beeline was the mass of *something* resting on the ground before the doors. Something bestial had dug that tunnel, and dollars to donuts it was the same thing that looked like a fucking hill down there. I didn't want to fight something big enough to imitate a landmass if I didn't absolutely have to, so I climbed back into the tunnel for now.

Yharnam was a hilly landscape, rising and falling ground levels leading to a lot of verticality in the construction. Despite the fact that the floor I'd just been on led out to ground level, there was just as much chance that the floor above would also lead to ground level on a different side. I didn't relish going to the bottom floor, however: the idea of dark tunnels, perhaps connecting to the ancient ruins of which Alfred has spoken, made me viscerally nervous. At least I was clothed and armed, now. I could put my practice and instincts to the test rather than relying on animal fury and a metal door.

Heading up the last winding staircase, I barely had the presence of mind to leap backward as I heard burlap strain under too-strong fingers. I dodged a swung sack by the slimmest of margins, feeling the disturbed air hit what little exposed skin there was on my face, and perched on the stairs by an even smaller margin. The very tip of my toes balanced on one step, and I carefully shifted my weight to rest on the step below.

I heard the rapid staccato of footsteps from past the sack-man, leather boots on stone. "Oh, so you found a new playmate," the huntress said, not breaking stride as she ran the sack-man through with a silvery sword. "Am I not enough for you?" Her question had a playful lilt to it, her exposed jaw displaying a wide smile. I plastered myself to the side of the wall as I saw her shift her weight. She grabbed the sword with both hands and wrenched upward while planting one foot on the sack-man's back, shoving it down the stairs. I batted the corpse as it fell past me, knocking it into the open air and hearing as its broken body smacked the multiple stairways until at last it impacted the stone floor with a heavy smack.

"What's your name?" the huntress asked, her voice pleasant. Her eyes were covered, like Gascoigne's had been, but her clothes were in impeccable condition – the black robes so well-maintained that they shimmered in the dim light.

"I'm, ah, I'm Taylor. Thanks for the assist there. I'm trying to find my way out of here. Do you kno—"

"Bored now!" With that same wide, childlike smile, she lunged down the stairs and thrust her sword at me like a fencer. I barely deflected, staggering back, trying to watch my balance on the stone steps while simultaneously guarding against this woman's attacks.

"Wh-what!? Why are you-!?" Metal sparked as I parried another strike, forced back to the previous dais.

"No more talking! I want to *playyyyy*," she whined, attacking again and again. I blocked each strike, retreating further, now going up the stairs in the other direction. I didn't want to fight a hunter in such a

cramped space, and thus far she wasn't attacking all-out. If I could keep this madwoman entertained until the room opened up at the top floor, then I could fight properly.

Once we made it to the top, I skipped backward and my feet touched solid, mostly-even floor. From there I squared my shoulders and baited her next strike. She came in with another thrust and my pistol caught her in the sternum. As she staggered, I lunged for once and caught her in the solar plexus with my clawed, spearing hand. I reached inside her and ripped out thick chunks of whatever organs my talons could find, casting the viscera to the ground. I watched as she fell backward, mouth open in shock.

Then she staggered back to her feet. "My turn," she chirped with lungs that didn't exist, blood pumping from a heart that had been ripped into thirds. She flicked the sword over her shoulder and I heard the metallic clink of something locking in place, then she drew a kirkhammer from her back. I didn't even have time to utter an expletive before she was on me, moving faster than Gascoigne had.

I lifted my pistol to arrest her movement as I had before, and she anticipated my move. As my finger squeezed the trigger, her hammer met my hand. My wrist shattered and the pistol went flying into the dark recesses of the room. I staggered back and swiped with the saw cleaver, but she danced around my blows. This wasn't figurative: her feet were going through kicking and skipping motions like Irish step-dancing. The one time I managed to lead my target and get a blow on-point, she deflected my cleaver with the massive side of her hammer and spun to maintain momentum, catching me in the left side and sending me flying. I felt my ribs break, before the ribs and shoulder on my right side likewise broke – when I smashed through a stone column from the force of her blow.

Neither of my arms worked. My body was mostly broken. But I'd be damned if I was going to die here and end up in that jail cell again. With my luck I'd be naked again and this crazy bitch would know I was down here. I gnawed at my face covering, managing to tug it down with great effort as I watched her dance and twirl and giggle like a toddler. Whatever was wrong with her, she was definitely behaving like a child. And I could work with that.

Sure enough, she skipped forward and held the kirkhammer behind her back, leaning in to smile at me. "Aw, are you tired? Do you need a nap like the others?" She had to tilt her head up to properly look at me, exposing most of her throat.

That was when I struck. Legs braced beneath me, I sprang up and caught her throat in my jaws. I bit down hard, splitting open her carotid, and began to drink. I needed blood to heal myself, and needed to exsanguinate her before she could properly retaliate. I sucked hard on her neck, drawing the blood faster than it could pump. My bones crackled like pop-rocks as they set themselves, hands coming up to hold her arms in place. I lifted her into the air, angling her so that gravity would aid my meal. I swallowed heavily, the heavenly flavor accompanying the most filling thing I'd ever consumed. I felt fulfilled, utterly satisfied, and yet I still hungered for more. I briefly opened my mouth wider so I could bite harder, sinking my fangs into her flesh and gulping down more blood until finally my prey was spent.

I dropped the husk of a woman and staggered, adrenaline catching up with me. I closed my eyes and braced myself, letting the shakes run their course. I needed to calm down. I needed to...

I needed to dance. Why just try to let the adrenaline run its course when you can burn it off productively? The ground here was just uneven enough that it might catch my feet, so I could turn it

into a game, train my footwork. I shuffled and bounced across the stone, trying to imitate what little I remembered of the foxtrot from cotillion classes my grandmother (that is, Grandma Rosier, my mom's mom) had paid for me to attend.

And if I was working my balance, why not try those stair railings? I skipped over to the stairwell again, picking up my pistol and holstering it as I went. Some little things were waving something from the floor, but I paid them no mind. "Hop!" I leapt onto the railing and began walking along the narrow surface, arms out to help maintain my balance. The little things moaned, making unpleasant noises. I didn't like how they glowed. "Quiet! You're breaking my concentration!"

Apparently my voice was louder than I'd expected, or maybe it echoed more. Regardless, my sharp senses picked up new footsteps coming down the way. I turned and beheld new friends, eager to join in the fun. I took the closest one as a dance partner. We jigged and hopped and leapt around the room, eagerly painting the walls together as we went. My partner was so jubilant that it began to sing, a wordless warble. I giggled and tried to imitate the noises as I pressed my partner against the wall, spreading more of the lovely crimson paint. Eventually my first partner was too tired and had to lay down, so I moved on to the second. More and more were happy to join my jubilation, dancing with me and singing and cheering from the sidelines, firing off party poppers. I had to occasionally pause to scold those ones, as some of the confetti almost hit me and I didn't want that in my hair.

Occasionally one of my dance partners would offer me a drink, and it would be rude of me to refuse. Of course, that would leave my partner almost immediately exhausted, so I'd have to lay it down for a nap. Soon enough I was the only one left on the dance floor, having waltzed and skipped and paso doble'd everybody else under the figurative table. The walls were so beautiful, painted with our efforts, the shining crimson so much more palatable to the eye than the drab gray-green stone. I hit one of the walls face-first with a wet slap, swirling my hands in the paint to draw little figures in otherwise blank areas. A giggle bubbled up from within my chest and I couldn't resist letting it out. This was the happiest I'd been in years, easily the happiest since...since... I vaguely knew that something bad had happened a while ago but couldn't remember what. Oh well, probably better that I didn't think of such things.

What did come to mind as I thought about the past, though, was an album that both my mom and dad loved and that they used to play a lot when I was younger. It was by a band called... Nope, couldn't remember that either. What a ditz I was today! But as I strode and skipped and painted around the room, the words rose from my throat and I sang to my audience, the echoes bringing it back around to make me part of the audience too.

*Too many lonely hearts,*

*In the real world!*

*Too many lonely nights,*

*In the real world!*

*Too many bridges you can't burn!*

*Too many tables you can't turn!*

*Don't wanna live my life,*

*In the real world!*