

Remembering Alfred, I went back to the tunnel entrance to Old Yharnam but found him gone. Incense was still burning near the wild-bearded relief of Logarius, but it was so low that Alfred had likely been gone for some time. I didn't know how much time I had to capitalize on this summons, and that's before taking into account how time worked in Yharnam, so I didn't wait for the curly-haired blond.

Instead I took the nearest lantern back to the Dream, where I met with Doll.

"Taylor," she greeted softly. "Did you find something by which to remember Iosefka? You appear conflicted..."

I withdrew the plaque. "I was hoping you could hold onto it for me, at least for now, so I don't lose it. I don't know how I could bring this back to the real world, but I'd rather it not get broken in all the fights I have." I took a breath. "As for my attitude..." I withdrew the invitation and showed it to her. "That was waiting for me in Iosefka's office – or, I guess, it was where the imposter was hiding at the time."

Doll pursed her porcelain lips. "I know very little of Cainhurst. Gehrman would know more, but please be delicate."

I nodded. The woman whom Gehrman had loved, he'd named her to me. Lady Maria of Cainhurst.

I found Gehrman out back, staring absently out at the loose garden of moon-scented flowers. "Gehrman? I have a question for you. It's...about Cainhurst," I said as gently as I could.

While I could tell he was listening from the moment I spoke his name – and likely had heard my approach well before – he didn't react until I mentioned Cainhurst. The old hunter turned and began wheeling his chair to rotate and face me. "I hadn't expected you to take an interest in such old history, lass. What's on your mind?"

I presented the invitation and he pursed his lips, much like Doll – and much like Maria, I suspected. I wondered if he had picked up the trait from her, since his lips weren't much made for pursing. He was silent for a good few seconds and I could practically see the currents of history wearing on his emotions like tides against a rock. "Well, this is interesting. I had no idea Annalise still had reach outside the castle."

"Who is she?" Perhaps if I kept his attention away from Maria...

"The last Queen of Cainhurst, first of the Vilebloods. Maria's cousin, albeit somewhat distant. There was bad blood there, I never asked exactly what: she wanted to leave it in her past. But Maria departed Cainhurst and made her way to Byrgenwerth.

"As I've said before, I'm no scholar. I couldn't tell you the timeline, whether the Healing Church or Cainhurst came first. But Cainhurst was always a small province, and they consolidated their new power among the nobility. At some point hostility broke out between the Church and Cainhurst, though by that time I was mostly retired. The Knights of Cainhurst were often a match for two hunters or more. But, well, we had far more than two hunters for each of their knights. Eventually the hostility ceased due to logistical issues: Cainhurst was inhospitable, the land itself seeming to rebel against invaders, and enough knights had been slain that they retreated to defend their home rather than striking out against the Church.

“At some point, I believe after Laurence’s passing, a firebrand named Logarius began agitating that the Vilebloods should be eliminated. Perhaps he saw their continued existence as a black mark on Laurence’s legacy. He gathered elite hunters, garbed them in white and gold, named them Executioners. They made their way to Cainhurst and massacred the entire land.” Gehrman sighed. “Barely anyone returned. They declared the castle cursed, lamenting Logarius’ failure.”

“But this is decades after all of that. You’re saying the queen is somehow still alive?” Despite everything I’d seen, I knew just how good hunters were at killing.

“Some things don’t quite obey the rules of mortality, lass,” Gehrman replied with a deeply sad smile. “If you want to know more, you’ll have to see it for yourself.”

I patted the poor old man on the shoulder. “Take care of yourself, Gehrman.” I stopped by and gave Doll a hug, then departed for Hemwick.

(BREAK)

The massive obelisk was still there, and still patrolled by two hulking hooded brutes. I’d grown much stronger since the last time I faced them, and dispatched each without much trouble. The obelisk would have to serve as some sort of landmark, right? Would the invitation somehow allow me to pass through that fog?

My contemplations were interrupted by the sound of hoofbeats in the distance. Living in Brockton Bay, I’d never heard hoofbeats in real life, but some movies were very realistic rather than using foley effects. Still, the heavy staccato thud of workhorse hooves reverberated in my bones as they drew nearer, emerging from the fog. The crank and clatter of an ancient carriage accompanied the clamor of the horses, and a black stagecoach erupted from the cloying mist. Hauled by a team of four black horses, it careened toward me and stopped on a dime beside the obelisk.

The coach was almost entirely pitch-black, only accented by golden metal. Whether it was real gold or something like pyrite, I couldn’t say. Deep maroon curtains drew across the windows, obscuring the interior. The horses gently stamped and waited obediently, likewise pitch-black. They were worryingly thin, their ribs easily visible, though the animals exuded obvious strength. They were enormous.

The driver was all but invisible beneath a massive black shroud drawn over his body and head. Black robes obscured his feet and sleeves, until he turned to me. I could see nothing beneath that hood, even with my enhanced vision. “Invitation?” His voice was like dead leaves blowing across cobblestones, a rasp that personified age and decay. I held up the letter and a hand emerged from the robes, gray and desiccated. The hand and letter disappeared back into the darkness and the coach door sprung open, making me jump slightly. “Welcome aboard,” he hissed in a manner that could perhaps have been intended to be welcoming.

I climbed inside and sat on black-upholstered seats with gold buttons. The door swung shut and I felt the coach jerk to life. Through the still-drawn curtains, I could occasionally make out the thick fog passing by. The hooves and wheels clattered in my isolation, ceaseless and rhythmic.

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*This was probably a stupid idea. I write this entry from the confines of some questionably-magical carriage, en route to Cainhurst Castle. Somehow the queen there, Annalise, who should be long since dead, has sent me a personalized invitation to her court. Something compels me to go, to learn. I have to know what she wants with me.*

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The carriage creaked to a stop. “We have arrived,” the coach driver rasped, his voice so clear that he could have been sitting directly beside me. I opened the door, which this time didn’t pop open of its own volition, and stepped outside.

The moment the door opened, my world tilted on its axis and I nearly fell back into the cabin if I hadn’t caught myself on the doorway: the door was pointed mostly skyward! I clambered out and landed in deep snow, looking back at the coach. “Oh fuck me,” I hissed.

The coach was covered in snow, the horses dead and partly rotted, preserved in the cold. The driver was curled up beneath his shroud, tiny and obviously frozen solid. At least one wheel was missing, hence the angled door.

I took a moment to look around, and didn’t much like what I saw. To my left was clearly the entrance to Cainhurst Castle. What had once been a garden now lay barren, snow lumped in what were likely demarcations for flowerbeds, and an enormous fountain empty and sad. A monstrously broad staircase, each step at least twenty feet across, led up to the portcullis and the castle itself. It towered into the sky, so high that the mist and fog obscured the tops. It likely reached ten or twenty stories, if not more. All solid stone construction.

To my right was some small stone edifice, a little building built into a mountainside. I could see why Cainhurst had been so difficult to assault: the entire place was within some sort of volcanic crater or surrounded tightly by mountains. Directly in front of me, the rocks formed into a steep decline into some sort of little stony valley.

And milling all about were some new horrors. Creatures, shaped like enormous fleas, scabbled through the snow with their heads down. Long shaggy hair dragged through the flakes while overly long limbs dragged them around. These looked even less human than the beastmen of Yharnam, unable even to walk bipedally.

I snapped open the saw spear and headed for the depression, keeping my head on a swivel. As I got closer to the edge, I could see in the snowy depths there were several more horse corpses, the snow-covered bodies oddly bloated. Nearly slipping on the icy stones and high-piled powder, I made my way down to inspect. My morbid curiosity only increased as I saw the nearest bloated corpse was...churning.

I picked up a chunk of ice and whipped it at the undulating belly, and couldn’t hold back a shriek as the corpse burst. Enormous worms erupted from the dead horse, scything mandibles like bobbit worms lashing at the air as they tried to attack whatever had disturbed them. And then they began slithering toward me, somehow sensing my presence.

Yeah, no. Fuck all of that. I drew the flamesprayer and hosed them down. While it was horrific and disgusting, a part of me drew satisfaction from their unnatural screeching and the tallow-popping of their bodies.

I felt and heard the disturbance in the air and threw myself into the burning worms just in time to avoid an aerial attack. One of those flea-creatures careened out of the sky, bringing its forelimbs down like hammers. I heard stone splinter under the impact. It held up its head, a narrow O for a mouth opening wider to let foot after foot of needle-thin tongue lash out like a whip. The rest of its face was shriveled and unused, eyes nearly the same gray as the rest of its body. Only a bit of its underbelly, particularly around its intestines, were a different color – blood red.

I snapped the saw spear through the air, tip hacking off part of the monster's tongue. It made a disturbing human screech as it reeled back, swiping at me with its overlong arm. Those fingers were longer than I'd given credit, and sharp nails bit into me, sending me sprawling into the frozen horse corpse. I shoved myself aside as the beast came crashing down again, obliterating the body and sending frozen chunklets hurtling through the air.

I rammed the spear into it, rotating the weapon and feeling my wounds close from its blood, then it mule-kicked me and my chest collapsed. I fumbled for a blood vial while my vision blackened, and then my vision went darker faster than expected as the beast dropped out of the sky and crushed me.

I awoke back at the ruined and frozen carriage. Now I began focusing on drawing one flea-man at a time, juking around to kill them by a thousand cuts. Gehrman had spoken of Cainhurst being dangerous, their knights a cut above the hunters, but I hadn't really comprehend just what that meant. It was humbling to realize just how mighty these old hunters must have been, that these scavengers in their wake were so frighteningly powerful.

I first cleared a way to the structure built into the mountainside. It was beautifully constructed, different design from Old Yharnam but made with the same kind of love and pride. Angelic statues adorned the columns, and there was what looked like an elevator shaft – but it was locked shut and the lever refused to move. After yanking for a bit, I decided best not to break the thing.

I made my way back toward the castle, passing the empty fountain. There was something about that fountain that I found consummately depressing. I don't know what it was that made me focus on the fountain in particular, when there was so much tragedy on display, but the fountain was what kept drawing my eye. The way it was dry, empty, a landmark of a time when this place must have been beautiful and lively, a display of joy and aesthetic loveliness... It pulled at my heartstrings for some reason.

I made my way to the final of the flea-creatures, which was both the strongest and least dangerous of their number. The beast was monstrously bloated with blood, so engorged it couldn't jump and could barely move from its resting place: likely afraid of tearing open its overladen belly and starving. I avoided the easy target of the belly and instead went for the limbs and head – I didn't want to lighten this creature and have its monstrous strength fully devoted to vengeance. If it could move with full speed, I'd have one hell of a fight on my hands.

When at long last the creature fell, it exploded. Pressurized blood, old and potent, slammed into me and sent me careening through the air, where I crashed head-first into the fountain's base.

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They could hear its cries before it was born. Glory turned to fear. Their queen was shackled and kept within a ritual circle to hopefully protect against whatever this curse was. What had given them this gift, and why? The thought was on all minds, as the colicky cries echoed through every hall. They were mighty, beautiful, but was this all part of some elaborate trap?

Then, at long last, their world was stillborn.

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I fluttered my eyes open. I was back in my bed. Somehow I'd been knocked-out in Cainhurst and woke up back in the real world? But what had that last vision been? Had that been, as Poe had said, a dream within a dream? Or perhaps a dream riding along with another?