

I avoided Dad. What could I tell him? “Hey, I met Mom. She’s a memory fragment left in an endless nightmare to which I’m cursed to return every night, and when she got her freedom she died for real”? That’d go over well. The only thing worse than what I had now would be to go to one of those parahuman asylums.

School was a blur. Sophia hit me, Madison did stupid shit, Emma talked. None of it affected me. While I still weighed about as much as normal, the strikes didn’t bruise. I didn’t even feel them. Emma’s words were white noise, a hazy cluster of sound. I didn’t even have to ignore it. I just stared blankly at her long enough for her to pause, then wandered off.

My real-world life was starting to feel more like a dream.

At home, I found the strength to put on a brave face. I smiled, made small talk. We cooked dinner together – naan bread pizzas made using pasta sauce as a base. When we headed upstairs and bade each other goodnight, I think he was in a good mood. My head hit the pillow and I felt myself spiral inward.

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The dead screamed, crawling from their tombs and clawing in frenzied panic, striking out at anything they could. The sensation of impact was the only experience afforded them, bereft of sight and sound and smell and taste and any nuance of touch. The people aged and mutated and inverted, ethereal beauty becoming eldritch horror. The footmen, chosen for their aesthetic appeal as much as their martial prowess, deformed into bloated abominations. Their architecture itself rippled and changed, becoming hostile, hateful. The earth reached up with grasping fingers and swallowed their nation, plunging them into darkness.

The child, never truly born as its very existence was a paradox, a stillbirth of reality, continued to cry.

(BREAK)

I awoke, my feet cold in the snow, before the massive castle of Cainhurst. Shockingly, the flea-people hadn’t reset. “What is time, in a dream?” I quoted Gehrman to myself.

The double-doors themselves were stories tall, carved from stone and reinforced with metal. I placed my hands on the freezing barriers and pushed. For all of my superhuman strength, I had to strain with all my might to open the doors. Were they otherwise operated by some mechanism? Or was the average Cainhurst knight truly that strong?

The front hall was beautiful. The floor was dark marble, blackish-green, polished to a mirror sheen. Enormous columns, ridged like classic greco-roman architecture, rose all the way to the vaulted ceilings at least fifty feet above. Enormous statuary, several times life-size, was set periodically into the perimeter. Each one was subtly different, but all of them were carved in Shakespearean garb – some with the classic Elizabethan collar, others with massively overdone ascots...cravats, I think they were called.

Oddly, there were no chandeliers down here. Instead, clustered around every statue and column were dozens of candles, all of them steadily burning down and pooling wax everywhere. The hall led to an enormous staircase, a flight of stairs that then forked left and right. White marble stairs were nearly

hidden behind a colossal red carpet clearly shaped explicitly for the staircase, with how it too split at the landing.

The hall wasn't empty. On the floor, cowering and murmuring to themselves, were some manner of servant. They were covered in gray cloth, like a tiny and unthreatening version of the sack men – complete with emaciated gray limbs visible beneath the cloth. They had brushes and rags and for the most part ignored me, their muttered nonsense growing more distressed when I got close, but otherwise made no indication that they recognized my presence.

I could hear sobbing, and at first thought it was a servant. Then I saw movement from the corner of my eye and dodged on instinct. An ethereal dagger carved through the air, and as I put distance between my attacker and myself she faded from view. She'd been see-through, like a ghost, and an absolute tower. Easily six and a half feet, possibly even taller than Arianna...and in a similar dress, come to think of it.

Drawing the saw spear and closing the distance, I watched the ghostly woman fade back into visibility. Sure enough, her dress was near-identical to my friend and Siobhan's substitute mother-figure. The woman wearing it had been beautiful in life, a willowy but full figure and flowing hair. I couldn't help feeling envy toward a dead woman.

Her sobs turned smoothly to an angry snarl as she staggered forward, clutching the curved dagger in both hands and slashing repeatedly. I didn't know if my weapon would hurt her, but it wouldn't hurt me to try – hopefully. I juked to the side and swung: the saw spear passed through her with some resistance, rather like cutting through gelatin. She screamed in agony and staggered: I could see some of her essence flowing with my spear like currents of air or water, and not all of it returned to her.

Other ghosts appeared as they approached close enough to be visible, clutching their weapons with hateful expressions on their lovely faces. Dealing with them was more an exercise in tedium than anything. These women had not been fighters in life, and their ghosts didn't really know how to maneuver. They charged and chopped like maniacs, but it was easy enough to dart around them. It was slow going to actually slay them, however, although eventually I disrupted each one enough that she broke apart with a fading scream.

The servants continued to dutifully scrub the floors, heads down.

Heading up the stairs, I found most of Cainhurst's doors barred and too sturdy for me to batter down. It was, once again, humbling: for all the strength I'd accrued, the dreaming world was stronger still. I found myself funneled through beautifully appointed libraries, with stories of bookshelves. Rich brown wood melded with white-stone railings and columns, accented by golden floor tiles and ceiling panels. I desperately wished that I could have spent time there, but I wasn't alone. Armed servants, some with rapiers and others with bizarre blowguns, tried to kill me – and were disturbingly effective at it.

Thankfully, Cainhurst seemed to follow the same rules as Yharnam when it came to their loot: contained within an enormous chest was a new weapon, a cup-guard rapier. In experimenting with it, I discovered that the blade was actually in two pieces: the upper half could slide off and down the blade to expose a gun barrel. I could still stab in this mode, though I feared for the weapon's durability, but of course the advantage was that I could put a bullet straight into a fresh wound.

After a few hidden-door puzzles (a staple in any ancient library, with sliding bookshelves and secret exits), I found my way outside and amid more giant statues I faced fucking vampire-gargoyles. More gray creatures, the exact color of the snowy stone, with wings growing from their arms. Their faces had stony beards and their mouths sported massive fangs, which they used to tear open my neck and drink greedily from me. From a distance, they could launch sonic attacks, and somehow the stone fuckers could fly.

Thankfully, just because they were stony, they weren't immune to bullets or saws. A well-aimed shot knocked one from the sky and it plummeted all the way down to the stony earth outside of Cainhurst Castle, shattering upon impact. The rest I tended to hack apart, though pegging them out of the air was still advantageous.

I navigated back inside to a library left exposed to the elements, everything shades of washed-out gray from frost and whatever else had ravaged it. The books crumbled into paper flakes at the slightest touch. A servant took potshots at me with his blowgun, while more ghosts lurked around: some were the dagger-women, but others were headless – that is, they carried their decapitated heads in their hands, lifting them up to scream a hellish wail of agony which caused my physical pain. My blood froze in my veins, turning into sharp snowflakes that tore at my blood vessels.

That room took me several tries to conquer, and at one point between ascents I found a corridor leading to an elevator – it turned out that was the same elevator built into the cliffs, which made for a decent shortcut. My reward was another chest, an important-looking book. This book, illuminated in gold leaf and elaborate paintings within its red-leather cover, was a genealogical registry of Cainhurst's nobility and their "Vileblood Hunters," who were apparently outsiders sponsored to war against the Healing Church.

"If they claim that our blood is unclean," a quote from Queen Annalise was recorded within, "then we will adopt this status as their enemy. We will drown them in our vile blood and those beings they mark as being accursed will be their end."

Within the chest nearby was another weapon, and a beautiful one at that. The pistol was stunning, immaculately crafted with a long barrel that was itself a work of art. The barrel was embossed and engraved with bronze and gold. And carved into the grip was a name: Evelyn.

(BREAK)

The castle exterior was quite the slog, going higher and higher as it felt like I was guided. I used the pistol, Evelyn, to pop the gargoyles: it punched more meaningful holes in them than my old flintlock. At last I made it to the top, which left me wondering why I'd been brought there. The rooftop was empty other than some parapets. But as I made my way further, I saw through the gentle snowfall that there was a figure seated in a wooden chair. A gray robe clung to an emaciated gray body. A black scythe rested against the chair, a sword at his hip. His beard and hair blended together into a wild mane, and a golden crown rested atop his head.

While the equipment was new, that mane was almost unmistakable: the relief I'd seen Alfred venerating had seen to that. The name escaped my lips. "Logarius..."

The frozen hand cracked as it broke the coating of frost, clenching in the air. The cold-mummified corpse tore itself free from the chair, air escaping his clenched teeth in a rasp that sounded like "No..."

And then the dead man began to levitate, bare feet only just brushing the ground! He floated backward, weaving his scythe in the air, and I could smell the coppery tang of blood as he seemed to conjure it from nothing.

There was no argument to be made, no chance to talk with him or state my case. Not that I expected a long-dead lich would be amenable to diplomacy. With each slash of his scythe, a screaming skull made from blood manifested and chased me. I had to blast them with my pistol or lead them to crash into a parapet, because the fuckers exploded with considerable force.

After about a minute of cat-and-mouse, with the floating lich walling me out via his blood magic, I made my move. I kicked off one of the parapets, leaping over the latest skull, and slammed into Logarius. His body creaked and cracked under the impact, and I rode him to the ground, impaling him with my spear. His dark mouth opened in a soundless scream of rage and I leapt back off him just in time to escape another explosion, though the impact was vast enough that I spiraled through the air and crashed to the ground.

As I scrambled to return to my feet, slipping on ice and snow, Logarius glowed a malicious red. He drew the sword at his hip and drove it into the ground, where it too began glowing the same hateful crimson. Then he took to the air, sending more skulls after me while blood swords rained from the sky.

It didn't take me long to make the connection that the blood-red glowing sword was likely the cause of the actual blood swords dropping down onto my head, so I made for the sword to break it and give myself some breathing room.

Logarius plummeted from the sky the moment I was fully extended and striking the sword, slamming into me with impressive force. Shingles broke apart as he dug a trench with my body, while I barely held his scythe from impaling me. My saw spear was at a bad angle and I couldn't strike with any worthwhile impact. So I abandoned it, letting the weapon clatter across the rooftop, and balled up my fist. I caught him unprepared when I decked him in the face, arresting his movement and thus mine as well. He staggered back and I seized my opportunity: my fingers cracked as I allowed them to become claws, driving deep into his chest. As I ripped my hand from his ribcage, I was already sprinting for my saw spear and firing my pistol half-aimed behind myself. I heard one of the telltale explosions of a blood skull bursting.

I grasped the spear and whirled just in time to deflect another scythe attack. Logarius was a blender, lashing out with scythe and sword, and it was everything I could do to keep up with him – especially as I had only one blade against his two. I could have cast aside the Evelyn and drawn the threaded cane, but I had another plan.

*There!* As I deflected his sword strike, he was in the middle of winding up for another hack with his scythe. There was just enough time for my pistol to snap up and catch him in the face, almost exactly where my fist had impacted him. His head snapped backward and he staggered, looking agonized even though still no sound emerged from his long-dead lungs.

I chased after him and this time drove both hands into his chest cavity, clutching his ribs and trying to pull his very torso apart! Logarius met my decisive blow with his own, impaling me on his sword and attempting to saw me in half. My method was quicker, and I shattered his ribcage with a pair of violent yanks. I tore the frost-mummified corpse apart, and Logarius fell back. As he lay still, body beginning

to fade into nothingness, I would swear that I saw a contended and perhaps even thankful smile on his lips – though partly hidden by his wild beard.

I fell to one knee, needing three blood vials to undo the canyon he'd carved into my side. His sword had begun to sever my spine by the time I'd managed to finish him.

Logarius' body faded and dissolved, and the gold crown that had sat atop his head clunked to the ground.

Why had I been led up here? There was no Annalise, no Queen of Cainhurst. Only this empty expanse of rooftop. Surely this hadn't all been some elaborate ruse to slay Logarius, had it? I stooped down to pick up the heavy crown, solid gold and fitted with numerous gemstones – thick-cut rubies, sapphires, topaz and emeralds. This wasn't part of Logarius' trappings, and hadn't faded with him. So why had he worn it?

In what might have been a profoundly stupid idea, I doffed my hat and placed the crown atop my head. There had been enough secrets hidden within Cainhurst, so perhaps there was one more. And as an entire new wing of the castle appeared as if from a desert mirage, my supposition was proven correct. Well, that explained why Logarius had stayed back and died there. But what had happened to him? Had that been him fighting me, or something else? Because that blood magic (the only term I could think to apply to the spells he'd been flinging) was nothing like anyone in the Healing Church had used. Could Logarius not have simply taken the crown with him to prevent others from finding this hidden place? Or had he stayed because he'd been...infected?

I pushed open the human-sized double doors to reveal row after row of statuary. Elaborate rolling horse-and-rider constructs as well as nobles posed upon plinths, all piled in as if to protect them from destruction. They were more whole than most of the statues I'd seen on the way here, so perhaps that was exactly the reason they were here. It was eerie, walking on the red carpet over polished black marble, striding before a silent audience of statues.

A second set of doors, these ones padded with velvet, opened to an immense vaulted throne room. A gentle voice rose from inside, elegant and feminine. "And you must be Miss Taylor Hebert. Approach our throne, that we may better see our guest."

Seated in a towering but somewhat spartan throne, made of gold and plush fabric and set beside a matching empty throne, was a frail and willowy figure fitted with a massive caged helmet over her head and shoulders.

Annalise, Queen of Cainhurst, bade me come closer.