

I pushed my brother's body in a wheelbarrow, crying all the way. His limp legs flowed over the rim, but we tucked his arms in. I couldn't stand the sight of his hand dragging the whole way. We closed his eyes, too, since it helped me picture him asleep. We couldn't do anything about the yellow skin, though.

I was wracked with another wave of sobs but gripped the wheelbarrow tighter to not tip him out. Derrick tightened his grip on my shoulder and stepped a bit closer. His hand was poised over mine on the wheelbarrow's handle, but a side-eye from me made him stuff it back in his pocket. Slowly, gently, Derrick looked at me after my sobs subsided.

"You don't have to push him—"

"No, I *do*." I interrupted. Derrick pursed his lips and looked forward again, just like everybody else. Around us were dozens of others pushing bodies in wheelbarrows, all converging on one point: town hall. Some sobbed. Many didn't. But we all had to be grieving pretty hard if we were bringing these bodies there. As we made our pilgrimage through the whole town, the temperature had been dropping from the midsummer heat of rural Illinois to the point of Chicago-like winter. I was freezing in only a sweater and was looking forward to when I could reach into my backpack and pull out the parka.

Still, a few blocks away, the smell reached us. I scrunched up my face since neither of my hands was free, but Derrick pinched his nose. Around us, a chorus of retching burst out, and it took everything I had to not join it. I switched to taking labored breaths in and out of my mouth.

"How many do you think there are this week?" He asked nasally.

"I don't know. I just hope the Taker chooses well." I replied quietly. "Isn't it time for you to go, love?" I asked. I felt his side-eye more than I saw it.

"You really want me to?" He asked, incredulous.

“Yes. I have to try everything that I can to get Jordan back. If people believe that going alone will help with that, then I have to as well.” I couldn’t stop, so I slowed my steps to as slow as I’d allow as I looked deep into him. I knew he meant well, but I had to do as much as I could to help my brother.

“Thank you for coming, my love. I wouldn’t have made it this far without you.” I said without breaking eye contact. Derrick trusted me and knew that I needed this, so he left me a kiss on the cheek and jogged back. Rumors were all I could go off for helping my chances, but I decided that I would take them as fact, just in case. I shouldered my backpack and got a better grip on the wheelbarrow as I trudged the last two blocks. Some of the people around me kept their companions with them, not believing whatever superstition there was regarding the Yellow Taker... or, they might know that they wouldn’t be able to make it without a loved one next to them.

The smell grew stronger, the temperature crept down, and when I rounded the corner, my goal revealed itself.

A pile of bodies, nearly a story tall, sat in front of Town Hall. They were all in decent condition, as none would be older than a day, and the cold kept them from decaying too quickly, despite the summer heat outside of the mysterious radius. All of the bodies had a yellow tinge to them, a result of the yellow fever that began this whole mess. I ran through a checklist in my head of all the things I told myself I would do to get a better chance:

Never stopped moving once started? I didn’t even stop to say goodbye to Derrick.

Both hands on the wheelbarrow at all times? No matter the tears or the shakes, I gripped tighter each time.

Never looked back? Well... I did once before I started moving. Melody was watching from the second floor of mom's house, and I just had to say goodbye. She looked so scared. I grit my teeth in frustration at the lack of clarity for these superstitions and sent a quick prayer to whatever God started this whole mess that they could pull my brother out of it.

The dozens that made the pilgrimage with me haphazardly gathered around the pile, many of them getting a spring in their step with the end in sight. I didn't have it in me. Seeing the pile of just... death, and thinking that my brother was going to just be thrown in there with them deeply unsettled me. I slowed to a near stop, overcome with dread before remembering myself, my resolve, and Jordan's smile.

I stopped with the tip of the wheelbarrow bumping the pile and lifted the back to drop Jordan off. My arms free of the burden, I let go of the wheelbarrow and shook out my arms. I brought the backpack to my front and fished out a parka, wrapping it around myself and closing my eyes to take in the amazing furred warmth. When I opened them, I met the jaundiced gaze of a dead face, upside-down, mouth hanging open. The eyes held pain in them.

The body was a child's.

I gasped and the rush of dead body stench forced me to turn around and splatter my lunch on the ground. A stranger's hand pat my back, and I nodded in thanks, tucking a stray hair behind my ear. Staring at the ground, I saw boots stop in front of me, just outside the range of my puke. I looked up to see a person dressed in heavy winter clothes, wearing a hospital mask, holding a clipboard and pen out to me.

"Name of the recently deceased, your home address, and your name on the indicated lines, please." The person said robotically. I nodded and took the clipboard and pen, filling out the necessary information with a shaky hand. I idly wondered if it was from the cold, or from

what I saw. I handed it back to the person, who wished me luck and dashed away to another person. I took one last look at Jordan until my eyes threatened more tears and trudged back home.

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Melody took abnormally long to fall asleep that night, but that made sense, given that she had to learn what death was, then forget all the rules that we told her. Her uncle could come back tonight.

Derrick and I lay awake in my parent's attic. A space heater buzzed at the foot of the bed, next to Melody's air mattress. The last step of this process was to keep vigil.

"Isn't it time for you to go to sleep, love?" I asked without turning to Derrick.

"Do you really want me to leave you alone tonight?" He whispered back.

"No," I whispered even quieter as I kissed his hand. He wrapped his arm around my stomach and pulled me closer, and I melted into his embrace. Luckily, no superstition I heard said that I had to do this alone. I wasn't sure if I would want to, anyway. Two mugs of coffee sat on the nightstand, but something in my gut told me that neither of us would take a sip tonight. If I couldn't sleep, then dammit, I wouldn't sleep.

"Is it wrong for me to want this?" I breathed. Derrick shifted behind me and squeezed me tighter before answering.

"Not at all. You saw how many people were trying to bring someone back today. Can you really say that they're all bad people for wanting a loved one back?"

I stayed silent. That child was someone's loved one too.

"This is your brother. No one would blame you for wanting to bring back someone so young."

“I saw a child in the pile, Derrick.” I stabbed. I drew in a shaky breath as the face slashed through my memories. Ten breaths passed before Derrick answered.

“You’re not a bad person.” He kissed my shoulder and buried his head in my hair. I couldn’t keep my eyes closed, or images of the pile, the child, Jordan’s body, the people around us, the yellow, they all came to me. I pressed myself against Derrick, and his body tensed. I continued when he wouldn’t, telling him that yes, I did want this.

He kissed my neck and ran his hands over me. Down, down, down he went until a breath escaped me as he worked away at me. I returned the favor and soon, we were both stripped bare. The moonlight illuminated my face and body through a window above the bed, and I sent a silent thanks to the bed frame for not being loud. As he slipped inside me, the sound of a giant water drop hitting water came from outside.

We stopped immediately but stayed rooted to our places. My eyes were trained on the window as the air shimmered in the night sky. A bone-thin hand shot from nothing, then another, and they pulled a body from somewhere beyond.

The Yellow Taker emerged right outside my parents’ house. Its body was black as ink, thin and skeletal. A tattered yellow robe, looking more like a bedsheet, sat on its body. The face of the Taker was indescribable. It was like looking through iced glass, and the moment it floated past the window towards Town Hall, I forgot its appearance completely. All that I was left with was a primal fear of death.

I put my hands on Derrick’s chest and pushed myself off of him. Silently, we both clothed ourselves and laid down again as if nothing happened. Without drinking a sip of coffee, we had a sleepless night.

The next day, Derrick and I sat in the kitchen, watching the news. My parents had taken Melody to Church, knowing that I had long since lost that faith, but hoping that they could kindle it in their granddaughter. Derrick, despite being religious, had refused to leave me alone. Every week, the news reported on the status of the bodies, and every day, the result was the same.

Where there was once a pile nearly a story tall, there was now blood all over the stairs, sidewalk, and street in front of Town Hall. No one knew what the Taker did with the bodies, as the constant cold had become unbearable for nearby tenants. There was speculation, but with no bodies, there could never be any proof.

It was, of course, an exaggeration to say that there were *no* bodies left. Every week, after the bodies were taken away, one person would come back. They would stay in the hospital for a day, while a representative would go to the family of the recently un-deceased and inform them that they could visit, under certain conditions. A group of representatives was sent to the houses of the permanently deceased and inform them of the fate that befell their loved ones as well.

You had to admit, it was all very well-thought-out, considering some eldritch being was involved.

So here Derrick and I were, watching the television tell us something we knew, waiting for someone to tell us something we didn't. We had both tried to talk, but any attempt at conversation was killed by the tension. The images of Town Hall were gone from my head, replaced with a deep desire to have my brother back. I still didn't know if I was selfish for wanting him alive over anyone else, but I was too tired to think about it.

What I did think about, however, was that Jordan could never have a funeral if he didn't come back. The last experience his body would have would be whatever the Taker does to her

unwanted. The weekly pool of blood that covered the front of Town Hall burned in my mind with this thought.

The only thing that could get rid of it was the assurance that if the Taker did give him back... I would have my brother again.

The knock that held Jordan's fate came, and I went to greet it.