

It was finally time. Well, technically it *had been* time for a good while but I'd stopped to try beating open the damned door to the Forbidden Woods. Much like Alfred had said, it was reinforced from the other side and a rasping voice demanded a password. I'd exhausted my knowledge of Yharnamite phrases and even given him a litany of book quotes and other pop-culture soundbites (including Carlin's "Rat shit, bat shit" cheer that Dad still didn't know I'd memorized) but been rebuffed every time. Hitting the door was a no-go as well: there was some subtle field coating the door and nearby walls almost like laminate, and my blows impacted on this field rather than the material itself.

After a time, I decided to finally be a self-centered teenager. As much as I wanted to rescue Iosefka, everyone from Gehrman to Desmond was all but direct in their belief that she was already dead. And I desperately wished not to be trapped in this nightmare any longer. Not after what I experienced in Yahar'gul. Everything else I could endure, just more torment, but losing myself? If I lost myself again, in this horrible dreamscape, I wasn't sure if there would be another miracle to help me find my way back. No, I had to leave. I had to finally think of myself before others and get gone.

I stopped by Gilbert's window first. I didn't rap on the glass, as he sounded at peace. I spoke softly. "Gilbert, this might be the last time I talk to you. I'm headed to the Grand Cathedral to try and get an audience with Vicar Amelia. If I'm successful, and she has the means to help, I'll finally go home and never come here again. I just wanted to say thank you for all of your help, your encouragement, your willingness to support a random stranger who turned up at your window. You're a good person and I'll never forget you."

A wheezing cough responded. "N-nor I you, lass. I'd thought this city done for, but your stories give me hope that at least some of it can be saved. You've done good, Taylor. You've earned your escape from this hell. Don't look back, girl."

Oedon Chapel was more difficult. Gilbert was dying: he was alright with saying goodbye. But the people I'd rescued and sheltered in the Chapel, they all knew me as a friend or at least as someone helpful.

"Whatever scheme you're peddling," Eustace groused at me, "I'll hear none of it. No final investment or a going-away present. We both know this is the last time we'll see each other so the best you'll get out of me is that I'm thankful you were so slow in your gift that you never managed to ensnare the others."

I smirked in reply. "You'll keep an eye out for the others, though, right Eustace?"

"Course I will! Not an ounce of sense among this lot, they need somebody to save their wretched hides."

I chuckled and waved Adella over to join me on the dais. She did so, hands clasped together, glancing disdainfully at Arianna. "So," I began unceremoniously, "I'm not good at things like this. Used to be a motormouth when I was a kid and I still wasn't any better at saying anything important. I'm headed to the Grand Cathedral to meet with Vicar Amelia. If I'm lucky, she'll have the method to send me home. So I'm saying my goodbyes now in case it's a hurried thing and I won't have the time later."

Making sure my footsteps rang out clear, I knelt down before the deformed beggar. "Desmond, thank you for reaching out when you first heard me, for helping keep this place together. You'll need to watch over it as best you can when I'm gone." I placed my hands on his disturbingly narrow shoulders

and then looped my arms around his diplodocus neck, drawing him into a hug. He broke down into wheezing, whimpering sobs as his skinny arms hugged back as best they could. Through his unintelligible blubbing I could make out words of praise and thanks. I rubbed his back until he calmed down.

“Y-you gave me a name, Miss. You treated me like a true person. I don’t know what we did to deserve you, but I’m thankful we got to know you even for a little bit,” he smiled, tears still dripping from his milky eyes.

I turned in my stoop to face Siobhan, who had her face buried in her sleeves as she rapidly shook her head. “I...I’m sorry, Siobhan. I need to go home. I have my own father who needs me before he truly forgets himself, forgets all about me. I have my own home to save. I don’t regret anything I’ve done here,” (Not entirely true: I regretted everything about what happened with Gascoigne, regretted that I hadn’t been able to save Iosefka, wondered if there had been a way to save Viola...) “but I belong to a different world and I have to help my people.”

Finally the dam burst and the little blonde slammed into me like a missile, bawling her eyes out into my coat. “I’m gonna miss you so much, Taylor! Be safe a-an-and...and I hope your daddy remembers you!”

At this point it was all I could do not to break down in tears. I turned to the taller blonde who stood respectfully, towering over me. “Arianna... I need you to help look after everyone here. Siobhan especially: she’s quite taken with you.” The tall woman smiled and blushed a little in embarrassment and happiness. “You’ve been nothing but motherly and even-handed since we met and we’ll need that to keep Oedon Chapel safe. We’ll need your gentle nature to keep tempers down when stress gets too high...” I trailed off, not sure what else to say. There was something important about Arianna but I couldn’t put my finger on what it was.

Turning to my most recent companion, I looked down at the slightly shorter woman. “Adella...” I swept her into a hug and my fellow brunette squeaked cutely in surprise. “Thank you for saving me,” I whispered in her ear. When I pulled back, her fair skin was crimson and she looked everywhere but at me.

“Y-you saved yourself, Taylor...”

“I didn’t just mean in the prison,” I smiled, remembering how she’d fearlessly challenged the Darkbeast. “You’re the only Church member I’ve met so far. I’m trusting you to watch over everyone here, make sure the Chapel is safe, protect these people from the scourge as best you can.”

She locked eyes with me and gave a firm nod.

As I made to depart, the hostile old crone raised her voice. “Thank you. For bringing me here.” I turned in surprise and her cataracts-ravaged eyes locked with mine. “Don’t get yourself killed, girl.”

(BREAK)

The final goodbyes had to be said to Gehrman and Doll. I took her hand and led her to the entrance of the workshop. “I don’t know if I’ll have the courage to say this twice,” I swallowed heavily, looking between them. “You’ve both been so kind to me, supportive, helpful. You’re true friends and I’ll

always remember you. I'm on my way to the Grand Cathedral to meet with Vicar Amelia and, if I'm lucky, she'll have a way to send me home. I wanted to say my goodbyes now in case it's a time-sensitive thing and I won't have the chance later. Thank you both so, so much for everything."

Gehrman only looked more morose and, oddly, Doll didn't look me in the eyes. It left a pit in my stomach. "...Aye, lass," the old hunter finally replied. "For whatever it's worth, this old dog's glad to have been some measure of help. And thank you. For being yourself, sappy as it sounds."

I hugged him again before he had the chance to roll away. He stiffened once more but actually forced his wiry arms around my back and gave me a single pat on the spine. I repeated the process with Doll, whose powerful arms held me close.

"I wish you luck, Taylor." Her voice was heavy with sorrow.

(BREAK)

I got a sense of *deja vu* on my battle toward the Grand Cathedral, and it wasn't a pleasant feeling. Once again I was battling through a cavalcade of enemies toward what I hoped would be a path to escape and salvation. The last time, that screaming monster had come over the wall...

The final opposition between me and the Cathedral was a pair of Church doctors all in black, carrying fucking tree trunks. To be more specific, the massive wooden shafts split at the end like the monsters were carrying inverted Hunter's Marks. Worse, those weapons were wreathed in wispy red energy like the sack-men when they got angry. Saws weren't effective against the doctors, so I'd been using my open saw cleaver. I did my best to circle one of the doctors but this pair was clearly an experienced team. They quickly flanked me, prodding and testing my defenses. The way in which they so easily wielded those massive hunks of wood unnerved me, reminding me of how Doll had effortlessly handled the kirkhammer.

One of the doctors got a hit on me, a glancing blow to my side (*Who inscribed the Hunter's Mark on your mind?*). I juked aside from his partner's thrust and retorted with a brutal sideways slash, opening up the doctor's abdomen. He staggered for a moment but kept coming. They shoved their weapons' tines past me and then swung inward, one up top and one down low. I couldn't dodge backward, up, left, right or down. I lunged forward and was rewarded with twin pommels to the chest, knocking me onto my back (*How did the little ones find you?*).

I flexed my back and leapt to my feet. As the doctor reared back for another strike, I shot him in the chest and followed with a claw through his solar plexus, rending his insides apart. As his partner died, the remaining doctor caught me in the arm with one of his stick's tines ("*O Flora, of the Moon, of the Dream*" ... *Was Doll praying to flowers? Or is something more sinister happening?*). I staggered. Overall I was uninjured but it felt like my head was going to burst. The few coherent thoughts – in my internal voice but not – were fading into a cacophony of whispers and screams, exclamations and assertions I couldn't grasp but the sheer sound was crushing me like a tidal wave.

The doctor raised his weapon, the inverted Mark framed against the bright yellow moon (*How did they find Annette?*). Before he could bring it down, my skull exploded from within.

(BREAK)

I didn't like what I had experienced. Not one bit. Not only was an exploding head utterly agonizing, but the questions raised by my own subconscious – or, the more worrying possibility, questions forced into my subconscious – were ones I didn't think I wanted to answer. Gehrman had been right: just going out and blindly killing beasts would've been better for my mental health. But now I had to make it out of this hell.

I fought my way back up the winding stairs, story after story, stone and black metal looming over rooftops as Yharnam stretched into the distance. I could see Oedon Chapel towering in the distance, its parapet spearing into the sky. I could even make out the semblance of the second tower that lanced even higher, scraping against the heavens, though I couldn't see what that final hallway – the one blocked by golden doors – attached to.

I turned back to face the Grand Cathedral, the largest single structure in Yharnam. It exceeded Oedon Chapel by at least half, if not doubling the Chapel's size or more. The colossal building towered over Yharnam from atop its tallest hill, looming above all like a king...or a god.

The two doctors in black once again stood guard. I'd taken on two sack-men with a fucking *door* and won: they wouldn't stop me. This time I led with what Adella had called a firebomb and I called a molotov cocktail. Of course the Yharnamites wouldn't have known Molotov or his "bread baskets," so they certainly wouldn't have known the Finnish bomb made to serve as a cocktail to go with it.

The bottle burst on impact and the flames licked eagerly, igniting the doctors' thick coats. I was already moving: I couldn't give them a moment to breathe. I came in low, sweeping my cleaver at the legs of the one on my right. Then I went into a handstand and mule-kicked at the one to my left. It took the hit and staggered, but apparently that tree weighed more than I thought because the doctor's feet didn't really leave the ground. Unlike his companion, whose legs I'd swept out from beneath him.

Smashing another cocktail into the downed doctor, I squared off against the one on my left. He studied me, as if trying to get my measure, tree crooked forward to ward off my attacks. I waited. Finally the muscles in his face and neck flexed, and he started to thrust his weapon. Feeling like Doc Holliday, I drew my pistol and put a round into his chest, following up with a claw thrust. I wrenched him off my arm and off the side of the staircase, sending him plummeting stories down to impact the stone with a heavy smack.

His burned but still-living companion finally made it back to his feet. With only one of these bastards still alive, the fight was much easier. Another bullet, another claw, another death.

I ascended the last flight of stairs and stood before a pair of doors so massive that even one of the giants could hunch through them. The dark, greenish metal depicted what I presumed to be Yharnam's gods, squamous and Lovecraftian, flowing into one another in one continual bas-relief. I went to knock on the door and then thought better of it, not wanting the sound to draw more attention. Instead I simply pressed my hands to the doors and pushed. Slowly, they ground open.

As I gained ground, my mind whirled. Why had those doctors been guarding the Cathedral, and why had they been using weapons like that?

*Wait.*

The answer came to me: tonight was the Hunt. I'd already faced several insane hunters. That weapon, it was the inverse of a Hunter's Mark, perhaps specially designed to be an anti-hunter weapon. Until the Hunt was over, hunters were supposed to radiate outward and kill beasts. If a hunter came to the Cathedral before the fight was over, he was at best shirking his duty and at worst had gone insane, coming to kill innocents. Oh god, had I been fighting these things, presuming they were monsters, when they'd thought the same of me? Could this have been resolved simply by talking?

Once the doors were fully open, I took a moment to holster my weapons and make myself presentable. I took off my hat and goggles, tugged down the face cover, untied my hair and shook it out. It was my favorite aspect and if I wanted to look pretty, approachable, *nice*, I should take advantage of it.

Before me was another flight of stairs leading to yet another set of massive doors. On each side of the stairs, like stone honor guard, were more statues of stinkhorn beasts. These ones had tentacles extending from the intersections of their lattice, just to be extra unsettling. Each one held a spiraling spear like a soldier in a parade, the tips from each side crossing one another at the top of the vaulted ceiling.

The second pair of doors opened into the Cathedral proper. The frontmost room was by itself a rival to Oedon Chapel's entire size. The floor was slightly carved with decorative patterns, the walls were very much like a Christian cathedral complete with gothic stained-glass windows. I could see the discolorations on the floor where pews had been, but they were all gone. The room was massive, open, empty. At the far end was the altar, several feet tall in itself and accompanied by decorations and statues that reached the stories-high ceiling. And prostrated before that altar, rocking back and forth on her knees, was a woman in white.

I approached gingerly, cautious and slightly afraid. Where was everyone else? Why was she alone? She reminded me of myself – tall and worryingly thin, her slender body wrapped in diaphanous layers of a gown. Platinum-blond hair fell limp from her hood, long enough to reach the floor. She had something clutched in her left hand, cradling her left hand in her right. When I drew close enough, I could hear the prayer she was repeating on a loop, as if in the throes of a psychotic break. Her voice was monotone, blurring through the words with no emphasis or gravitas.

“Our thirst for blood satiates us, soothes our fears. Seek the old blood, but beware the frailty of men. Their wills are weak, minds young.

“The foul beasts will dangle nectar and lure the meek into the depths. Beware the frailty of men. Their wills are weak, minds young. Were it not for fear, death would go un lamented.

“Seek the old blood. Let us pray, let us wish to partake in communion. Let us partake in communion and feast upon the old blood.”

She looped through this prayer twice, quick as a flash. It reminded me of the movie *Rain Man*, where Raymond had memorized the joke “Who's on First” but didn't understand any of the nuance or humor, so simply ran through it as quickly as he could with no emphasis or pause for gravitas or laughter.

I came close enough to touch her. She hunched in on herself and released a deep, agonized moan. Her body churned beneath her gown as she twisted in pain. She bulged and shifted. Her back burst, spraying blood onto me and across the church in twin arcs that almost looked like bloody wings.

The gown stretched and deformed, exposing arms and legs covered in bandages. Hands and feet quickly deformed into claws, covered in short white fur. Within moments the change was finished. The long monster resembled a greyhound, easily twenty feet or more from nose to behind not including its shaggy tail, and if it stood up it might have broken twenty feet in height as well. The hood had become a sort of veil hiding its eyes, and a pair of wood-like antlers pushed out from its skull. A long, narrow tongue lolled from its equally long and narrow maw, framed by hundreds of glistening razor-sharp teeth.

The creature took in a deep breath and screamed. Beneath the bestial roar and through the phlegm and reverberation, I could hear a word that both horrified and saddened me.

*“NOOOOOOOO!”*