

Lightning crashed. Steel glinted in the dim light. I spiraled through the sky, lashing at my opponent, who deflected every strike. Propelled on wings of hatred and despair, fueled by yet another betrayal, I fought heedless of the danger to myself. My foe needed to be punished, no matter how long it took. The clouds and fog served as stepping stones as I careened around the pillars, my every blow sent off-course from its rightful path. Tears blurred my eyes to the point that I could barely see my enemy and I didn't dare blink, lest I lose sight. Finally I couldn't help it and blinked as I swung, putting full force into the blow: I wasn't changing course regardless of if I could see. My saw cleaver arrested its flight, caught midair. I reached to draw my pistol and her hand crossed my body, locking around my wrist and preventing me from aiming.

"Taylor." Doll's voice had the slightest hint of impatience, the tone of a parent done with their child's outburst but unwilling to be harsh. I blinked my eyes clear and saw that she was the one holding my wrist; her thumb and fingers were clamped firmly, unrelentingly around my cleaver's blade.

I...had been trying to fight Doll? To kill Doll? "Oh god." The words came out of me in a wheeze as I deflated, releasing my grip on my weapons. With effortless grace, she holstered my pistol and took me by the waist in one smooth motion, gently pushing me to sit on the garden wall. She folded the cleaver with the practiced ease of a master and set it on the grass beside us, before she sat beside me.

"How...how long...?" I couldn't finish the question.

"Less than a minute. I am glad that you came to yourself before firing your pistol. It would disturb Gehrman's sleep."

"How are you so selfless?" It was all but unfathomable to me that she seemed to never give a single thought to her own wants, needs or wellbeing.

"I am as I was made," she replied simply.

The silence stretched for longer than was comfortable. I finally had to ask the questions that had been boiling within me. "How are you not angry with me? I just tried to hurt you."

From where she'd been looking out at the misty expanse and distant columns, Doll turned to look directly at me. Her pale eyes locked onto mine and she gave me a tiny smile. "You were in pain. The moment you recognized me, you stopped. You are a good girl: it would be uncouth to hold a grudge in this circumstance."

I took in a deep breath and let it out, slowly, almost whistling through my teeth. I tried to speak three times, and my voice kept catching in my throat. I closed my eyes and forced myself to speak. "You sent me into those gravestones. You knew my mother's name was there. You...you've mentioned the graves repeatedly. How long have you been trying to get me to find out?"

I opened my eyes to find her smiling wider, approval in her expression. "Since the moment you gave me your name. You are the spitting image of your mother, only younger and with green eyes rather than brown." She didn't volunteer anything more: I had to ask.

"Why didn't you just tell me?"

"I believe I can best answer with another question: if I told you that I had known your mother, even if you believed me, would you not have eventually come to suspect my motives? Offering such a

connection, volunteering it, would gnaw at you. You have been betrayed and let down, lost those close to you. In addition, this was knowledge that I had no way of knowing if you were ready to accept. By leaving it up to you, the chances were better that you would discover it when you had suffered sufficiently, experienced enough horrors, to understand and accept it.”

More of the idea that understanding in Yharnam took suffering. I couldn't exactly refute it. “Well, I might be willing to accept it, but I still don't understand. How...how did she come to be here? What happened to her?”

“The Little Ones found her, brought her here for me to balm her wounds – much like as with you. However, she never departed. There was nowhere for her to go. When she first became sensate, she asked if this was the afterlife. Her tone was derisive. Gehrman explained better than I could that this is a stopping point. I spoke with her multiple times as she worked.” Doll paused for a moment, as if to take a breath. “Her only concerns were to somehow make it back to her family, and especially to you. She cried for hours when I explained her circumstances as the Little Ones understood it.”

The pieces fell together. “Sh-she came here after the car crash?”

Doll nodded. “Her soul had departed your world and come here, to the Dream, drawn to serve a vital purpose. The realization that she could not return home, that she had died, it broke her. Only when Gehrman was able to free her did I once again see the woman whom I had grown to consider a friend. According to her, she hoped she would go to heaven. I hope that she went someplace good.”

Tears flowed freely down my face. I cried not in great heaving sobs but in a resigned gentle deluge, understanding how little I could do. “Then she's gone,” I stuttered through my tears.

“She loved you with an intensity I have rarely seen,” Doll replied in a roundabout fashion. “When I discovered that you were her Taylor, I resolved that I would do anything and everything I could to aid you. To do some level of justice to the love she felt.”

Doll looked up at the moon, hanging low in the sky, opalescent and glittering. She regarded it contemplatively, worrying her bottom lip with her ivory teeth. “I was made to love, to serve. But even had I not been, I would want to help you. And I would still love you. You have a passion, a beauty within you that surpasses even your mother's. I truly believe that you can do anything, and I will do what I can to aid you.”

I couldn't trust my voice. I threw my arms around Doll and sobbed as I hugged her close.

I don't know how long she held me, how long I cried. Eventually my tears ran dry and I pulled back to look at this beautiful, wonderful...I suppose I could still call her a person. “Doll, why is Gehrman so tense around you? It's just the two of you here, and the little ones. How did you end up here?”

She gave me a sad smile. “I cannot tell you as it is not my story to share. When you believe that it is the right time, ask Gehrman. The story is painful, and so even though I know you will not I must still caution you against asking frivolously – if only to reinforce the gravity.”

Shortly thereafter the workshop door creaked open and Gehrman rolled out, covering his mouth as he yawned. “I hope I didn't interrupt anything important,” he muttered as he saw me hugging Doll.

“Actually, I was hoping to talk with you.” I gave Doll one last squeeze and stood up, opting to leave my cleaver in the grass for now. I would ask him about my mother at the end: for now I had other information to gather.

“So I’ve been wondering about some of the freaks around Yharnam,” I said as he wheeled back inside with me behind him.

“You’ll need to be more specific, lass,” he chuckled.

“Well, the first ones I found were these big bastards, almost twice the height of a person, swollen and round. Big and dumb and violent, kinda gray-green.”

“Huntsmen’s assistants, we took to calling them. They became somewhat common once Ludwig started rallying Church hunters. In essence, they were there to help equalize the difference in strength between common huntsmen and the beasts. Don’t ask me how they’re made,” he waved me off, “I couldn’t begin to tell you. They’re the work of Choir experiments, as are most things, I suspect.”

I tilted my head. “You say Choir like it’s a proper name. What are they?”

Gehrman sighed a little. “I was never particularly pious. Essentially, the Healing Church had two subdivisions – three, once the Church hunters became a thing. The Choir is...” He wiggled his hand in a ‘so-so’ gesture. “It’s a dual title. Technically any of the higher-ranking Church members are of the Choir, but it’s also a specific division within the Church that deals with... The best way to explain it, at least as far as I understand, is that the Choir raises their voice to be heard by the gods. They also began working on advanced thaumaturgic and alchemical methodologies for assisting Church hunters. Perhaps the assistants were early attempts to enhance hunters.” He shrugged. “Regardless, assistants are universally slow-witted and strong, seeing violence as the only solution.”

I did my best to explain the white-faced freaks, giants, and sack-men.

“The white-faces, we of the Workshop called them Church doctors. Can’t remember who coined the phrase, but I believe they came from an experiment with blood to see if they could make themselves immune to the beastly scourge. Now, I’ve never seen a doctor succumb to the scourge, but they seem to be lacking something: I’d say that, in a very real way, they lost their humanity in the exchange. The giants, I have some ideas but nothing I’m confident enough to say aloud.” He was being cagey again but it didn’t feel important enough to push.

“As for those ones in black?” he continued. “I have nothing for you. I’ve heard of them from hunters who’ve come to the Dream but I could tell you nothing of their origins or if they have some special weakness. I have some very dark, worrying suspicions but, as I’m sure the doll has told you, you’re probably not ready to know them yet.”

I nodded, then steeled myself. “You knew my mother.”

He blinked and turned to regard me sidelong. “Did I?” He didn’t sound like he doubted me, more that his mind was simply so burdened that he wasn’t sure he could remember.

“Yes. Her name was Annette Hebert. She came here after a car accident, and when she found out she couldn’t come back to me she was broken until...until you freed her.” I almost couldn’t finish the sentence, but I had to make it clear.

His eyes lit up at the last statement. “Ah, I believe you’re right.” His eyes widened as he looked at me again. “...Gods, you really do look just like her.”

“How did you set her free?”

Gehrman shook his head. “You’re not ready to know. Moreover, even if you were, I *cannot* tell you until you are ready to be freed.” The emphasis he put on being unable to talk...was he being kept here against his will? I couldn’t imagine Doll doing something so cruel. Were they both trapped here due to some curse?

“How do I become ready?”

“Just like I told you the first night,” Gehrman chuckled. “Go out and kill beasts. You’re a hunter, your duty is to slay the corrupt and save those you can.”

I nodded, relatively certain that I’d get nothing else from him on that angle. “What can you tell me about Byrgenwerth?”

He steepled his fingers, contemplating his words. “The Byrgenwerth Academy was – perhaps still is – the most advanced place of thought on the continent if not further. Particularly under Provost Willem, it pursued the understanding of our place in the world and how to potentially change it. It sponsored expeditions into the Tomb of the Gods, the massive tunnel network beneath Yharnam. Byrgenwerth scholars were some of the few who referred to the Tomb by its proper name, Pthumeria. Or perhaps Pthumeru. I was never exactly clear on that. Eventually, their discoveries proved too great to contain, and the great place of knowledge lies decrepit amid the horrors of the Forbidden Woods.”

Gehrman turned his wheelchair around to face me. “If you want to know more, you’ll have to go through the Woods. But before you do so, there is another part of history that you should experience.” He rolled past me and began rummaging in one of the desks, rifling through drawers. Eventually he withdrew a key embossed with a stinkhorn creature. “Ascend Oedon Chapel. Explore what you can find there. It... I believe you’ll find it important, though perhaps not helpful.”

With that bit of cryptic advice, he wordlessly dismissed me. I said my goodbyes to him and Doll, stopped to enhance myself further, and then departed.

(BREAK)

Before I went exploring again, I was feeling sentimental. I checked in on Gilbert, who was...well, clearly not fine, but no worse than he’d been before. He coughed and could barely speak, but wished me well. I hated that I could do nothing for him.

Returning to Oedon Chapel, I found that the survivors were getting along well enough. From his perch in the corner, Eustace beckoned me over. “A bit of advice for you, miss high-and-mighty hunter,” he sneered, then continued to speak in a protective tone. “Keep an eye on the lady of the night. She despises the nun, her purity, the woman in black a representation of what she could never be. I

wouldn't be surprised if there was violence in the future. Mark my words, the whore is capable of great cruelty in the name of her bruised ego."

I gave him a slow nod. It was unlikely that I'd actually take it into account, but this paranoid bastard was at least watching out for us in his own ineffectual way and that deserved respect to a degree.

"So many people underfoot," the old woman griped. "And they wonder why I don't leave my chair."

I approached Adella, whose face lit up. "Lady hunter!" She swept into a deep, elegant bow. "Perhaps we can properly finish our introductions this time?" Her face betrayed a mix of mirth and sadness.

Ah, right, I'd never told her my name as I'd been in a crisis. "I... I guess you can call me Taylor. It's nice to properly meet you." I sat down beside her on the bench, making small talk about how she was settling in. Finally I asked what I'd been wondering for a while now. "When we were in that prison, you acted as if you knew the street outside. Do you know where we were?"

Adella swallowed heavily. "I wish I didn't. And I might still have been wrong: the whole place, it...it wasn't right. But it looked like Yahar'gul, the village of Mensis."

"And what's Mensis?"

For a moment she looked offended, then realization crossed her features. "Ah, of course. Your accent is foreign: you'd not be informed on Church politics. The School of Mensis is a division within the Church dedicated to understanding the gods as best we can. While the Choir looks to cast out their voices and draw the gods' attention, you could say that Mensis wishes to show up at the gods' doorstep. I visited Yahar'gul several times as a youth during my training. It was always a dour but fantastic place, rich in history. I...if something has happened to Yahar'gul, and to the School..." She trailed off, but I'd seen the sparkle in her eyes as she talked of the school. If that place had been this Yahar'gul, Adella would be devastated.

"If I can save anyone from the School, I will," I promised.

Adella gently caught my hand as I stood. "Please, before you go... You are an outsider so this may seem strange to you, but you understand the power that blood has. Mine has always been stronger than most. I would offer it to you not simply in thanks, but to ensure you are successful in your hunts – that you have the strength and vitality to save more people." She held forth a syringe full of blood so dark it was like black cherry. It was even darker than mine, which had gotten significantly more crimson since coming to Yharnam. I still remembered when I was younger, my blood was almost pink: I'd inherited a mild form of anemia from my mother, and had resigned myself to never being an athletic powerhouse. At least, until I came here.

"Thank you, Adella. I'll put it to good use."

Up on the dais, Arianna, Siobhan and Desmond were engaged in happy conversation. They brightly greeted me – Desmond a bit delayed due to blindness – when I approached. We conversed about how they were doing and I did my best to deflect when the question was inevitably turned around on me. Arianna saw right through me.

“Taylor, dear. Even if you feel uncomfortable speaking with someone else about your problems, you should at least get them out. Most hunters tend to keep a journal, something to which they can vent. Even if you know that no-one will read it, the act of putting words to paper instead of bottling them up can be a cleansing experience.”

“I’ll think about it,” I replied, needing to leave before I started to cry. The wound of my mother’s death was open once again, and Arianna’s maternal kindness was scraping against that exposed nerve. As I moved to the locked door in the chapel, for which I now had the key, I caught sight of Adella hurrying to sit down and look nonchalant.