

I opted to return to the Dream first. The longer I could put off talking to my friends in Oedon Chapel about my being trapped here, the better. Plus, I could distract myself with whatever I'd found in Hemwick.

I gave Doll a quick hug and headed into the workshop proper to see Gehrman. "Hemwick was...weird," I said simply in lieu of a greeting. He snorted.

"The people there were always off," Gehrman said casually as he rolled toward one of the desks. "The Church tolerated their worship of different gods so long as they cleaved to the law and provided Yharnam with bone-marrow ash."

"Ash? I...kinda heard about that. I had some weird vision, or really an auditory hallucination, in the tunnel on my way there." I didn't mind sharing such uncomfortable truths with Gehrman or Doll. This place was far enough removed from reality that I didn't fear their judgment.

Still, Gehrman raised an eyebrow. "A vision, or hallucination, eh? What did it say?"

I talked him through it, as well as what I could only presume was the witches' conversations. He pursed his thin lips and nodded along, deep in contemplation. At length, Gehrman spoke. "Hunters and scholars have sought the ability to experience others' thoughts, to understand history as it was lived by others. Some find it, but only after much hardship. Far more than you have experienced, not to belittle your own tribulations." He stretched, shoulders popping as his long and thin arms reached far above him. "I couldn't say what has given you this ability. It is most assuredly a double-edged sword, and most who gain it come to see it as a curse more than a gift. I have no advice to give you in this case, except that from what I learned from others I'd recommend that you rely on it as little as possible. Whenever you have the choice to use it, refrain unless it's the absolute last resort. That's your best avenue to remain sane."

"Are any of us sane at this point?" It wasn't an off-color joke so much as a genuine question, with the madness we lived through.

"There's quite the chasm between our own questionable mentality and the slaving man-beasts carrying out the Hunt against living, untainted men and women." Gehrman's mild tone still somehow held an air of admonishment.

"...I worry that the chasm is shrinking," I admitted, my voice small. I stared into the gently crackling fireplace at the back of the workshop. I was so engrossed in my own misery that I didn't hear or feel Gehrman roll up beside me until his thin, bony, far-too-strong hand came to rest gently on my shoulder.

"None of that, now." His voice was still mild, his tone not particularly changed, but it felt comforting. "You're so much stronger than you realize, Taylor. And that lack of realization may be your saving grace. Instead of holding confidence in your strength, you always fear that you will fail. And you work to avoid that. It's a hard way to be, but a good way. Don't lose that aspect of yourself."

I swallowed hard. "So-" My voice cracked and I swallowed again. "So what did I find in Hemwick?"

Accepting my forceful change of topic, Gehrman turned back to the desk and motioned me over. "This is Caryll's rune tool." He tilted his head. "And if I'm not mistaken, you've a rune in your pocket, lass."

I tilted my head and withdrew the strange ephemeral sand-dollar. “This thing?”

He held out his hand and I deposited the strange item into his hand. “Correct. As with most things here, best for you to learn by watching and doing than by any esoteric explanation.” He set the rune atop the etch-a-sketch and the former sank into the latter. “It also helps keep me from trying to explain the parts I don’t quite understand, like how the runes can be made physical like that,” Gehrman chuckled softly.

He began working the various dials on the sides of the frame. Unlike an actual etch-a-sketch, where it would carve lines in sand, this caused the substance within the frame to rise and fall like terrain until it formed a strange pattern within the disk. “Caryll, she was a genius, gifted with a mind to rival Willem’s. Somehow she found a means to transcribe the speech of the Great Ones. As you might imagine, when a god speaks, its words have immense power. We can take these concepts and imbue them into ourselves.” Gehrman turned the frame toward me. “Study it. Stare into the image until you feel it resonate within yourself.”

The image was strange, a single horizontal line marred with vertical lines – most pointing downward but three at the far right breaching the line and going both up and down. As I stared, I felt mildly disoriented, like I was floating. The water at my back as I stared up at the noonday sun at summer camp.

*Great volumes of water serve as a bulwark guarding sleep*, a woman’s voice whispered within my mind. The gentle, lecturing tone reminded of my mother and I felt my eyes welling up. *And an augur of the eldritch Truth*, her voice continued. *Overcome this hindrance, and seek what is yours*. As proper consciousness returned to me, I became aware that I was making...the only way I could register in my mind was ‘jellyfish noises,’ for as little sense as that phrase makes.

Gehrman chuckled to himself. “Been a while since last I saw that. It happens to every neophyte when first experiencing a rune.”

I made another jellyfish noise. “...I mean, *Lake*,” I corrected myself. “Why, how is such a simple word such an overwhelming concept?”

“How can a mortal unravel the countless layers of meaning, symbolism and esotericism within a god’s words?” he answered with another question. “To us, it condenses to something as simple as ‘lake’. But to a Great One... Are you familiar with icebergs, Taylor?” At my nod, he continued. “I don’t know if you’ve ever seen them from beneath the surface. What we see at the top, what breaches the water, is a bare fraction of the true mass. It’s this way for the runes. Our thoughts are the water. What breaches, what we see as the iceberg, is all that we can truly comprehend. All of the rest we don’t think about. But it’s still there, and all of that meaning is what gives the runes their power.”

“That’s...a lot to think about,” I said, air escaping me like a punctured zeppelin.

“The world is so much larger and more complex than we could ever understand,” Gehrman advised. “It’s in understanding that we will never truly understand, that we begin to truly understand. At least, that’s what Willem might say on the subject.”

(BREAK)

I returned to Oedon Chapel still unsure of how I might break the news that I was trapped. Something else demanded my attention upon my arrival, however. Siobhan was seated on Arianna's lap, fidgeting anxiously. "Hello, Taylor," she said, some level of excitement missing from her voice.

"Taylor!?" The relief in Desmond's voice was palpable. "I'm so glad you're here. We need help." Since he was blind, he didn't flinch when I whipped my head around to face him. "My ears are sharper than most. Something's scuttling around that way, down the ladder." He gestured toward the door I'd originally used to enter the Chapel. "I've been too afraid to ask anyone to go investigate, so Eustace shut the door and we've been hoping whatever it is won't come up to visit us."

I nodded sharply. "I'm on it." It made sense why Siobhan was so anxious. A little girl like her would want to explore. But with something roaming around, it would be far too dangerous to wander off. And with both Desmond and Arianna terrified for her safety, I'm sure she'd feel smothered to some degree. I readied the saw spear, opened the door, and headed for the trapdoor. Down the ladder, I could perceive something in the darkness. It was at the edge of my perception from up top, but it was something black and layered. A pile of clothes, perhaps? A pile of corpses? Something had apparently been moving.

I eschewed the ladder and leapt down the shaft, landing into a deep crouch to burn off the impact. The pile of cloth spun. It was Eileen, in her bone-white bird mask. "Eileen!?" I sputtered. She closed the distance and placed a finger against my lips. Her hushing whisper was so quiet as to be almost inaudible. "You've got people scared out of their wits up there," I practically subvocalized. "What're you doing, creeping around down here?"

"Standing guard," she replied in the same near-silent voice. She motioned for me to follow, leading me to a perch overlooking the Tomb of Oedon. An old man in yellow staggered amid the tombstones, weeping to himself. "Henryk, Gascoigne's partner. A very old and very strong hunter. The loss of his partner and his daughter have broken him. Thus far he's kept to the Tomb, but I'm watching for when he finally breaks."

"Wait," I hissed back, "his daughter? Viola? So Gascoigne was his son-in-law?" Eileen tilted her head a little at the term, probably foreign to a Yharnamite, but seemed to comprehend the meaning. "But does he know that Siobhan is still alive? His granddaughter?" Oh god, he probably came home, found the house ransacked... "I might be able to save him."

To call Eileen's tone incredulous would be as vast an understatement as to say Eidolon was kind of powerful. "Save him?"

"You can come back from the brink, from beasthood and madness. If he knows his granddaughter is still alive, perhaps he can be brought back. If not, I'll take his attacks while you get an angle on him."

"If you want to take that risk, so be it. I think it's foolishness, but if you still Dream then even death is little more than an inconvenience. Still, don't be so cavalier. Dying in agony too often is bad for the mind and soul."

I left the perch and began descending into the Tomb.

(BREAK)

Henryk's motions were jerky, like a reptile or insect. A combination of predator and prey, a cornered animal. He paced and twitched. I swallowed hard and hoped that something good could come of this. I didn't have a good history of trying to help in this Tomb. He heard my footsteps and his head whipped around toward me. Beneath his broad hat, he was ancient. Wrinkles like canyons marked his face, his hands were so old that his veins stood out like pipes against his papery skin.

"Henryk?" Addressing him by name might knock him out of combat mode.

He was on me almost before I finished speaking. Nearly as fast as Gascoigne, nearly as strong, he was a force in his own right. I blocked his strike, unfolding my saw cleaver to parry his folded cleaver. "Get ahold of yourself, man!" I admonished. "Siobhan needs you!"

"Siobhan?" he asked in a voice that sounded like he'd cough up dust any moment. "You bitch," he hissed, juking backward. In a smooth, practiced motion, he holstered his pistol and withdrew a dagger from his coat, flicking it at me with lethal precision. I dodged, but it still clipped my left arm and left a shallow cut. "You want to taunt me with her? Killing Gascoigne and Viola wasn't enough for you animals, was it?"

Two more knives and a pistol shot, then he was coming in again. I could see Eileen getting into position to leap down. I had to make my gambit. I dropped my cleaver, reaching up to grab his as he swung. The blade embedded into my shoulder, splitting my collarbone. I gritted my teeth even as blood coughed up from my throat. I clutched his cleaver's handle with my left hand, balling up my right and slugging him across the face with enough force to send him sprawling. "I said get ahold of yourself," I bellowed, ripping the cleaver from my body and casting it aside, injecting a blood vial and instantly feeling the bones knit back together. "Siobhan is alive and she needs her grandfather!"

He froze on the ground. "She's alive?" His face turned to a scowl as he leapt to his feet. "You lie! I saw the house—"

"I saved her!" I cut him off. "I don't know what was after her, but it turned the house upside-down shortly after I got her out. I was too late to save Viola or Gascoigne, but I'll be damned if I'll let a child die when it's in my power to stop it." I kicked my foot under my cleaver's handle and flipped it up into my hand with ease I hadn't expected. "Now, will you calm the fuck down and act like a human being?"

"What proof have you that she's alive?" he challenged.

I was about to say nothing but my word, but then I remembered. It made me feel like a heel, that I hadn't thought to return it to Siobhan. But that carelessness might be to my benefit now. I reached into my pocket and withdrew a small music box. "She told me that she and Viola would play this to help Gascoigne remember them. She asked me to find her parents. I was too late..."

"Wind it," he said softly. I did so. The gentle, melancholy tune wafted through the graveyard. "Mergo's Lullaby." It was a whisper, almost too soft for even me to hear. "I gave that to my daughter, to celebrate their pregnancy. Siobhan wouldn't tell that story to just anyone. She trusted you."

"She still does," I clarified. "Now, are you calmed down? Can you behave like a person? Because I can take you to your granddaughter." I clicked the cleaver shut and casually brandished it. "She and the rest of Oedon Chapel are under my protection. If you so much as look at one of them sideways, I'll gut you where you stand. Understood?"

Henryk walked up to his saw cleaver, folded it shut, and holstered it. “I understand. If I am ever so far gone as to endanger my flesh and blood, you’ve permission to end me. I may regret asking, but Viola and Gascoigne...what happened?”

I looked down. Should I tell the full truth to this old veteran? “I don’t know why Viola went outside after Gascoigne. She was killed by a beast, and Gascoigne lost his senses. He killed them all, but...” I trailed off. “I was there long enough to learn how deeply he loved his family.” I didn’t lie, and Henryk could fill in the blanks as he chose.

As we got to the ladder, I ran Henryk through the denizens of the Chapel, as well as the myriad of horrible things I’d do to him if he hurt them in any way. I used one more blood vial to remove the lingering damage from his cleaver. “I’m coming up,” I hollered into the Chapel, “and I’m bringing a visitor!”

The moment Siobhan saw Henryk, her face blossomed into a radiant smile. “Grandpa!” She leapt off Arianna’s lap and raced forward, the pain of this long night melting from her. Henryk likewise seemed to lose decades of old age, dashing to close the distance with a gentle laugh and scooping Siobhan into his arms.

“I was worried about you, fennec,” Henryk spoke softly. “Your house was ransacked and I’d feared the worst.”

“Taylor kept me safe since...” Siobhan trailed off and Henryk hugged her tighter.

“Everyone, this is Henryk, Siobhan’s grandfather. He’s a veteran hunter.”

“Oh?” the old lady sniped. “So another one not doing his job, then? Fat lot of good you hunters are doing for us tonight!”

“Just what we need, another chatterbox,” Eustace muttered.

Arianna and Adella each gave their own silent greeting, an elegant curtsy and a deep formal bow. Adella glanced sidelong at the blonde after the fact.

“Well, any friend of Taylor’s – and family to Siobhan – is a friend of mine,” Desmond said brightly.

“So what of it,” the old woman continued to press. “Are you going to go out and kill beasts for us, or is your family reunion more important?”

Henryk didn’t quite rise to her challenge. “I am an old man. My skills are not nearly as sharp as they once were. I don’t know if I’m cut out for the hunt anymore. But I can still fight. So, with your permission, I would like to stand guard here at Oedon Chapel and make sure that nothing makes its way inside.” He didn’t say it, but I knew he was thinking of the other things I’d encountered. The sackmen, the Church doctors, that freaky brain-sucking monstrosity: they weren’t really beasts and might not be deterred by the incense.

“That sounds like a good idea,” I said, cutting off the old woman’s retort. “I’ll feel a lot better knowing that you have someone talented keeping watch when I’m not around.” Since nobody else had

mentioned Eileen's obvious presence in the doorway, I didn't either. Maybe it was some sort of etiquette.

"Um, about that," sweet innocent Desmond piped up. "I thought you were leaving. Not that I mind you being back – it certainly saved me from fear – it also worries me. Did you not find what you were looking for?"

I hadn't even realized I'd been moving toward the benches until I sat down on one. Immediately Arianna and Adella were on either side of me, hands on mine. "The Church... The Grand Cathedral is empty. Vicar Amelia is dead. I killed the beast that killed her." Close enough to the truth for government work. I didn't exactly feel like horrifying these pious people with the revelation that the vicar had become the beast, and confessed to this being the Church's fault. Maybe I could tell the truth later, but for now it was my burden to bear.

Siobhan tackled me with a hug. "No, then you're trapped here? What about your daddy?"

I couldn't stop the wistful smile from spreading across my face. She was too sweet. "I know, vaguely, of another way out. But I don't know exactly how or when it'll happen. I just need to keep going forward. Next stop is the Forbidden Woods. I need to save Iosefka, or avenge her. And, well, more and more things are pointing toward Byrgenwerth. I'll need to go there."

The entire chapel went silent in response, and I could feel the tension in the air. Somehow I knew, what was to come would only be worse.