

With the curmudgeonly old bat safely ensconced in Oedon Chapel and under threat of ejection – both her and her chair – if she were to be unpleasant, I opted to take Desmond’s suggestion and explore for more survivors. Much as I wanted to rescue (or, more likely, avenge) Iosefka, I couldn’t pursue her to the exclusion of the other people trying to weather the storm of this nightmarish Hunt.

For the first time in a while, I patrolled Cathedral Ward with a clear head. My biggest threat, both literally and figuratively, was those massive patrolling giants with their axes. I still didn’t know who decided it was important to attach a tin bell to the robes securing their ragged cloaks: it didn’t make more noise than the jangling chains or their thundering footsteps. Maybe it had some religious significance. Regardless, those giants and the long-faced freaks in white (I’d forgotten to ask Gehrman about either of those things) were still dangerous but felt less so: I’d gotten faster, and acclimated to fighting lightning-fast feral hunters and that church-haunting demon wolf, so I practically danced around these slower opponents.

After a bit of wandering, I came to the massive gate. Contained within was a memorial and graveyard, dominated by a central obelisk that apparently commemorated the vicars as they passed. According to Gehrman and his map, this circular set of walls and gates was the central intersection across Cathedral Ward. All major foot traffic crossed the graveyard, to remind the people of those who came before. Standing before the gate, looking up, I didn’t like my odds of climbing it. Most Yharnam walls had wrought-iron spikes over the top, likely to prevent unwelcome beasts from scuttling up and over, and the immense steel structure before me was no exception. While immaculately rendered, the various depictions of Old Yharnam-style angels and the stinkhorn monsters from Oedon Chapel were all jagged and angled spikes and blades. I could potentially climb up the gate, but too much risk of leaping over those spikes. If one bit of clothing or a limb caught on them, I’d be impaled and helpless.

This was apparently the gate that would open upon presentation of the Chief Hunter’s emblem, but I didn’t have any such emblem – much less an idea of what it might look like. Odder still, if the gate had people watching for the lead hunter to return, I couldn’t see anyone. I could hear two or more giants shuffling around, but nobody seemed on guard. In fact, the lever that probably controlled the gate was unmanned. Or, no... As I looked at the lever, mist rose up around it and a whole cluster of little ones appeared! “Ah! H-hey!” I waved at them, trying to get their attention. After a bit they noticed me and imitated the wide wave of my arm.

“You little guys understand me well enough. Think you can help me out?” I called. “See that lever you’re clustered around? The metal stick?” I held up my left arm like the lever, thumb out and crooked like the spoon that would need to be pushed in. “I need you to grab it up near the top,” I followed my own instructions with my right hand gripping my left, pushing the thumb together with the hand, “Squeeze the two metal pieces together, and then pull it forward!” I shifted my left arm along the elbow, swinging it like the lever would presumably tilt.

They stared vacantly at me and I repeated the instructions once or twice more. I could almost feel their collective sense of wonder as my instructions finally sank in. I watched in no small amount of pride as these little creatures, who seemed to primarily operate according to some sort of programming, managed to follow new directions. Metal creaked, gears ground and steel screeched as the massive gate opened. “Thanks, little guys!”

With the main gate open, I could move far more easily throughout the labyrinthine Cathedral Ward. I ran into some new horrors in my travels, because of course Yharnam wasn’t finished showing me nightmares. The first was a gurgling *something* in a ragged burlap sack-robe, and thankfully I couldn’t

see its face. Its flesh had the freakish translucent grayness of old skim milk, and I could see countless sluglike tentacles hanging out from the shadow of its hood. It waited, feigning cowardice, until I was distracted by one of those fucking crows. Then it charged me from behind, spinning me around. Its hood shrugged back as the most massive slug of all – or maybe some kind of feeding tentacle – emerged from the maelstrom that was its ‘face’. It drove that tentacle into the seam between my eye and skull, just as I’d once fantasized about doing to Emma with my tongue, to feed her all of the horrors I’d experienced.

Instead of feeding me new terrors, this thing was sucking, taking from me. I could feel a profound sense of loss as it drank, what, my brain? My memories? Much as I might want to forget most of what I’d experienced in Yharnam, I wanted to forget on *my* terms. I wanted to forget because it was *my* choice, not the hunger of some brain-sucking parasite. From the moment it grabbed me, my body had gone limp, somehow paralyzed and helpless under this monster’s touch. But I’d had enough taken from me. I’d lost enough. Every bit that was taken from me, the void was immediately filled by white-hot anger and roiling hatred. The creature touched that hatred, the well of pure anger churning within me like a tempest, and it recoiled.

This time I leapt and tackled the creature. I didn’t bother drawing my weapons: I used my hands, my claws, my fucking teeth. I shredded this monstrosity, tearing it apart as it screamed and flopped, terrified under my grip. I took my time, wanted it to experience the same fear and helplessness it had inflicted upon me. When its skinny arms finally stopped flopping, I wiped my mouth clean of the egg-white residue and felt restored. In disemboweling this abomination, I had reclaimed whatever it had stolen from me. I straightened up and spat on its corpse before replacing my face cover.

Good or bad, they were my memories, and I wasn’t going to allow anything to steal part of what makes me *me*.

My other new encounter was less immediately alien, but it radiated an aura of pure wrongness. Its body and head were covered in black sheets, while emaciated grayish limbs were left bare. In its left hand, it clutched a bloody sack that it kept slung over its shoulder. At first I thought it was another of the long-faced weirdos, but this thing took far more abuse and nearly killed me with a single punch. If the two enemies were related, it was only inasmuch as they had similar tall and lanky frames. The long-faced freaks in white were the Aegis to the sack-men’s Alexandria.

The sack-man moved with incredible speed, covering massive distances in a single bound, hitting harder than just about anything I’d encountered thus far. My only saving grace was that this thing seemed to need a moment of buildup before it could attack. I flipped the saw spear to hold it underhand, like the Romans would hold their spears. Baiting the sack-man into another charge, I pushed my enhanced legs to their limit and leapt into the air above the monster. My gamble paid off: it needed at least a full second to react and move again, and by the time it had followed me with its eyes (presumably, at least. The head under the sheet definitely moved and seemed to track me, but I had no clue how) and began preparing to dodge, it was already too late. I brought the spear down with my full body weight and the strength of both arms, the point burying straight into the sack-man’s head. I kicked off its chest and landed well away just in case of retaliation, but instead I got to watch it stagger a bit before dropping over dead.

Something in me didn’t even want to approach its corpse to retrieve my weapon. This thing made me uncomfortable on a primal level, twinging some ancient survival instinct. Even the corrupted huntsmen and other monsters avoided the sack-man whether it was alive or dead. Apparently I’d found a monster

that even other bogeymen considered a monster. On the one hand, I was proud that I'd killed it. On the other, it was unlikely to be the only one.

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Back into the foggy Yharnam streets, slaughtering my way through huntsmen in various stages of corruption, I heard a new voice. "Get off my porch, you smelly beasts! If I have to go get my mallet, you'll be sorry!"

That startled me enough that I almost lost pace. I only just tore out the throat of a bestial axeman before he could get in his own swing. I was beginning to understand just how different Yharnam was, but even then, such a casual response to flesh-eating monsters? Once I was done with the corrupted huntsmen, I approached the door and knocked. "Uh, hello sir? Are you alright in there?"

"That accent...you're not from around here, are ya? An outsider who's come to join the Hunt? What a pathetic idea."

"Hey, it wasn't my idea to come here. I'm just trying to find a way home. But until I can do that, I might as well protect people from the beasts."

"You what?" His voice was confused and indignant. "What, you think I'm a beast? Well maybe I think you're a beast. And step away from my castle!" Either he was crazy or he just couldn't hear too well through this heavy door.

"Do you have a window?" I called, raising my voice. "I think we're having a misunderstanding."

"A...!? Oh, enough of you. What, you think this is funny? Well I certainly don't. So be gone with you! I'll have nothing to do with your beast hunts," he shouted.

From behind me, my enhanced ears picked up the sound of curtains sliding open. "Do you mind?" inquired a soft feminine voice. "Not only are some of us trying to sleep through this horrible Hunt, but this level of noise is bound to draw more beasts."

I moved over to the new window and watched from the corner of my eye as a shadow appeared in a window beside the door through which I'd just been talking. So the weird guy wanted to eavesdrop, huh? "Hi there, miss. Sorry about that. I'm trying to get people someplace safe. An incense dish might not be enough tonight."

The woman's silhouette approached closer and she cracked the window. "Oh my, what a queer scent. Like the incense, but fresh... Not sure I like it, but I'll take it over the stench of beasts and blood any day. Now, trying to get me someplace safe? That's a line I've not heard before. I'm off-duty on the night of the Hunt, dear. Besides, this is no place for ladies. Wouldn't want to drag you down too..."

It took me a good few seconds to process that. "I... Wait, that wasn't a come-on! I'm trying to evacuate people. I'm a hunter. I've seen more than a few occasions of beasts trying to break inside people's homes, even with the incense dish. We've got a few survivors barricaded in Oedon Chapel. Huge stone walls and doors, and dozens of massive incense barrels. Tonight's just getting worse and I'm doing my best to save those I can."

The window opened further. I could see fair skin, golden hair, long aristocratic features, and one blue eye in the dim light. I realized she was probably trying to read my face so I tugged my goggles and mask out of the way. Her scrutinizing expression immediately softened. “Gods, you’re just a girl... By the Good Blood, how desperate have things gotten if we have adolescents fighting our battles for us?” She shook her head, bringing herself back to the present. “Alright dear, I’ll come with you. The night has been long and I’ve so little incense left...I don’t know if I could have held out.”

“What’s this two-bit nonsense you’re peddling?” The man’s voice cut through the calm night. “You, wench, you really believe this mooncalf’s story about some shelter. You’re a damn fool to trust an outsider. And you, hunter? Her sort’s probably just looking to thief some of your coin.”

Did this guy just live to be contrary? He was warning us both against each other, as if everyone was continually conspiring against one another. “Look, come with or don’t. I’m not your keeper. If you want to stay here, that’s your prerogative.”

Now that I’d turned toward the man again, I heard a door open behind me. The woman stepped out in an elegant burgundy dress. She was tall, easily over six feet, with a long neck and equally long, delicate limbs. She looked fragile, almost ethereal. Yet another tall woman who was effortlessly beautiful and made me feel inadequate. Wonderful. Then she gave me a sweet, shy smile and my feelings of indignation dissolved. The two looked nothing alike, except perhaps for fairness of skin, but that smile reminded me of my mother. “My name is Arianna,” she curtsied a little. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Miss Hunter.”

“Ah, you can just call me Taylor. And I’m no good with the fancy stuff. Is a handshake insulting?”

She giggled and accepted my handshake, her larger and longer hand still somehow feeling small and fragile in mine. “Delighted to make your acquaintance.” She adjusted the strap of her rucksack, presumably loaded with her essentials.

“Right, then. If you two are off to make asses of yourselves, you could at least have someone with common sense among you.” The man emerged from his own home. He was old, late fifties at the youngest, with a scraggly graying beard. He was ugly, an oft-broken nose sticking out like a tree branch, jaw and chin sticking too far forward. It was the kind of bizarre face that would look sweet and grandfatherly if it was adorned with a gentle smile. Instead he gave everything a judging sneer. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you when this one eats you,” he said to Arianna. “And that goes for you when this one picks your pocket,” he preemptively scolded me.

I couldn’t hold it back. “The fuck is wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” came the immediate reply. “It’s the rest of the world that’s mad. Now get going before we all age backward or some other insanity comes to curse us.”

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When we got back to Oedon Chapel, it seemed that I wasn’t the only one who felt Arianna had a motherly nature. Siobhan was immediately taken with her fellow blonde and I could see the little girl blinking back tears. Meanwhile the old man and the even older woman had instantly hated one another. In the sniping match that ensued I at least got his name, which was Eustace. The old lady still had yet

to share hers. Eustace took up position atop one of the pedestals formerly intended for relics, watching the chapel like some sort of guardian.

I strode up to look him in the eyes. "I'll tell you the same as I told her," I jerked my thumb at the old woman. "This is a safe place. If you hurt anyone here, by word or deed, I'll bodily eject you from this church. Understood?"

"Quite the act you're putting on. I'd almost believe it if I wasn't so worldly," he replied. "Out of respect for you keeping your ruse up for so long, I'll spare you a nugget of advice: beware the blind man. There, the beggar sits, at the bottom of the bloody food chain... And then he's here, acting like he owns the place. He's not to be trusted. What's the want with all these people, anyway? That little weasel has a murky past, I guarantee it."

"I'll... I'll take that into consideration, Eustace. That said, you should probably keep your suspicions under your hat for the most part. Safer that way."

"Of course it is. I don't know why you insist on babbling your accusations directly to each and every person. Liable to get yourself killed," he responded, utterly lacking in self-awareness.

I took some time to check in on Siobhan and Desmond, and assure myself that Eustace wasn't going to be a threat. The man was odd, to say the least. He accused everyone of wild things without a hint of evidence or even reason for supposition, yet also warned us all away from each other as if protective of each one of us individually...when he wasn't suspecting us of plotting against him.

Siobhan approached me with a folded letter. "Taylor, I found this while I was exploring." My eyes went wide at the fear of Siobhan wandering out and Desmond had to have sensed my apprehension.

"Don't worry, miss. We were in verbal contact the whole time and she didn't leave the chapel. There are plenty of storage nooks and places to hide for meditation," he reassured me.

She presented it again. "I found this. I think it says Byrgenwerth. That's connected to the Forbidden Woods, so it might be helpful."

*The Byrgenwerth spider hides all manner of rituals, and keeps our lost master from us. A terrible shame. It makes my head shudder uncontrollably.*

Well, presuming that was how you spelled 'Byrgenwerth,' it could indeed be a clue. A spider somehow hid rituals? I asked Desmond about it and he was just as perplexed. "I don't know about any spider, but Byrgenwerth is supposedly a dangerous place. As for who wrote it, doesn't sound like one of the priests. Vicar Amelia isn't lost, and anyone who could otherwise be considered a master is deceased. Ludwig the Holy Blade, the previous vicars, they're not lost. They're interred in the central graveyard."

"Perhaps some sort of cult?" I ventured.

He shrugged his narrow shoulders. "I don't think so. I would've guessed it was someone from Byrgenwerth if it was a cult, but the way it talks it doesn't sound that way. I'm sorry I couldn't be more help."

"You're fine, Desmond. Just do your best to keep everybody safe and stable, okay?"

“Alright,” he smiled with his long blocky teeth.

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Stepping around a massive supply cart (seriously, that thing was almost the size of a freight car, and there didn't seem to be enough room for the proper number of horses. What, did they hitch it to one of those giants? Fuck, that might be exactly what they did), I opted not to waste time and simply shot the undulating crow. Damn things always managed to get in a few hits once they got airborne. At the top of the long, winding steps into a higher section of Cathedral Ward emerged one of the long-faced goons in white. Carrying a lantern in one hand and the trademark pointed cane in the other, he descended slowly and deliberately. The lantern looked...off, however. As he got closer, I realized what was wrong. The lantern was covered in eyes!

They grew over the glass like barnacles, the sickly purple light from the flame reflecting out through the pupils. The eyes twitched and undulated, watery and round, looking fully alive. He gave that long-jawed rasping battle cry, raised the lantern, and three will-o-wisps rose out through the glass. The floating flames drifted toward me. I took a shot and the bullet passed clean through one although, satisfyingly, it did hit the bastard behind it. I juke to the side and the wisps pursued, finally impacting me. The pain made me recoil as it felt like my blood was literally boiling within my veins. The ringing in my ears from pain-induced tinnitus was so bad that I almost didn't hear the surprisingly light footsteps behind me. I leapt aside just in time to avoid a sack-man's charging punch.

I was done with this. I smoothly holstered my saw spear and drew the cleaver, extending it into a glaive with one motion. I spun to deflect the cane strike from white-face, sending him stumbling toward sack-man. The area wasn't as open as I would have liked, especially with these massive figures crowding me, but the stepped dais toward the actual stairs was hopefully roomy enough and there were several areas into which I could juke if I kept tactics in mind. Unfortunately, the two monsters seemed willing to cooperate and were also focused on tactics, splitting up to flank me.

I slid to my right to dodge another punch, then had to bend forward at the waist to avoid the cane. I could hear the sack-man's grip tighten on his burlap and pushed off with my legs, moving further to the side as the sack impacted meatily on the ground. It bled more, whatever was within having been pulverized by the blow – which left the stone in the street nearly broken to powder.

I snapped up my pistol and shot the white-face when it tried to stab down at me, but before I could capitalize on the staggered enemy, the sack-man joined in. It stomped at me and followed up with another punch. I switched my grip as quickly as I could, gripping my glaive two-handed, and lopped off the black-clad monstrosity's arm. It took far more effort than even I had expected, comparable to trying to cut through a stone column with a single stroke, but I'd managed it. The creature let out some bizarre pseudo-screech that sounded almost like a scream played in reverse, its body now roiling with strange wisps of smoke-like red energy.

The wisps came in again and I dodged, right into the cane. I barely bent in time for the cane to brush over my left shoulder, and even then it would leave a bruise. I popped back up to standing and used my new momentum to lodge the glaive into the white-face's torso, splitting it nearly in half. Speed was key and so I made to abandon my weapon for the moment, until it grabbed me by the wrist. The white-face wasn't willing to surrender so easily and clutched onto my arm even as life departed its body. It held me in place just long enough for the sack-man to close the distance and bring its bloody burlap cargo

down onto me, smashing me into the ground. I felt my collarbone, shoulders and all of my ribs shatter. It shuffled forward and finished with a stomp to my skull.

Instead of waking up back in Oedon Chapel or the Dream, I had visions of trying to see through thick cloth. Of chanting, screams, maniacal laughter. The sound of metal going into and through flesh.

I awoke, some time later, to my first encounter with a Nightmare.