

My mind swirled with ideas as to what I might say to the poor orphaned girl. Even more so, what she might do if left all alone. She couldn't be older than ten, maybe not even that old. Could I count on her to stay locked in her house? What if something tried to break in? Damn it, I was only a teenager, I wasn't prepared for anything like this!

I was spiraling. I needed to stop and focus. Center myself. *Be on the lookout for beasts*, I reminded myself. Concentrate on that for now, stew on the existential crisis of responsibility in the background. Heading up the massive steps took me to the biggest damn church complex I'd ever seen. Everything was carved from stone, many of the statues and all of the pillars were hewn from a single stone each and immaculately carved. The statues were horrific, Lovecraftian nightmares fusing the human and the inhuman. Portrayals of robed figures with heads like stinkhorn mushrooms, arms raised in supplication or perhaps triumph. Were these portrayals of Oedon? Perhaps his – its – angels? If so, I'd take my chances with Biblically-accurate angels.

As I explored the complex, multiple mausolea and smaller temples, I found an honest-to-God treasure chest. The big thing was ornate and hidden in a shadowy corner, and I opened it fully expecting a trap, or an ambush, or for a mummy to pop out and yell at me. Instead I found a strange tool. Divided into parts, it looked like a sextant and some bizarre combination of measuring scales and one of those 3D chessboards I'd seen in a novelty shop. I had absolutely no idea what this thing was but as I watched, some of the oddities that Doll called the little ones (I guess I should start calling them that too, if only so we had common parlance) rose up from the solid bottom of the chest.

With the opportunity to watch this time, it was honestly fascinating. First came the churning substance, as a pseudo-liquid like whiteout bubbled up from nowhere. Then the little ones rose up in a cluster, emerging from the liquid as if surfacing from beneath the water. The stark white faded away, leaving a slight... Mist was not the correct term, but my eyes interpreted it as mist or fog despite it not drifting away. The area where the little ones met the solid surface was disrupted by this mist, preventing me from seeing it clearly. Perhaps it was like the headache I'd gotten when Doll had started using her magic and I'd looked right at it. If so, I was glad I couldn't see what was going on.

The little ones grabbed the tool, moaned in what I presumed was thanks or perhaps congratulations, and pulled it down with them. Then the chest was empty and its floor undisturbed. Even the dust was still in place. "This place is so fuckin' weird," I muttered to myself.

Normally when I hear the word 'chapel,' I think of a smaller church – someplace where one or two dozen people at most could gather for worship. If the naming conventions held true and this was a *small* church... Well, put simply, Oedon Chapel was massive. Vaulted ceilings at least fifty feet high, probably a hundred feet from front to back, with a raised central dais a dozen feet or more across. Everything was beautifully carved, even the floors were textured. Alcoves featured little pedestals, some with what I could only presume were artifacts. I couldn't begin to imagine how Oedon was worshiped, but however they did it they did it in style. And all around me were massive urns with wicks, all burning and releasing a scent I somewhat recognized.

It had been difficult to place at first, because I'd gotten used to the scent. It was the smell of the moonlight-flowers that clung to me. Well, not quite that smell, but this was an approximation. And, my brain registered, there had been a candle, lamp or incense holder releasing that same scent at Gilbert's window and at Gascoigne and Viola's house. And here were hundreds of these, filling the entire cathedral with the smell.

“Well now,” a voice chirped from my right, “even steps, not muttering to yourself, and you can stomach the incense. Unless my ears deceive me, I do believe someone with their wits still about them has come to the chapel. I was starting to get worried I’d be the only one left,” the man finished with a slightly unhinged giggle. I couldn’t tell if it was a tic, a nervous breakdown from fear, or if I was dealing with a madman.

I turned to address the speaker and froze. Once again, I was confronted with something frightening. He had gray-black skin like ash, not of the same texture as human skin. I could tell it was almost papery. He was far too long – arms almost like tentacles, topped with spindly-fingered hands, even a face too long and narrow. Gehrman at least appeared in the realm of reason, but this...this creature’s pointed chin and nose were elongated so much as to be obviously unnatural. Milky eyes blinked unseeing, and it undulated in ragged red robes, long torso resting on the stone. This creature had no legs.

“Are you mute?” It spoke in a friendly, youthful male voice. Someone in his early twenties, maybe? Definitely a Yharnam accent. “I sure hope not or that’ll make things difficult. I can’t exactly see, you see?” Another giggle.

I tightened my grip on the pistol. “...Sorry if this is rude,” I said at length, “but what are you?”

If he was offended, he didn’t show it. “I’m a person! At least I think I am. Best we can figure, me parents left me here for the priests to care for me. I can’t entirely blame them, I’ve never met anyone like me and nobody else has either. No legs, eyes don’t work, they tell me I’m the wrong shape and color. Let me tell you, it’s the ‘no legs’ thing that’s the most inconvenient,” he chuckled. “So I live here at the chapel, at the priests’ generosity. What brings you through here, traveler?”

I kept a healthy distance. “I’m heading to Cathedral Ward, to the Healing Church. I think I need their help to get home.” I looked around. “You said there were priests here?”

“Well I’m glad you clarified, since you’re in Cathedral Ward already. And yes,” his face fell, “there were priests here. This hunt...it’s different. Everyone’s locked up inside, as you do, since it always ends. It’ll end this time too, mark my words, but something tells me it’ll end badly. The priests got their gear together and went out to help people. That was hours ago and not a one has come back.” He tilted his too-long head. “You don’t sound too frightened by all this. Are you perchance a hunter?”

I shrugged. “I guess so. That’s what Gehrman tells me, at least.”

His lips spread in a disturbing smile. Even his teeth were too long, and all of them oddly blunted. “That’s wonderful news! I’ve been waiting for one of your ilk. Maybe we can make a difference yet!” As if sensing my incredulity, he continued. “Far as I can tell, the beasts are getting bolder. The usual little incense dish isn’t always enough to keep them back. Even some folks hiding away are going bad. Yharnam’s done for, mark my words. But that doesn’t mean that we can’t still help people.” The ragged mutant waved a long arm in a sweeping motions. “The incense in these urns all together is strong enough to scare off any beast, and it’ll last well into the morning if not longer. If you find any folk with their wits about ‘em, tell ‘em about Oedon Chapel here. They’ll be safe. And if we can get some supplies, close off the doors, we can make a good stand of it till the hunt ends, come what may.” He trailed off with that unsettling giggle again.

“So what’s your name?” This was the longest conversation I’d had with someone that wasn’t through a door, aside from Gehrman and Doll, but they didn’t exactly count considering they were in a pocket-dimension Dream.

“Don’t have one,” he shrugged. “Priests always just called me ‘my child’ or some such, others called me the Chapel Dweller like it was a profession. I’m naught but a humble beggar, no skills to count as a profession.”

I blinked. “You’re the second person without a name I’ve met tonight. Would you like one?”

He smiled again. “Oh sure. I’ve tried to come up with one for meself, but nothing ever felt quite right. Do you have a name, miss hunter?”

I wanted to believe he was a gentle wretch, a victim of circumstance who had genuinely good intentions. Yharnam hadn’t beaten hope out of me yet. However, the saying always goes to trust but verify. “I’m Taylor. Nice to meet you.” Hopefully Iosefka or Gilbert, or maybe Doll might know about him. Doll from stories told by other hunters, but still. Gehrman was probably too far out of date to know. “I’ll have a look around. If I find anyone, I’ll keep you in mind.”

“All I can ask,” he declared with another laugh.

(BREAK)

Gilbert didn’t know about the beggar, having never made it to Cathedral Ward himself. He listened as I explained my current problems, then I heard the grinding of wood on wood. He wheezed and I could hear him staggering.

“Gilbert!” I cried out in concern, his shadow approaching the window.

“This is probably...the last time I can move like this,” he wheezed. “But Taylor, you’ve been kind to me and I want to repay that kindness, as well as give you the chance to succeed at your quest.” He fumbled with the window, managing to slide it up somewhat. His hands were bandaged, gnarled, shriveled. His body looked withered like a corpse or a wizened old man. I still couldn’t see his face: I was certain this was intentional. He passed something through the bars: it looked like a strange watering can, or an oversized airbrush tool. “When Iosefka told me about the beasts, how they’re a risk but don’t like fire, I got ahold of this. Now I want it to be yours.” I tried to protest but he cut me off. “If you must, consider it a last request from a dying man. Don’t get trapped here, Taylor. Burn your path to freedom.” Gilbert shoved the device into my hands and with great effort shut the window again. He staggered back to his bed. “N-now off with you, lass. I need to read my new book and get some rest.”

I smiled softly. “Rest well, Gilbert. If I can, I’ll get you out of here too.”

His shadow tiredly waved me off. “I’ve made my peace, girl. Unharmd by this plague of beasts, I can die human and on my own terms even if the schedule’s not mine. And I can help my new friend get out of here.”

(BREAK)

My reasons for meeting Iosefka were twofold: I wanted to know if she had any information on this beggar and if he was trustworthy, and I was looking for her advice on what to do with the little girl. Could she make an exception and open her door to let the girl inside? I slaughtered my way through the huntsmen and the beasts – it was almost by rote at this point – and knocked on her door. “Iosefka, are you busy?”

The voice that echoed through the door shortly thereafter was smooth, assured, the voice of a confident doctor. It was decidedly not Iosefka’s voice. “Oh, well hello there. Who’s this again? I’ve been so busy I’m having trouble keeping track of voices.”

My spine felt like it was made of frozen metal. The chill that circulated through me was only rivaled by when I realized I’d never see my mother’s flute again. I swallowed hard. If Iosefka was being held hostage, if there was hope of saving her, I’d need to avoid alerting this other woman. “I-it’s Taylor. From earlier tonight?”

“Ah, Taylor. Of course, how could I have forgotten? How are you, dear girl?” The words were right, but they were completely insincere. I could feel the falsehood, taste its bitterness on my tongue. This woman had no idea who I was or what my relationship was to Iosefka.

“I’m alright. I was just in the area so I thought I’d check in, make sure you’re still safe in there.”

That perked her up. “Oh yes, I’ve set up quite the safe area in here. In fact, I think I can accommodate more patients – or, if not patients, at least guests in need of safety. If you find any survivors, send them to my clinic. Upon my oath as a healer, if they are human I will look after them, perhaps even cure them. This sickness, these beasts, they are not to be feared.”

A far cry from the gentle woman who’d feared for her patients’ health and safety.

“This time the night is long,” the woman continued. “I might be trapped here, but I should do some small thing to help. How about I even offer a reward for your assistance? Tempted?” she purred.

*Play along*, I exhorted myself even as I gripped my saw so hard it shook. Like Gascoigne had shaken when he heard the music box. “Y-yeah, a reward would be nice.”

“Wonderful! Well, off you go, then. If you find anyone who’s still human, send them to Iosefka’s Clinic! You can assure them there’s no place safer!”

“Don’t worry,” I replied, “I’ll get right on that.”

It took all my willpower to walk away rather than run.

(BREAK)

“Gehrman!” I shouted, charging out of the mist in the Dream. “I need directions!” I skidded to a stop, lowering my voice once I found him. The wheelchair-bound man sat before one of the desks, fiddling with a device – the same device that the little ones had retrieved from outside the chapel!

“I expected as much,” the old man replied, not looking up from his inspection. “What possessed you to bellow so greatly I half-expected the roof to collapse upon me, Taylor?”

“Iosefka – one of my friends in Yharnam – I think she’s been kidnapped. Or...or she’s dead,” I responded, throat suddenly blocked by the volume of my worry. Iosefka had been the first person to sing me to sleep since my mother died, the first altruistic soul I’d encountered in so long. It was through her that I managed to cling to hope and take those first tentative steps toward freeing myself from this nightmare. “I need to know if there’s another way into the clinic. It’s in western Yharnam, Northwest I think. Big building, full of gurneys and medical equipment.”

Doll peeked in from the doorway. “The ministrations clinic that Laurence once frequented on his charitable missions,” she clarified for me. I didn’t miss how Gehrman’s hackles rose, shoulders hunching defensively when she spoke.

The old man did his best to silently let out his tense breath through his nose, pretend he hadn’t just been so on-edge he might well have split in two. “...Aye, I know the place. It’s connected by underground corridor to a village in the Forbidden Woods.”

Even with my panic, I couldn’t keep my eyebrow from rising and the sarcastic comment slipped out with no regard to my emotional state. “It’s called the Forbidden Woods? Did you let somebody’s edgy thirteen-year-old name it?”

Gehrman waved me off. “Nah. Woods’re infected with some sort of disease. People went mad, monsters moved in. Even the beasts avoid the place. Course, they would’ve been forbidden regardless with the schism between the Church and Byrgenwerth, but that’s just one reason to avoid them. Now give me some paper, lass, anything will do: it won’t be terribly detailed.” I provided him a scrap and he began to scribble. “I made it a point not to spend much time out there. Never felt right even before the infection. Snakes and worse out there in the fetid swamps, and I always felt like something far too intelligent was watching me from the shadows.” He drew a basic path, some buildings to represent a village... “The trapdoor should be around this area, provided a shack hasn’t been erected atop it.” Gehrman rolled his chair around to look at me as he passed me the paper. “Now tell me why you need to get inside through a back way.”

I did my best to condense the information, telling him about Iosefka and why she was important to me, as well as this new voice pretending to be her. At length, Gehrman sighed and gazed at me with those sorrowful eyes.

“I won’t tell you not to try saving her, though I will caution against it,” he warned. “I can guarantee you that your journey won’t have a happy ending.”

I squared my shoulders. “Even if I can’t save her, Iosefka and her patients deserve vengeance at the very least.”

His frown deepened. “Do what you will.” Gehrman turned back to his device.

In an attempt to avoid leaving things on a somewhat negative note, I spoke up again. “So what did I find, anyway? What is that thing?”

“Blood-gem tool,” he responded, resuming his inspection. “We used it to concentrate blood and blood gems into our weapons. Blood, the echoes, is representative of strength and fortitude. By making this symbolism physical we fortify our weapons just as we can fortify our bodies. The blood gems... I have

no cultural touchstone to help you understand, so simply comprehend that these are solidified concepts written in blood and given physical form. When worked into a weapon, they can provide powerful advantages. Some keep memories of trauma and carry drawbacks, but suffering always breeds strength so they can be the most powerful – if you can handle the danger. Kegs used to be fans of seeking those kinds of gems, the madmen.” The mix of fondness and derision in Gehrman’s voice when he mentioned Kegs reminded me of how Dad used to talk about his cousin Rob, so I could only imagine that Gehrman saw them as having their hearts in the right place but their heads up their asses.

“Interesting. Once you’re done looking it over, maybe I’ll try it out.” I stepped closer, moving slowly so as not to startle him. Gehrman didn’t seem to frighten easily, but what I had planned... “And thank you, for the map.” I leaned down against his chair and gave the old man a gentle hug. He’d been alone for God only knows how long, his only company being someone he obviously couldn’t stand. If Doll’s words meant what they seemed and he couldn’t even travel to Yharnam, Gehrman must have been starved for human contact to a degree even I couldn’t fathom.

I didn’t hold the embrace for more than a second or two. He stiffened in my arms and didn’t respond, verbally or physically. I left him to his work and approached Doll.

“Thanks for the help there. So who’s Laurence?” I asked her.

“He was one of Gehrman’s old friends, a brother in arms,” she replied evenly.

“Was, huh?” I let out a low breath. “Gehrman’s lost a lot of people, hasn’t he?”

“And even more within this Dream. Countless hunters he mentored, far fewer was he able to free. Too many succumbed to madness or beasthood. I sometimes walk the path and look at all of the names, to recall everyone who has fought to escape the hunt.” Doll was always subdued but she sounded particularly melancholic there.

“I wanted to ask you,” I changed the subject with the subtlety of that bridge monster, “do you know anything about a blind mutant in Oedon Chapel?” I described the strange man as best I could.

“I believe so, at least in passing. Several people have mentioned someone of that general description. None have commented on his character, so either he is inoffensive or has simply not done anything to draw attention from those hunters who encountered him.”

I sat on the garden wall. “So, this might be a difficult question, especially since you live here and don’t have much context. But I need to ask somebody for advice and with Iosefka unavailable you’re the one best equipped, I think. There’s a little girl, orphaned now. Her mother was killed by beasts, her father went insane and turned into a beast himself. I... I don’t want to leave her alone in her house. Young and trusting as she is, she might wander off or let some maniac inside. Do you think it’s better to bring her to Oedon Chapel, so she’ll at least have someone to talk with? Or is she safer in her house?”

Doll stood silent for a time, apparently thinking while she was perfectly immobile. It was a bit disconcerting to see how she didn’t breathe, didn’t twitch or fidget. “On the worst nights, beasts become so bold that even incense will not frighten them away. A dish burning through the night would not provide safety. A chapel filled with incense urns would turn away more and larger beasts than a dish would, and Yharnamites build their places of worship with thick stone doors.”

An answer that didn't exactly tell me what to do, but Doll raised good points. As long as the beggar could be trusted, Oedon Chapel's stone doors and thick walls would likely be safer. "Thanks, Doll. I'll see you later."

"Farewell, Taylor," she said with the tiniest smile. "May you find your way safely through the dreaming world."