

The enormous canid monster slunk closer. I would have expected it to lumber but it moved with a disturbing grace, as though this were a natural-born animal. Antlers scraped the ceiling as it raised up to scream again. Why did it have horns? The screaming creature from the bridge had horns too, but none of the others did. It advanced on three limbs, its left arm still cradling an amulet to its heart. I saw the flashes of gold from the amulet and its chain.

I opened my mouth to speak, to entreat this creature. It *moved*, faster than I would have expected from even a graceful monster its size, and closed the distance. A huge claw, arm covered in tightly-wrapped bandages, caught me around the midsection and batted me into the wall. Before I could even bounce off and hit the ground its palm was on me again. I slammed into the wall once more and the narrow, strong fingers closed around me. Vicar Amelia (and I somehow knew it was her) wound up while she screeched in her monstrous dual voice. **“GET OUT!”** She threw me through the stained-glass window and out into the dark Yharnam evening.

Brilliant red, pink and teal shattered and spread around me like glass butterflies. I shot my hands out and caught the edge of the window with my fingertips, shifting my momentum. I swung to the side and crashed through the next window, the force landing me on Amelia’s back. Unholstering my saw spear I immediately began to dig into her, hacking through fur and flesh to get at her spine.

She violently rolled, crushing me under her weight and scraping me off her back. I injected myself with a blood vial as I stood, snarling a wordless challenge. She lashed around me, ricocheting off the stalwart stone walls, moving so quickly. Not even the flayed beast in the little church had been this fast: only Gascoigne had been comparable. Very rarely did she lash out with her left hand, and always with a halfhearted backhand slap or fist slam before she returned it to its spot at her chest. Not only did she not want to move that amulet, she was clearly afraid of breaking it. The other claws made up for her hesitation and she was rapidly bleeding me. I gave as good as I got, carving deep trenches in her arms and legs each time she came in for a swipe.

Finally she pulled away, hunching in the corner. Hopeful that she’d tired out but wary of some new attack, I approached slowly. She tucked her head in, touching the amulet to her brow, and golden light enveloped her. Was she managing to do what I had done? Was she curing her beasthood?

Instead I watched in horror as her wounds closed. I hastily injected myself and rejoined the battle, but ultimately I ended up too exhausted and found myself impaled on her claws, life leaving my body.

While I didn’t think about it at the time – couldn’t think about it, really – it must have been both terrifying and saddening for those at Oedon Chapel for me to suddenly appear on the dais, bellowing in rage, before charging out through the doors.

(BREAK)

By the time I massacred my way back to the Grand Cathedral, I’d burned off a good deal of my anger. The doorway was blockaded by fog reminiscent of the mist the little ones created, albeit thicker and it didn’t make me sick. Operating with the presumption that this was some sort of barrier, I opted to regroup outside of it and check what I had on me. I had a few molotovs that I could potentially use to hurt Amelia when she healed, but I’d rather her not be able to heal in the first place. In my seemingly bottomless pockets (I decided to just accept that I could hold virtually anything and not try applying logic to a world with the little ones popping out of the ground) I had what looked to be especially thick blood in a cloudy-glass jar crudely labeled “Sedative” with a strange squiggly icon beside it. It looked

like a lopsided snake, the kind Emma would draw: she never was a good artist. There was something called blood cocktail, which was apparently literal rather than being like a molotov cocktail. I still hadn't figured out what to do with that... I remembered stories of cigarettes being used as currency in prisons, so maybe I could trade people blood-booze for favors? Last in my pockets were strange glass ampules half-filled with a silvery water. The tags, marked with the Hunter's Mark, read "Numbing Mist." Something in me, some instinct implanted the same way the Mark itself was attached to my mind, told me that this mist would help me here.

As I relaxed my focus on planning and turned back to the foggy barrier, I became aware of a sound. My sharpened ears could hear the beast that was Amelia (if I was back in time, she should have been human again. Working theory: this fog somehow kept things within synched with my timeline) trying to pray. And it sounded like she was weeping.

I stepped through the fog and found the monster hunched over the altar, massive shoulders shaking. It sniffed the air and wheeled on me. I stomped my foot, the sound reverberating like a gunshot in the empty church, and bellowed with all my anger and authority. "STOP!"

The creature was actually brought up short. It leaned back slightly, unsure of how to proceed.

I seized the initiative. "Amelia! Vicar Amelia! I was turning into a beast as well. I managed to fight it off. It can be done. I could bring Adella here to testify. You can do it too!"

The beast breathed heavily, sagging under my words. "...**NO**," she warbled, the barest hint of a human voice beneath the phlegmy growls. "**IT IS TOO LATE FOR ME. FOR ALL OF US. IT...IT'S ALL OUR FAAAAULT!**" She arched back, head whipping through the air as she howled in rage and despair. I charged and met her the moment she went to lunge, saw biting deep into her barrel. She kicked at me, lashing her toe claws like a velociraptor, hacking at my body while I sliced at her hips. I grabbed onto a lock of her shaggy fur as she juked away, hitching a ride. When she hit her sudden stop, I used the momentum to once again end up on her back. I snapped the spear to full extension and drove it deep, into her spine. It wasn't enough to sever her spine, unfortunately, but she definitely didn't like it. She rolled again, forcing the spear to slice further through her in order to dislodge, and once again crushed me. As she rose, she lowered her head to the amulet.

Now! My left hand stabbed into my pocket and retrieved one of the ampules. I watched it glisten in the air as it arced toward her, just as Amelia began glowing gold. Her wounds started to close...and the moment the globe shattered on her and covered her with silvery mist, the golden light stopped. Her healing ceased.

I drew the saw cleaver and once again met her charge. She ran on her hind legs, dextrous right hand lashing out to knock my cleaver from my grip. Amelia lunged down, jaws opening to devour me.

I leapt into her mouth.

I tucked my long arms and legs in close to myself, my boots briefly finding purchase on her narrow, slick tongue. I did my utmost to will the change, spearing my hand up into her soft palate. I wrenched back and watched my hand slowly transform back from a claw. I smashed into her teeth when Amelia fell onto her side.

I crawled out of her mouth and saw her massive eyes gazing at me, her veil having pulled back. They were popped, bloodshot, and such a pale blue they almost looked silver. Disturbingly human eyes set in a monstrous dog's skull.

Her breath came in shallow heaves. ***"THERE IS NO FORGIVENESS FOR US,"*** she gasped. ***"NO REDEMPTION. IN OUR HUBRIS, WE DAMNED YOU ALL."***

"I don't understand," I interjected. "I just came here to find some way home. I heard you know magical things. I...I don't want to wake up here anymore. Please."

"MAGIC? TRANSPORT FROM OTHER PLACES? NO, THAT IS THE WORK OF MENSIS. THEY WERE THE FIRST TO FALL. NO, NO THEY WERE THE FIRST TO SUFFER. THE CHOIR, ALL OF US...WE FELL SO LONG AGO." Tears glistened in those massive eyes. She clutched the amulet to her heart, shaking as life left her body.

"Damn you!" I snarled. "I never wanted to come here! I don't want to be bound to the Dream! I don't want to be a hunter! I just want to go home!"

"THIS WAS UNLEASHED WHEN FIRST BYRGENWERTH EXPLORED THE TOMB OF THE GODS. AFTER THAT, ALL WAS PREDESTINED TO RUIN. WE THOUGHT IT A FAIR, EVEN PROFITABLE EXCHANGE." She stared straight into my eyes. ***"THERE IS NO ESCAPE. YHARNAM IS NOT PART OF THE NORMAL WORLD ANY LONGER. WE ARE THE PLAYTHINGS OF CAPRICIOUS AND WRATHFUL GODS, AND THIS IS OUR FATE. YOU WERE CAUGHT IN THIS TIDE, AND YOU WILL SUFFER ALONGSIDE US FOR THE CRIME OF BEING HUMAN. PERHAPS YOU WILL EVEN DIE HUMAN, UNLIKE LAURENCE. UNLIKE ME..."***

Amelia's eyes turned glassy and she ceased to move.

"No," I snarled. "No, you bitch! You don't get to die and leave me here! I'm finding a way home!" I crawled over her corpse and pried her hand open retrieving the amulet from her sinewy claw. The fingers snapped as I carelessly broke them. It was heavy, mostly solid gold, and the front was engraved with laurels. It had a clasp: it was a locket. I popped it open but instead of pictures or a lock of hair, there was simply a phrase carved into the gold.

Never Forget

"That tells me nothing!" I screamed, lightning striking outside as if to punctuate my anger. I stalked toward the altar, wondering if there would be something there.

There was definitely something.

Set upon the altar, hastily though reverently, was a skull. It was not a human skull, nor a canine. Clumps of black hair still somehow clung to it. This deformed monstrosity was the skull of a beast, and it radiated significance. There was practically a haze in the air around it. Against my better judgment, I reached forward to touch it.

The musty smell of books and preservation fluid filled the air, as always. The old man rocked gently in his chair, tapping his staff arrhythmically in his hand. A nervous tic. The precious metals in his blindfold visor and scholarly miter glistened in the dim light.

It was time now: any more delays and he would lose his nerve. This academy had been good to him, but fear is the enemy of progress. As the provost himself said, evolution without courage will be our undoing. He took a deep breath to steady himself. “Master Willem,” the younger man spoke, “I’ve come to bid you farewell.”

“Oh I know, I know,” the old man rasped in a voice squeaky with age. His heavy jowls sagged, betraying an age that should have meant death long ago. “You think now to betray me.” The words were not said with heat, but they cut all the deeper for it.

“No, but you will never listen.” They had undertaken this argument far too many times, and not once had either party been swayed. He would no longer allow his goals to be stifled by fear. “I tell you, I will not forget our adage.” It was an olive branch, an attempt to prove to Willem that he still believed even if they disagreed.

Willem nodded heavily. After several long, pregnant moments, he spoke and his words carried the weight of the gods themselves. “...We are born of the Blood. Made men by the Blood. Undone by the Blood. Our eyes are yet to open.”

The young man joined, adding his voice to the final and most important phrase. “Fear the Old Blood.” They stood in what had at one time been companionable silence. Finally the younger man stepped back. “I must take my leave.”

As he departed, Willem’s weak voice still reached his ears. “...By the gods, fear it, Laurence.”

The gates of the academy creaked open for Laurence one last time. He would never again return.

I staggered back, gasping for air. When I’d touched the bone and comb in the old workshop, I’d gotten snippets, jumbled memories that my mind barely managed to assemble into a story. This skull, it told an entire story.

I’d seen through the eyes of Laurence, Gehrman’s friend and the first vicar of the Healing Church. The old man, he’d addressed as Willem. Gehrman said Willem was in charge of Byrgenwerth. Their adage... I suspected I now knew the password to enter the Forbidden Woods.

I turned around, saw Amelia’s corpse, and everything came rushing back. The emotion that had been shorn from me during that vision crashed back into my soul, and had me seeing red. I’d come here for help, and been faced with a monster. Not only that, but Amelia stated it was all their fault and the Church had damned us all. With a beast skull that all but assuredly belonged to Laurence, it seemed that this hadn’t been the first vicar to turn into a monster.

I had just wanted to go home and have a chance at being happy. Was that too much to ask!? Lightning struck again, bathing the church in multicolored light through the stained glass. Was it too much to have one good thing happen in my life? To be given even a moment’s reprieve from the abuse, physical

and mental, piled on by the world, the people, and the universe itself? I'd said my goodbyes! I'd accepted that Iosefka's rescue was a lost cause! I was ready to go home and face that living nightmare! Why was I doomed to remain here and fix other people's problems when I couldn't even fix my own!?

I stalked out of the Grand Cathedral, seething to the point that I was practically blowing smoke from my nostrils. I inhaled, and smelled smoke. No, not my own metaphorical rage-dragon smoke. Gunsmoke. Gunpowder, cleaning oil, the sweaty musk of athletic endeavor. Someone was fighting. A distant gunshot burned into my hearing. Well, at least I'd have acceptable targets...

On a tiered set of steppes leading down from the Grand Cathedral (I wasn't sure what cardinal direction it was, but I hung a left upon leaving the Cathedral) lurked two hunters, cackling like imbeciles and shooting at reinforced doors. The more disturbing part was that the people inside the buildings were likewise laughing maniacally: I couldn't say if it was fear-induced hysteria or if they'd simply gone insane. Either way, I had prey.

The first had a shortspear in one hand and an oversized, overwrought beast of a weapon in his left hand that could perhaps be called a firearm. It looked more like a model Civil War cannon, complete with the wheel on it. The other toted a wooden shield (proof that he was crazy. As I'd shown, shields are useless) and a weapon I'd seen the birdbath little ones offering since my defeat of the Darkbeast. It was some sort of frail-looking scepter with an oversized metal head. He flicked the weapon and, in a high-pitched shower of sparks, it began lashing with blue-white lightning like a lethal Van de Graaff generator.

"Show some hell to me," I snarled.

The spearman quickly proved to be the real threat. Well, not him per se. His thrusts were telegraphed and his swipes were so weak I could bat them aside. But that fucking gun, that weird-ass scattershot mini cannon, bowled me over like a truck. Lightning-mace kept me on the back foot, and I understood why he used the shield: he used it to block the scattered bullets, so he could keep on the offensive. These two fought as a clever, but inexperienced, team.

Even with the gap in skill, two hunters were running me ragged. I quickly accumulated wounds that I couldn't easily compensate with returned damage, and I didn't have the time to inject myself and heal. I was getting worn down, beaten from all sides. And as I crashed into the shield and was shoved back, I had a vision of myself trying to shoulder past Sophia. She shoved me back into Julia, who stumbled for a moment before stepping aside and letting me fall. I had a bruise on the back of my head that kept me from sleeping right for weeks. The cruel laughter, not a single person intervening, too scared or having too much fun to help me...

I caught the lightning mace in my hand, fingers deforming the volleyball-sized metal head. Lightning lashed at me, and was pushed back with my own lightning. Violet electricity arced off me as my eyes glowed glorious red behind my goggles. My jaw pushed out, my hair came loose, my fur rose from the static in the air. I threw back my head and howled, unleashing a spreading dome of electrical devastation that blackened bone and reduced flesh to ash.

Spent, I dropped to my knees in a crater of glass and soot. I had no more strength to move. Something would come and find me, hurt me. I couldn't take being hurt anymore. I fumbled in my pockets and retrieved another Bold Mark. I needed to hide away, like I always did. I needed to heal. I was in so much pain, in my heart.

Appearing in the Dream, I curled up and cried as the little ones stared, lost as to what they could do to help.