

Oedon Chapel. I didn't know what Oedon was, but it didn't seem like a province. People here swore on gods, so perhaps it was one of Yharnam's gods? I really needed someone to give me a primer on the local beliefs and superstitions.

In order to reach the chapel I couldn't take a straight shot because that would be far too easy. No, instead I had to go up and down through rotting, hollowed-out buildings and face numerous maddened beast-men, more rats and crows, trolls... It wasn't a fun trip.

When I finally reached the graveyard area, marked on the map as the Tomb of Oedon (was Oedon interred here, or was this a gravesite for his faithful?), I found a solitary man. Garbed in black with a white stole over his massive duster coat, he was driving his axe into the chest cavity of a long-dead beast as if by rote. I'd been working to be more stealthy in this place, but he either heard or smelled me.

"Beasts," he whispered in a soft voice, accented differently than most native Yharnamites, "all over the shop." He turned, eyes bandaged over like the Wheelchair Man's had been, though with cleaner wrappings. "You'll be one, too... Sooner or later." He exhaled, steam rising from his mouth. It wasn't that terribly cold out, so he must have been monstrously hot on the inside.

I had the feeling this was inevitable, but still held off on overtly hostile actions. "I was asked by a little girl—" And damn me for not thinking to ask her name, "—to find her family. She said her father was out on the Hunt and her mother, with a big red brooch, had gone to look for him."

That was the wrong thing to say. "You'll not have her!" he snarled, voice thick with saliva, lunging at me. He fought... To say he fought like a maniac would have been unfair: while he was definitely insane, he didn't simply throw himself at me as that would imply. He fought like a force of nature, always on the offensive, always maneuvering for a better angle. When his axe wasn't whistling through the air, his blunderbuss barked instead.

I'd been hardened by days of battle. I'd had my body enhanced through Doll's weird magic. I'd faced down abominations several times my size.

None of it was enough. I was facing a true hunter, not the simple armed townsfolk. He was faster than me, stronger, far more experienced. That was my first time dying to Gascoigne. As he wrenched his axe from my neck, he spat his words derisively. "Too proud to show your true face, eh?" His derision then washed between horror and rage as my body faded away. "You'll be harder to put down."

This was my first encounter with someone else who had once Dreamt. As I would discover, those who had been touched by the Dream kept some measure of their memories even when time reset. Well, as Gehrman and Doll would correct me, time wasn't exactly resetting. My deaths in the Dream became what *could* be, and I was then set back to do it right this time.

Father Gascoigne, once a priest or other holy man from a land unknown to the common Yharnamite, could remember that he had killed an enemy who would not remain dead. And, as a hunter, he did what he did best.

The next time I fought him was outside of Gilbert's home, the hunter having tracked me down. We slammed against fences and into Gilbert's window, much to his distress. I could hear my friend coughing, possibly dying from panic, as I screamed out in pain. I'd like to say I gave as good as I got, but in the end I died and Gascoigne lived.

The next several days were some of the worst in my short life. I knew what would come every time I lay my head down: whether it took hours or minutes, the relentless maddened hunter would find me and we would battle. The pain and suffering were intense, but the true agony was the certainty: in my normal waking life, I understood the certainty that Emma would hurt me. In my dreams, I knew that Gascoigne would kill me.

I struggled, argued, spat curses at him. It was so much noise to his ears. I'm sure, to his broken mind, I was just another fur-covered wretch. He didn't laugh, didn't cajole. Didn't even make animalistic sounds. Gascoigne was silent and efficient. Night after night he pursued his prey, slaughtering his way through other beasts in order to seek me out. Our cat-and-mouse chase led all across outer Yharnam, to the steps of Iosefka's clinic. It was there, bleeding out on the stairs before her door, and hearing Iosefka's worried voice call out, that something in me settled, stone resting within my sacrum.

This would never end until I ended it.

I returned to Odeon's tomb, knowing the hunter would be following me. At this point I was all but certain that he was the girl's father, and so I played my gambit: I wound the music box and set it on a stone lantern. The slow, clicking melancholy disturbed the night air. When the hunter finally arrived, he was not the composed pursuer he normally was. His chest was heaving, face sweating. He gripped his weapons so hard they shook. "Where did you get that?" he snarled, spittle flying. "WHERE DID YOU GET THAT!?"

"Your daughter gave it to me," I shot back in an even voice, rolling clear of his leaping strike. "Because your wife left without it. What did you do to your wife?"

He stumbled. "V-Vi? No, I didn't— I would never—" The hunter whirled on me. "Goddamn beasts! You took her from me!"

It was the closest he'd gotten to human, but he'd clearly been insane long before he met me, if a music box was the only thing that kept him from killing or abandoning his family. "I'm no beast. What happened to your wife? What did *you* do?"

"Liar!" A sweep of the axe. "Deceiver!" I ducked behind a gravestone to avoid the scattershot from his gun. "You took her from me! I heard her scream!"

Keeping low, I crawled around the gravestones and plucked up the music box, winding it again. He screamed as it played. He leapt for me again, shattering the lantern with a single vicious strike from his axe.

"Murderer! You beasts are all the same!" I could hear his tears.

"Your daughter still needs you! Will you just abandon her? Forget her like you always do!? Bury yourself in your hunt until nothing else matters!?" I was screaming now, tears running down my own face. Was I still talking to this hunter? Was I even in Yharnam? I wound the music box one more time, letting the tune creak out. He hunched in on himself, shouting, sobbing. Had I done it? Would at least one family not be utterly shattered?

The change had been brewing, likely since he'd begun to forget his family. Nothing could have stopped it. But many nights I fear that I may have pushed it along. That my attempts to break through to his humanity had instead scraped on his guilt and sent him fleeing into his animal side.

The hunter's sobs became a bestial roar as his clothing burst, a colossal shaggy beast at least eight feet tall standing where before had been a broken man. He charged at me, crushed gravestones without effort. A claw caught me in the chest and sent me flying. I tried my best to dodge out of the way, firing in retaliation, working to get some distance. Any distance was negligible as the newborn beast closed it in a single bound. Claws shredded my coat, ripped through my clothing, shattered my ribs.

Coughing blood, I injected myself with the last of Iosefka's special vials and stumbled away. His claws caught my coat and lifted me up, then he threw me through a tree. Somewhere in my flight I lost hold on my saw cleaver. I looked up through concussed eyes at the flailing, blood-maddened beast. I couldn't die like this, couldn't leave this monster alive. It would kill others. Gilbert, Iosefka, the hunter's own daughter.

Something glinted on the ground. I dived forward, praying my unfocused eyes could perceive depth enough that I wasn't doomed to fail. My fingers closed on the hunter's own axe. I somersaulted to my feet and whirled around, driving the weapon deep into the beast's neck. I shot it just as Gehrman had told me, arresting its momentum when it tried to claw me, and chopped again. Blood spewed from its neck, healing my wounds. It was slowing now. I struck again, nearly severing its head, and the monster fell back.

Even semi-decapitated as it was, the creature still wasn't finished. Claws rose up slowly, reaching threateningly for me. Upon the miserable monstrosity, my mind superimposed the face of my father, face twisted in hate and desperation.

I screamed in terror and rage, and brought the axe down onto its chest. It kept fighting, trying to stand, to claw me, to do anything. I brought the axe down again, slicing through its ribs.

Again, into its organs.

Again, splitting its chest wide.

At some point I'd resumed crying, robotically lifting up the axe only to plunge it back into the beast's chest cavity.

I don't know how long I stood there, mutilating that dead thing, until Eileen the Crow found me.

(BREAK)

"Stop that, now," a wizened woman's voice gently chided. "I understand you're scared, but this isn't you. You're no beast. Not yet, though if you let yourself keep as you are..."

At first I thought I was seeing Death, in the dim light of Oedon's Tomb. White face, heavy hood, ragged cloak. As my vision cleared and I wiped my tears, I saw instead a feather-caped woman more reminiscent of a plague doctor. A jagged knife rested loosely in one of her hands.

“Settle down, child, and dry your tears,” she said, stepping smoothly to lean against the staircase that led up to the chapel proper. “It won’t do to lose yourself on this, of all nights.”

“I—” My words were forcibly cut off. I lurched to the side, tugging down my face covering to vomit profusely and noisily on the stone. Thin but strong hands took me beneath the arms to hold me up.

“Been quite some time since I met a hunter this new,” the woman chuckled. Her accent was also strange, emphasizing the ‘u’ in hunter. “What a mess you’ve been caught up in. What got into your head to start the hunt tonight?”

I reached back to pat her shoulder in what I hoped was a universal translation for ‘I’m good.’ I coughed a few more times, spat some bile from my mouth, wiped my face with the tail of my coat. “I... I didn’t have much of a choice. I was brought here.”

“An outsider, eh? So unlucky. And you were brought here?” At my confirmation, the bird mask tilted. “Do you Dream, then?”

My eyes widened. “Y-you know about that?”

“Aye.” She made her way back to the stairs and took a seat on the steps, patting the stone beside her. “I’ll wager the majority of hunters who can still string together a sentence Dreamt at some point. Tell the little doll I said hello.”

I sat beside her, body going almost limp. “Sorry, but who are you?”

“So new I’ll bet you don’t even know the various hunter traditions. Then again, had you known, perhaps you’d not have been so eager to speak with me.” She folded an arm across her chest and bowed slightly. “Eileen the Crow, hunter of hunters. Those poor souls who go mad from the hunt, it is my duty to put them down.” Eileen gestured to the corpse I’d been destroying, as it dissolved into mist.

“Poor Gascoigne; once, hunters used to still call him Father. He was a holy man from another country, so he said, who fell in love with a lass from fair Yharnam. A good man once. I think this was a long time coming. He had more will than most, but he was falling apart.”

“That reminds me too much of my father,” I muttered, then suddenly began crying again. Some girls cry beautifully. In the Lord of the Rings movies, Arwen was only more beautiful when she cried. My eyes get puffy, my cheeks redden, I sweat. And right now I was bawling, howling my sobs. It was too much. I was just a child: I shouldn’t even have to deal with what I faced in the real world, much less all of this.

Eileen shifted, not really sure what to do. “You need to steel yourself, girl. You can’t go falling apart, not tonight. There are no humans left, they’re all flesh-hungry beasts now. And I won’t be around to help you come back from whatever state in which you find yourself.”

That actually helped me come back around. Hiccuping softly, I lifted my goggles and wiped my eyes. “Th-that’s not true. I know at least two people who’re still human, still good people. There’s still hope,” I protested. There had to be. If there wasn’t hope, what did I have left?

“Then the night hasn’t claimed quite everyone yet. This land is still doomed, but I suppose you can try to save a few.” Her casual statement rankled.

“Nobody deserves this hell,” I protested.

“Nothing about deserving,” Eileen countered. “Bad happens to good all too often: no scales are being balanced. I doubt any efforts toward rescue will bear fruit, but I have been wrong before. If you think you can be a grand savior that’s your prerogative.” She stood and shook off her feather cape before fishing in a pouch on her belt. “A welcome for the new hunter.” She offered me four small, folded sheets of parchment. “Now best be on your way: there’s no shortage of beasts to deal with. Try to leave the hunting of hunters to me. No easier way for an inexperienced hunter to become blood-drunk than in dealing with the mad.”

Eileen strode off into the darkness, leaving me with my thoughts. After sitting for several minutes, I remembered that I’d promised to find the little girl’s mother. From everything the hunter – Gascoigne – had said and screamed, I knew that I wouldn’t like what I found. And sure enough, on a roof overlooking the graveyard, I found the corpse of a lovely blonde woman. On her chest was a massive red brooch the color of fresh blood. I delicately unpinned it: if I was going to tell the girl the truth (and I was still undecided), I’d need some proof.

Inscribed into the back, like you might find carved into a tree, were two names within a heart.

*Gascoigne + Viola*