

A new area to properly explore meant that I was once again flying blind. I opted to return to the Dream and check in on Gehrman and Doll, set the old man to work on a new map for Cathedral Ward. "It's almost refreshing to have so much tedium," he commented. "While I'm busy here, feel free to investigate the blood gem tool, or see what your badges can get you." He smirked at me. "My old eyes are still sharp: I noticed that saw badge on your lapel."

In truth I'd forgotten about it. Just another thing picked up through the aqueducts, and when I'd grabbed it I remembered about the sword badge and had wondered if it was similar. Then came Gascoigne and I had plenty of other problems. "You said hunters could requisition equipment. How would I do that here?"

He waved me off. "Go bother the weird things in the birdbath. They have all sorts of stuff they pick up from Yharnam."

Once I was at the birdbath, I had Doll as an amused audience as I did my best to communicate with the little ones. "Gehrman? Why are they trying to offer me a big friggin' rock?" I called.

"Kirkhammer," he hollered back. "Good for squishing things."

Doll showed me how the weapon worked, how the narrow thrusting sword slotted and locked into place with the massive stone head, and it made me a bit uncomfortable how easily she handled the enormous slab of rock. Carvings in the side were worn away with age but the occasional large numbers that hadn't entirely faded made me think this thing was covered in scripture. I gave the kirkhammer a few experimental swings but didn't like the sheer weight. Far too much for a slip of a girl like me: every motion made it feel like I was going to go flying in the style of Looney Tunes. The little lantern they offered next was much better. It didn't provide much light with its tiny candle, but according to Doll the candle would never run out. I could attach it to my belt and have at least a bit more illumination than normal.

On presenting the saw badge, the little ones again held up the weapons they'd offered me at the start of this journey, plus something extra. It reminded me of my existing weapon, only instead of a glaive on one side the weapon narrowed into a sharpened point and had saw teeth on both sides. I tilted my head at Doll. "So what's this thing, and why's it here?"

"Gehrman called it the saw spear. It is a modification, some would say an improvement, to the saw cleaver with which you are familiar." Doll ran her hand along the flat side of the weapon. "As you might already suspect, beast hunting has a metaphorical component. Blood gems are concepts made physical, and so the physical can be made a concept: the serrated weapon is anathema to the beast. While the teeth may catch on a hunter's clothes, they will find their mark and rend open a beast. The spear may be good for travel to the Forbidden Woods. There are creatures there who are more vulnerable to the symbolic righteousness of a thrusting blade, such as that spear tip."

I got the feeling she knew a lot more than she was letting on. However, she'd been honest with me thus far and had already admitted to occasionally being limited in what she was able to say. Maybe this was another case of me not being ready to understand something quite yet. "Oh. While I have you here..." I fumbled in my pocket for the sheets of paper that Eileen gave me. "What're these things?" The symbol drawn on the paper looked like a minimalist trident with the outer tines pointing inward, or maybe something like a medieval mancatcher.

Doll gave a soft smile. “That is quite a gift.” She turned the paper upside-down, so the tines pointed downward. “These are what is known as the Bold Hunter’s Mark.” Seeing that I had no comprehension, she sat down on the garden wall and placed the papers in her lap. “It will not work here but when next you are in Yharnam, close your eyes and envision yourself returning home. This symbol should appear in your mind. If you concentrate on it, you will find yourself brought back to the Dream. This is a useful ability but also a costly one: you are returned as you were when last you were within the Dream. All blood echoes will slide off your essence.”

“So it’s for if I get stuck somewhere? Trapped?”

“In essence, yes. Hunters themselves have been hunted before, particularly by the knights of Cainhurst during the war. Most hunters who found themselves captive had no recourse, but one connected to the Dream could escape.” And here she mentioned something else for which I had no context. Cainhurst? War? “This, on the other hand, is a Bold Mark. Written in blood-gall ink and placed into physical form, this paper acts as an anchor and lets you bring your blood echoes with you, at the cost of destroying the Mark.”

I perked up. “So if I’m in a bad situation, this is an emergency exit that lets me keep my blood echoes? I’ll have to thank Eileen next time I see her. Oh!” I smiled at Doll. “She said to tell you she says hello.”

Doll’s smile widened a fraction more. “Eileen is a sweet woman,” she said, “and strong-willed. Even after she was freed from the Dream she continues to work to bring peace to blood-maddened hunters. She has found her calling, and I am proud to have helped her to discover it.”

On recommendation from both Doll and Gehrman I decided to give the new saw spear a try, and went to the blood gem tool to enhance it. Gehrman looked over my shoulder to talk me through how to guide blood echoes through the various reservoirs and drip them down into physical form, before slotting blood gems that disappeared into the weapon. When I was done, the saw subtly pulsed with power in time with my heartbeat before it settled down. I expended the last of the echoes enhancing myself, letting Doll weave the supernatural energy into my body to make me stronger and faster.

(BREAK)

I returned to Oedon Chapel and said hello to Siobhan and Desmond. The girl was keeping her odd new friend entertained by telling him stories of her daily life: to a blind man who lives in a chapel, it must have been enthralling. After brief greetings I headed out into Cathedral Ward proper. The door to my left – I think it was to the north but couldn’t be quite sure with the way buildings wended – opened into another graveyard and a small well. These graves looked almost impromptu, as if they’d had too many bodies to bury and decided to dig graves here. That couldn’t be good for the water table, could it?

With each enhancement from Doll, my senses seemed to be sharpening as well. I could head soft leather boots on the stone path. A large, unnatural man came up from the downward-sloping road. Upon seeing all of him, he had to be at least seven feet tall. His clothes, oddly enough, were at least vaguely fitted to his size. Not tailored but definitely not the kind of shortening of the sleeves that happened with the bestial hunters. He wore a white duster coat over an all-black ensemble, and a broad white hat over a scarf-covered head. The strange man’s overly long face was on display, almost as white as the little ones, and a different kind of long than Desmond’s. Instead of having too much chin, he had...just too much face. It reminded me of the Easter Island heads in a way, the odd length of the

skull. Black eyes with barely-visible irises of some yellow-hazel color completed the unsettling and inhuman look.

I tightened my grip on the saw, knowing what was likely to happen. Sure enough, he brandished his sharp-tipped cane threateningly and his jaw distended further, down to his sternum. A rasping noise came from his throat like someone with no vocal cords trying to shout. With a flick I opened the saw spear and darted in. Since he was wielding the cane in his right hand, I ducked past him on the left and stuck to his left hip as best I could, whittling him down with slashes. He battered and stabbed me, but I bled him and healed my wounds with his claret. When he dropped I made a note to ask Doll and Gehrman about this white-coated weirdo.

Opting to see what lay in the direction from which the waxy-faced cane man had come, I headed down and soon felt the ground shaking. I could hear the rattle of chains, the soft clanking of something like a cowbell. Was...was there some sort of gigantic bull here?

I rounded the corner to see an honest-to-God giant. No, no bull, but it might've been better. This thing was titanic. The bridge monster had been a good ten feet all hunched, probably twelve to fifteen at full height. This abomination was fifteen feet while stooped! I wouldn't be surprised if it was a full two stories when it straightened up. It looked like an emaciated corpse, wrapped in rags as if in some attempt to maintain its modesty. Its legs were loosely chained together, though with more than enough room to walk so I saw no point in the chains. Its hands were chained to a gigantic axe, most of it rusted and bloodied though where the haft transformed into the head's central column it was instead elegantly-textured silver with something of a Norse theme, if I had to guess. Over the creature had been placed a gigantic sheet, perhaps the old white cloth of a Victorian-era tent, secured around the neck with rope to form a sort of makeshift cloak. And seated atop its shriveled head, casting its seemingly eyeless face in shadow, was a hat sized perfectly for its head. And even though the head was too small for its deformed, lanky body, it was most certainly still massive.

The thing trudged toward me, readying its axe. "Fuck me," I groaned, and lunged.

The fight was surprisingly not terribly difficult, though that was entirely because I avoided getting hit. I was all but certain that a single stroke from that axe would cleave me apart, and a punch or kick from a monster that could heft a chunk of metal like that would do no good for my bones. I darted between its legs back and forth, slicing at its ankles and sawing the backs of its knees. When it toppled forward, I leapt onto its back and charged up along its spine before my empowered legs propelled me into the air to drop back down, impaling it through the back of the neck.

Then I heard more chains, felt more shaking, and opted to book it.

(BREAK)

Cathedral Ward was a maze. It made sense: Yharnam was a huge city, so its center was probably built up more organically in a frenzy to make use of the available space. In this case, that meant spiraling out in great tentacular city streets along the contours of the minor hills that rolled beneath my feet. Going through this place, the map only barely helping, I fought my way through dozens more bestial huntsmen and a few full wolves. Weirdly enough, in a barrel that I just happened to break during a skirmish with a gunman and a huntsman with a pitchfork, I found a neatly folded outfit. It was all black, with a strange visor for the eyes and a stole like Gascoigne had worn. Was this perhaps a clergy outfit? Why would someone have stored it here?

As I took a breather and pondered, I saw the glow from the corner of my eye. The little ones rose up again, holding out their arms welcomingly while one wiggled in the outfit's direction. I quirked a brow. "If you're offering to take this for me... Thanks, I guess?" They bundled the clothes up into a ball and disappeared into the street. "Okay then."

The streets wound and flowed up and down Yharnam's hilly terrain, up stairs that became cramped kill boxes as I was flanked by beasts (Thank you Gilbert for the flamethrower), and through elegant open hallways until I found a place of relative calm. I could smell the faux-moonflower incense mixed with other smokes, and found a man meditating before what looked like a shrine. Embossed on a headstone resting atop the shrine was the appearance of a man, tall and lean, with a massive wild beard.

I looked down at the meditating blond, who was now looking up at me. He tentatively released his grip from a massive wood-and-steel wheel. Was...was that his weapon? "The way you hold yourself," he muttered almost under his breath, "you don't seem mad..." He stood. "You're a beasthunter, aren't you? That's precisely how I started out!" Well, this guy was excitable. "Ah, beg pardon. You may call me Alfred," he smiled, "protege of Master Logarius – the hunter of Vilebloods!"

I blinked behind my goggles. "Uh, I'm Taylor, hunter by necessity. You'll have to forgive me but I'm an outsider to these parts. I don't know of, ah, Logarius or Vilebloods."

Alfred glanced back at the headstone, which I presumed was a likeness of Logarius from his reaction. "Well, as Master Logarius told it, there was once a scholar who betrayed his fellows at Byrgenwerth and brought forbidden blood with him to Cainhurst Castle. It was then that the inhuman Vilebloods were born. They are fiendish creatures who threaten the purity of the Church's blood healing. In his time, Master Logarius led his executioners into Cainhurst to cleanse it of the Vilebloods. But all did not go well: despite the acts of the noble Executioners, the leader of the Vilebloods yet lives. Master Logarius became a blessed anchor, protecting us from evil." He looked down and shook his head. "Tragic, tragic times, that Master Logarius should be abandoned in the cursed domain of the Vilebloods. I must free him so he may be properly honored in martyrdom, so I seek the way to Cainhurst Castle."

"You say 'in his time' and that Logarius led the Executioners," I pointed out, "but you never mention going along with them. Plus, this sounds like it happened years ago and you can't be older than thirty."

He flushed all the way to his ears. "Ah, yes. I...suppose that to claim the title of protege may be a tad presumptuous. I was deeply inspired by Master Logarius and learned all that I could of the great man denied martyrdom. I am the last of the Executioners, and the first in more than two decades. But regardless, what say you? We may hunt different prey but we focus on keeping the people safe. Why not cooperate, pool our knowledge?"

Well, he was apparently a religious fanatic calling himself the apprentice of a man he'd never met. But I knew little and any information I could get would be useful. I just hoped that it would be accurate. "Sure. Not sure how much I could tell you on my end, but I'll try."

"Very good indeed! Here, take this, to celebrate our acquaintance." He passed me oddly shimmering paper. "Fire paper is little use against vilebloods but of great help against beasts. I picked it up in my travels but have had no cause to use it."

Fire paper? I'd have to ask Doll or Gehrman how to use it. "Thanks. So I've heard of Byrgenwerth a few times now. What is it?"

He shook his head. "A wicked place, I'd say. A noble cause misused. Byrgenwerth was once a place of learning, a gathering point for scholars and occultists. And the tomb of the gods, carved out beneath Yharnam – which should be familiar to all hunters – was originally accessed from there. Well, a group of prospectors discovered a holy medium down in those catacombs, and this led to the founding of the Healing Church and the establishment of blood healing. So in a sense, everything sacred in Yharnam can be traced back to Byrgenwerth."

This was a lot to try and comprehend. "So why is Byrgenwerth wicked, if all the good stuff came from there?"

"Well," he shrugged, "I am but a layman – a simple hunter, concerned with facing evil rather than unraveling the mysteries of the world. I don't know the full story but Byrgenwerth rejected the miracle of blood healing. As such, the Church has declared it forbidden ground and the wood around it is infested with monsters. It's unclear how many, if any at all, of the scholars remain alive, as this schism occurred decades ago, but only they know the password that will open the gate to the Forbidden Woods. It was a final childish insult to Vicar Laurence, to seal the entrance from their side as if to say that they were the ones who forbade us."

"So, Cainhurst," I prompted, hoping to get a bit more information than just 'they're evil'. "Why are you searching for the way? It's a castle; how hard could it be to find?"

"Some manner of glamour protects it," Alfred responded. "Those who enter the ever-present fog find themselves back where they began no matter if they focus on walking straight or take no end of turns. I've heard that there is magic to pierce the fog, or to somehow guarantee safe passage, but each time I've set out from Hemwick I've found myself back where I started."

"I have a last question, about more recent history. I'm trying to get into Old Yharnam, specifically the Church of the Good Chalice. Do you know how to get there?"

Alfred laughed a sudden, surprised yelp. "My lady Taylor, truly providence has set us together on this day." He led me to a lever and, with a grunt, flipped it. A nearby statue ground off to the side, revealing a dark staircase. "In case beasts ever wandered up, we couldn't have them invading fair Yharnam. So we kept a stone over the main passage. I suppose on the night of the Hunt it doesn't matter much."

I nodded and began to descend. "Take care, Alfred. If I find anything about the Vilebloods or Cainhurst, I'll let you know."