

It took some time to discuss the idea with Iosefka that we'd already had this conversation, that I remembered her bidding me goodbye. Thankfully, with it established that I was somehow coming and going via my bed and sleeping in what was to her the blink of an eye, it wasn't too difficult for her to imagine that I somehow came back in time. It was passing strange, to use her term, but as someone from a world where capes frequently broke the rules of physics I didn't find it impossible.

"Iosefka? How do hunters fight beasts? I've managed to get my hand on a gun and some kind of saw thing."

She hummed and I could tell she must be tapping her chin. "I've not seen many hunters: where a hunter prowls, beasts lurk within the hearts of men. None of us want to imagine that the scourge has managed to take root within us, so we tend to avoid hunters when we can. I know that they are fast and agile. Rarely have I seen a hunter use a firearm, despite the fact that nearly all carry one. They prefer to use melee weapons. Perhaps beasts are resistant to bullets?" Now that was a scary thought.

"Alright," I said as I stood back up from where I'd been crouched. "Wish me luck."

"Blessings and luck be upon you," she chirped from behind the door, and I knew that it was more than a mere platitude: Iosefka was a good person, and she was genuinely praying for me. I'd need it.

My second encounter with the wolf started rather like the first, with me using the gurneys as rams to get it off-balance. When I managed to get it tangled in the workings of one after an attempted bear-hug, I ducked around the thing and began to hack into it. I held the awkward weapon in both hands, the long and narrow handle wrapped in dirty bandages. The saw blade hung in front, resting on a hinge somewhat like a folded straight razor – and razor was right, because the inner side of the weapon was sharp as well, a single cutting surface more like a razor or cleaver rather than the jagged saw of the outside. I brought the weapon down with a cry, wicked barbs tearing through the wolf's flesh. The creature still didn't move right, and that applied to the cuts. Its body seemed like a bag of gel squishing around a central axis, and the excess flesh moved back and forth almost like nothing inside the fur wrapping was attached.

Blood poured from the gash I rent in the creature and it ripped a claw free from the gurney's folding mechanisms to catch me across the chest. I'd been right that the new outfit was more protective – the coat was barely scratched, but the vest and shirt beneath had been shorn through. I could feel the air on my ribs, and I was relatively sure a lung had been punctured. I screamed as best I could and cut again, aiming for the shoulder. I needed to inject myself and heal, but if this thing could press its advantage I'd just end up dead. And since I counted four vials in my pockets, things I used didn't come back when I went back through time.

I swung in a heavy overhead arc, using myself as a fulcrum to bring the weapon down with as much force as possible and embed into the mass of muscle that was this monster's shoulder. Then I applied what little weight I had to wrench downward and drag the saw through its flesh and tendons. As its blood sloughed onto me, I felt a sensation similar to when I'd injected myself: not nearly as much of a high, but my wound was tingling as if it was healing. Was any exposure to blood here going to result in a healing effect? That worried me for if these monsters were to make me bleed: I didn't fancy them healing from my misery.

Revitalized at least a little, I danced away and injected myself with another of Iosefka's vials to fully close my chest wound. The wolf tore itself from the gurney and our fight began in earnest. I had

virtually no experience, it had a gimpy arm and another bleeding wound. The fight was clumsy and undignified, with lots of swearing and shouting on my part. At one point the beast threw itself atop me and just tried to smother me with its barrel chest, and I had to beat against its sternum with my own forehead. Finally it collapsed and breathed no more, and I felt as much as saw and heard something traveling from the wolf into me. A high-pitched noise, a sort of misty air current, and the sensation of...heaviness, was the best way to describe it. As though I'd suddenly gained a load or a burden, but at the same time the kind of heaviness that one would experience in the bottom of their chest, resting against their spare ribs, after a particularly hearty meal.

Satisfied that I was no longer in immediate lethal danger, I settled down and began to experiment with my weaponry. In hindsight I should have done this in the misty place with the cabin, but I'd had a lot on my mind. I had a pistol, though it wasn't quite a flintlock. Not quite semi-automatic, either. I wasn't sure exactly how the weapon was loaded, but I could feel the weight in the butt of the gun and somehow intrinsically knew that it had five shots but could carry more. I didn't want to waste bullets, so I'd have to learn how this thing worked "on the job," as the saying went. The saw, on the other hand, was more interesting in that I could experiment with it without expending ammunition. There wasn't really enough of a gap between handle and inner blade to trap someone's head in there, so it probably wasn't for some weird ritualistic executions. As I ran my hands over the handle, my fingers found a lever hidden beneath the bandages on the inside curve of the handle and a depression like a button on the outer curve. Pressing one did nothing. Pressing both did nothing either, but as I held them down and moved the weapon around the striking end began to swivel. It was on a hinge! I swung the weapon and eased up on the button at the apex of the swing, and the weapon locked into a second form: a long glaive with a wickedly curved blade like an executioner's axe. While it wouldn't tear flesh as easily as the brutal saw, and this design really didn't seem like it was meant to utilize the saw when deployed, the added reach would be a big help. I'm tall for a woman, taller still for a teenage girl, but I'm not the size of a full-grown man nor did I have anywhere near the weight or muscle. Being able to swing a long weapon like this would give a lot of leverage and help me keep out of reach from many taller opponents.

If I had to fight for my life here in Yharnam, so be it. At least here I actually could fight back, rather than back home. Still, just like I'd given (*was still giving*, said a traitorous part of my mind) Emma a chance to come to her senses, I'd give these hunters a chance. They were still people, at least I hoped: they didn't deserve to die without the opportunity for peaceful resolution.

As I prepared myself to leave the clinic, something caught my eye: a slip of paper, or parchment, whatever, somehow immaculately resting on a stool, undisturbed by the carnage that had gone on around it. I poked it with the gun, worried it might bite me or something, before picking it up to read. *Seek Paleblood to transcend the Hunt.* Now what the hell did that mean?

I stepped out through the damaged gate and saw the same axeman patrolling. He turned and saw me, and I struck what I hoped was a serious and intimidating pose, pointing the end of the cleaver at him. "I'm no beast," I declared firmly. "My name is Taylor. I'm trying to find my way home. I don't want to fight you, but I will defend myself."

"Accursed monsters," he spat in return, dragging the axe more hurriedly as he lurched toward me. "Burn them all!" He waved that torch, and I swung before he could contort to launch his axe. Now either he was incredibly fragile or this cleaver was terrifyingly well-made, because the weapon bit in and took his arm clean off just above the elbow. I stared in disbelief, and the madman mirrored my expression for just a moment. He recovered more quickly, however, and let out a scream of pain and

anger, canine gap-toothed mouth spraying spittle at me. I was still in disbelief: I'd actually maimed a person. His arm was on the ground. His stump was dripping blood. He was lunging forward, bending to the left, axe coming up and over.

I yelped and leapt back, the axe barely missing my leg. Instinct more than anything else saw me bring the weapon down on his neck, exposed by his lunge and shining in the dim evening light damp with sweat and no longer in the shadow of his hat. The cut was smooth once again, and his head rolled while his body collapsed, mouth still working for several seconds as he mouthed angry words. His unfocused eyes truly stared at nothing, body and jaw going limp. More of that current rushed into me, accompanied by the same high-pitched sound and feeling of weight.

I stared at the corpse, licking dry lips, blinking heavily. I didn't know how to feel, or what to feel about the fact that I didn't truly feel guilty. Part of me reiterated that this maniac was no longer a person anymore, that he was a dog-toothed monster who saw a little girl as something to kill. I also thought that he'd still been a human being.

Ultimately I couldn't stand there forever, beside broken horse-drawn carriages. One of them still had the horse attached to it, though the creature was long-dead and growing desiccated. More worrisome, now that I had time to look, was that the bricks just stopped. Not in a clean line, but as if they'd been broken off like balsa wood. What had clearly once been a road had been torn out of the earth and thrown away to God-knows-where, leaving a trench so deep I couldn't see the bottom. I didn't want to be anywhere near that trench, for fear that whatever had done that would come crawling up to greet me.

I headed up toward what looked like a main street, well-maintained, but saw more men patrolling. All hunched and wild-looking, probably insane. I didn't want to deal with them if I didn't have to. Cutting to the left, I knocked on doors to no response and stopped at a strange metal grating on the floor. Two slots led straight down into the dirt, and looking up I could see two rungs of a ladder. Was this some sort of Victorian fire escape? Could I get it down and climb up to the rooftops? That would be much better than risking life and limb down here.

A sharp pain bit into my back, spinning me around and interrupting my ruminations. Another man had snuck up on me, this one wielding a sickle! My back stung, the tip of the weapon having pierced through my coat and torn into my flesh – nearly severing my spine! The man looked rather like a coachman from the old period pieces, black coat and cheap top hat. He raised his sickle again and I shot him in the face. I surprised myself again, how well I'd been able to fire on reflex. But with literally inches between the barrel and his face once I'd raised it, it would have been nigh-impossible to miss.

The coachman staggered back, groaning and clutching his face, but wasn't dead or even laid out! Josefka hadn't been kidding when she said beasts might be immune to bullets, and there was no doubt that these former men were now beasts. I brought the cleaver down in a high arc, shearing through his arm and splitting through his collarbone and ribs. He collapsed dead, I had to plant my foot on his chest to wrench the blade out of him, and still more of that essence, energy, whatever transferred from him to me. I really hoped that wasn't some sort of magic infection.

I took the time to explore this little section of street now, make sure nobody else was going to ambush me. Someone did, apparently having pretended to be a corpse. His animalistic snarl gave him away before he could surprise me, and I shot him before slicing him. It was smooth, almost easy, and on some level that frightened me even though I was thankful that I could defend myself. I was still killing, and the only thing keeping me on this tenuous side of sanity was that they weren't giving me a choice.

Once no longer under immediate threat I spent some time trying to get the ladder down, but nothing worked. I even managed to peg it directly with a chunk of brick, but no dice.

Before heading down the main road, I opted to explore the other side alley. However, upon seeing a towering monstrosity easily eight feet tall, wider than some of the narrow brownstone houses, and wielding a polearm with a haft as thick as I was, I mentally declared *Fuck all of that* and chose to take my chances with the main road.

Once again, perhaps I should have kept with the first threat.

What caught my attention, even before the sheer number of madmen wandering the street, was the crucifixion in the center of the road. Two chunks of steel had been fastened together, and the corpse of a massive wolf-beast had been further lashed to the makeshift cross with metal wire. Flammable materials like hay and presumably oil barrels were clustered around the monster, and it was still alight. So these had been hunters, they'd been dealing with monsters. Then...what, they went crazy? They were infected? Something changed them from heroes to beasts themselves.

Savage barking, the click-click of claws on stone. Not the heavy thuds of the wolves, but actual dogs. Well, as close to dogs as these hunters were to men. These were horrid, mangy things, jaws hanging open unhinged like a snake or that Tasmanian tiger we'd read about in biology. They were slick with oil, blood and sweat. I had to dodge, throwing myself to the side and against yet another empty carriage to avoid one biting at my hip. I swiped at it with the cleaver but it was already out of reach, coming around for another bite.

I heard deep, moist chuckling from behind and above me. Another coachman was seated at the carriage, having faded into the darkness with his dark clothing. He aimed a rifle down at me and my world erupted into pain. However, despite having been shot in the face, I didn't die. I didn't even go down. No, that happened when the dog got me around the neck and two more came in to rip me apart.

(BREAK)

It took several tries to get through this main thoroughfare, during which I learned a few things.

First, twisted as these people were, they still had some semblance of human thought. They could plan, flank, and identify allies. They were also still proficient with firearms. I needed to keep moving and deal with them either as soon as they came or when an advantageous situation presented itself. They weren't smart enough not to gather in a row on narrow stairs, for example, and I could decapitate several at once.

Second, FUCK those dogs. They were incredibly fast and tenacious. I died to them more than to the men. Thankfully, they weren't nearly as bulletproof. My aim rapidly improved with moving targets on which to practice, and it became policy to just peg a charging dog rather than try cutting it.

Third, whatever I was absorbing didn't seem to be an infection. It also appeared to carry over through time, in a sense: whatever had killed me would be a little tougher the next time around, eyes glowing with what I could only describe as eldritch power. When I killed it, I'd take back everything I had accumulated from before my death.

I fought my way through the main road, dealt with a massive troll-like man who attempted to crush me, and through several derelict houses. I found people even further gone than the madmen, hairy half-wolves wielding farm equipment. I died to them a few times and learned that those ugly little things with the lanterns served as anchors: if I “lit” one by touching it, I’d come back there rather than at Iosefka’s clinic. This was all very elaborate and none of it felt anything like a parahuman power. It felt like straight-up magic.

I found another lantern after ascending a ladder, beginning to realize just how built-up Yharnam was. In science fiction stories, the narrator would often talk about cities built on top of themselves, roads built over the old buildings and new structures built on top, stretching toward the sky. Yharnam was genuinely this. As I took stock of the sheer size and absurdity of this city, I noticed that there was actually light coming out from a window near me. I approached, ready to defend myself but hopeful that there was someone else out here, someone sane. With my pistol ready, I knocked on the window.

A wheezing voice responded. “Well now, a passerby who’s actually polite?” He was interrupted from his thoughts by a wracking cough. “Will wonders never cease.”

I smiled, shoulders sagging in relief. “You’re the first person I’ve met who hasn’t tried to kill me. Well, other than Iosefka.”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “Ah, Iosefka, what a dear. Ah, but—” Another horrible cough. “But where are my manners? My name is Gilbert. An outsider much like yourself, judging by your accent. You must’ve had a fine time of it: Yharnam has a special way of treating guests.”

Someone who understood! At least a little bit. I couldn’t help the giddy, manic laugh that bubbled from my throat. “Y-yeah, it does. I’m Taylor. You know Iosefka?”

“A sweet woman who tried her best for me. I don’t think I could stand if I wanted to, so forgive my manners for not coming to the window. I came to Yharnam looking for a cure in their miracle blood. It bought me time, but my end is still coming. But I’m willing to help, if I can.” Another round of coughing. “This town is cursed. Whatever your reasons for coming here, you should make a swift exit. Whatever that can be gained from this place can only do more harm than good.”

I leaned against the barred window and talked with Gilbert, discussing our homes and how I came to be here. He was intrigued by my explanation of waking up here every night, wishing blessings of his gods upon me that I might escape this nightmare. Over time, however, it became difficult for him to keep talking with his cough. “I suppose I should go,” I said, reluctantly. “Is there anything I can bring you?”

I saw his silhouette shake its head in the distance, lit against the curtain by his lamp. “I stocked up with supplies once I realized I wouldn’t have the strength to leave Yharnam. They’ll last me weeks. I suppose, if you come by any good books you’ve no longer a need for, I could take them off your hands.”

As I bid him goodbye, Gilbert spoke up one more time, fighting through his abused lungs. “L-listen! If your concern is somehow supernatural, as it seems to be, the best place to seek answers is in the Healing Church. They have many great scholars there, mysticists and archaeologists and others. Normally Cathedral Ward is off-limits, us outsiders and commoners kept here in the west, but tonight is the Hunt. Perhaps you can make it across the valley and find what you seek.”