

The door creaked open and Gehrman awkwardly rolled inside. “Is Taylor doing better?” he asked Doll, looking directly at her. The porcelain woman nodded with a soft smile and Gehrman gave me his own smile, a bit self-effacing. “I’ve never been good with crying women, so I deferred to someone with better understanding. Now,” he rolled a little closer, “you need to come to terms with what happened, but I doubt you want to be trapped here as you mentally convalesce – let alone what this pain might do to you when you waken.

“As such, I propose that you take a quick sojourn to a Chalice Dungeon. A hunter’s greatest risk is losing himself – or herself – and hunting while emotionally compromised is one of the quickest ways to do just that. At best, you risk making bad decisions and hurting people. At worst, you could become a blood-drunken fiend with no anchors to help you claw your way back.” Even the old veteran Gehrman had a tinge of respect in his voice there: coming back from madness, as I’d done previously, must have been an exceedingly rare feat. “Thus, the Chalice serves its second purpose. The primary is to loot the past, take from memories and make the objects real – or at least, real enough for our purposes. Feel free to collect any loot you find in there: you can indeed bring it back with you. But for you, the primary goal is to simply burn off your anger and pain. Kill monsters and the corrupted until you no longer feel the clenching pain behind your sternum.”

Doll gently stood me up, then walked over to stand beside Gehrman so I could look at them both simultaneously. He didn’t cringe away this time. “I agree with Gehrman. You have suffered significant loss and need more than my comfort to come to terms with it. It is somewhat unpleasant to admit that I cannot heal you entirely by myself, but I acknowledge my shortcomings. Likewise, I know little of the methodology by which hunters entreat the Chalice. Gehrman can teach you the ritual.” She gently ushered us out of the side room, which once again disappeared.

“Why does it do that?” I asked. “Why not just keep the extra room?”

“This Dream was modeled after a real place,” Doll responded. “While some areas can be changed to suit our needs, the greater the change, the more strain placed upon its anchor. A temporary addition is far less taxing than a permanent one.”

Gehrman nodded solemnly and I fell into step beside him as he rolled downhill.

“So killing things is therapy for hunters?” I asked with a humorless chuckle.

“I said it from the beginning, lass,” Gehrman replied with an actual little smirk, “killing beasts is good for you. Hunters face such mighty horrors, things we can barely comprehend: reasserting ourselves by slaying the chaff is good to keep from getting unmoored.” We came to rest beside a collection of gravestones, each one with a strange little dais before it. “Pass me the Chalice, Taylor. I’ll get the ritual ingredients together: you go see the doll and use your echoes. Leave a few, though – they’re part of the toll. Once the rite is started, you can’t go back and prepare, so make sure you’re well-equipped.”

I visited Doll nearby and further enhanced myself, then returned to Gehrman. He had two dishes of dark-red blood, rippling from even my light steps.

“Ritual blood,” he gestured at the dishes. “Incoagulable, constant, only expended in events such as this to serve as a medium. The blood holds memories, like seeks like.” His tone was severe, mysterious, almost reverent. “When all is melted in blood, all is reborn.” Gehrman pointed at the Chalice, which

seemed firmly mounted on the stone dais. “Pour the blood into the chalice, then offer of yourself. It is the payment to travel the toll road into history.”

I took up the dishes and followed Gehrman’s example, treating the blood with deferential reverence. I delicately poured it into the chalice, then rested my hand over it. The same way that I extended blood echoes to fortify my weapons, I felt something flow from me and into the Chalice.

“Let the chalice reveal the tomb of the gods,” Gehrman intoned, “let blood be the hunter’s nourishment.”

I felt myself falling, flowing into the chalice, losing all sense of self.

“...And let ye partake in communion...”

(BREAK)

I awoke on a stone floor. Briefly I panicked, worried that I’d ended up back in that jail, but the colors were all wrong. Everything was pale blue and gray, torches in the wall burning with blue light. The entire place was...not necessarily better cared-for, but it had been built with so much initial care that it still looked better. Despite the dust and obvious wear, the walls were beautiful. So painstakingly crafted, it reminded me of photos I’d seen of ancient Greek structures. Each pillar was a work of art in itself, the walls covered in designs I couldn’t begin to place: massive bas-reliefs and recessed panels that reminded me of Catholic saints. From the ceiling descended roots, having pushed through the roof.

This was Pthumeria, I was sure of it. It really was an underground society. I ran my fingers along the beautiful wall as I advanced. It was ancient, long since abandoned, but still held such beauty that I found a lump forming in my throat. At the end of the hall was some sort of door, a solid slab of bronze. Like the walls, the door was inlaid with carvings. A central figure, tall and long, stood proud. In recesses on either side were strange symbols. One looked like liquid, perhaps being poured into a dish, while the other was some sort of crystal. Blood and blood gems, maybe? I couldn’t say. The figure reminded me of Doll, or Arianna: so long and elegant that it began to look inhuman in its beauty.

I pushed on the door, to no avail. It didn’t seem to have any hinges, nor a handle to pull. I felt along its perimeter to find some sort of purchase, and discovered what seemed to be hand-slots at the bottom. Shit, I had to lift this thing? It was solid bronze! I knew I’d been getting stronger, but still...

Well, I had no alternative. There wasn’t even a lantern to take me back. I slipped my fingers under the door, squatted, and began to lift. Once it ground out of its seating, I found it shockingly easy to lift the mass. I all but tossed the door up into the frame, where it locked into place. I had to pause after that (after stepping out of the doorframe, just in case) and feel my arms. Yes, I’d been getting harder, more defined. But I just lifted what had to be more than a ton of metal without too much effort.

The new chamber I’d entered into was massive, a square supported by arches and columns. Collected in the corners were rotting wood barrels and crates, rusting equipment. At the center, within a circle of tiles, was a lantern. The Little Ones moaned and waved enthusiastically to me, and I couldn’t keep from smiling. They were always so happy to see me. Once you got past their disturbing looks and realized that they were basically children, or like puppies in the form of deformed little mummies, they became adorable.

“Are you doing alright?” I asked as I lit the lantern. One gave a thumbs-up as I’d showed it. “That’s good.”

I crossed the room to another door, shoving it up and open. The beautiful if decrepit chamber gave way to a cavern of dirt and roots without any transition. At this point I was getting used to weird shit in Yharnam, and Gehrman did call this place a memory. Likely it had the same issue. Gigantic scabrous rats and desiccated mummy-men confronted me and I fell easily into the behavior of a hunter. The creatures attacked, I juked around and cut them down.

This became my methodology for the entire Dungeon. I wandered, killed monsters, passed petrified bookshelves and weird leafless underground trees, flipped switches and climbed ladders and killed more monsters.

My strangest encounter was with a glowing man who seemed to chime. Dressed in robes, taller than me and lanky, he clasped his hands together as if in prayer. I had prepared to defend myself, but he walked on past me with nary a glance. He didn’t look back; maybe he hadn’t even noticed me. He just continued on his way and left me confused.

My journey reached its culmination in a massive room, two flights of stairs leading to a tiered platform and then an upper floor past that. Three enormous figures bobbled around, their bodies far beyond pear-shaped: they looked passably like the desiccated people and the glowing man, presumably some sort of Pthumerians, but they were hideously bloated and towered over me at somewhere around eight or nine feet tall. One lumbered about with a cleaver, one with a primitive shotgun, and one with a hefty club and a censer of incense.

I had relied on my cleaver for this Dungeon, enemies obviously not bestial and the teeth of my saw spear getting caught on their clothes. This fight was no different in that respect, but it quickly became a running battle as the trio chased me up and down the stairs. I continually juked past the cleaver and club, jabbing elbows and quick kicks at the two melee brutes. The scattergun bastard was my real threat: my first fight with them resulted in him staggering me and the other two beat me to death.

For the rematch, I holstered my pistol and gripped a firebomb. Shotgun was up at the top, ready to snipe at me – or at least as passably as he could with such an inaccurate weapon. I charged Cleaver and chucked the firebomb into his face: as he staggered, I shot past him and then doubled back: a shoulder buried into his fatty back sent him crashing down the stairs. I reached for another firebomb to blind Shotgun, but my fingers closed around something different. That femur bone that I’d retrieved from the old workshop... What good would that do me!?! Shotgun raised his weapon and fired, and I tried to dodge.

I found myself several person-lengths to the side, having transformed into mist and shot near-instantaneously in the chosen direction. I could feel the old bone resonating with power, power that it offered freely. It took only a bit of effort on my part to tap into it. Shotgun fired again and I pulled on the bone’s essence, turning to mist and flowing through the gunfire. It reminded me of a faster version of Shadow Stalker from the Wards. When I re-formed, my cleaver was already hurtling through the air and bit deep into the monstrosity’s skull. He staggered back and I pressed my attack. I hacked at him, driving the blade into his elbow joint, and kicked the gun free from his hand. Grabbing his shirt with one hand and using the cleaver to guide him, I spun and hurled him from the upper platform to crash head-first into the tile. It shattered under his weight, and presumably either his spine or skull did the same, because he didn’t rise.

With Shotgun dead, Club and Cleaver were a much simpler affair. I drew the flamesprayer and simply led them on a chase, dousing them in fire and occasionally chopping with my own cleaver when the opportunity arose. Eventually they both dropped dead.

I opened the sarcophagus they'd been guarding and found it filled with filth – mold heaped like folded cloth, eyes in jars of preservation fluid... Mist announced the Little Ones' presence, who collected all of the items. "Uh, if you little guys think they're important, have at it," I said, still a bit nonplussed by the discovery.

That fight had been...honestly, it had been rather fun. I figured one more adventure couldn't hurt, so I made use of the elevator that the thugs had also been guarding, taking it a floor lower.

(BREAK)

The next floor was more beautiful, better-preserved due to not being as close to the surface – at least, if that kind of logic even applied to this place. Gorgeous golden chandeliers hung, braziers burned with cloying gray smoke, everything was more elegant and worshipful. Traps abounded, floor panels that activated lethal devices like spear launchers and flamethrowers. I actually managed to use them against the Pthumerians, slaying them with their own traps.

I stepped smoothly through a doorway after dispatching the last mummy-man, and was promptly caught in the jaw by a vicious punch. I slammed into the wall, groaning in pain, and looked up at a black-robed sack man.

"No," I snarled, spitting out blood. "Fuck you." I was done being afraid of these things. I ducked under its next punch, then hacked into its knee when it kicked at me. It hefted that sack, I heard its fist clench the cloth, and I shot it in the chest. As it staggered, I drove my claw into its chest and tore out its innards. The blow caused its robe to billow, and I at last saw the face of my tormentor.

The creature was...in a way disappointing, and in a way exactly what I'd expected and feared. It was very nearly human, disturbingly closer to human than the church doctors, but it was slightly deformed. Its eye sockets were empty, its teeth as gray as its skin as if it was one solid color. The face was somehow both too long and too broad without simply being oversized as that would imply. It was in the uncanny valley, but the worst was the inescapable feeling that this had at one point been a person.

I felt the air ripple and leapt aside, hearing the tile shatter under another sack man's attack. He shouldered the bloody bag and prepared to carry on. Then I caught motion behind him and a massive spike impaled him through the skull. It was like if someone had enlarged a railroad spike to the size of a whiffle bat, almost as big as the creature's entire head.

The warrior ripped the weapon from her now-dead prey and stepped back, weapon at the ready like an odd combination of pick and scythe. She seemed older than me, dressed similarly. She was a bit taller and more developed (I was used to the latter, but why did so many women here have to be tall and beautiful?), and her pitch-black hair spilled down her back in gentle ringlets.

"First time I've seen another hunter here," she spoke. Her tone was cautiously optimistic. "What brings you to this lovely little hellhole?"

My voice wouldn't work. I croaked softly. I knew that voice. I hadn't heard it for three years. The tears started to flow.

"...Are you alright? Miss?" She stepped closer.

I finally managed to hiccup. "M...Mom?"

She recoiled as if shot. For a moment I felt an infinite well of pain, then I heard the worry in her voice, the fear and concern. "Oh god. Taylor!? No... No, not you!" She was growing frantic, brandishing her pistol. "No, they didn't take you! You can't be here! Show your face, imposter!"

I pulled off my goggles and yanked down the face covering, tears spilling from my hazel eyes. They poured like a faucet as my wide mouth, just like hers, tugged up and down at the same time unable to decide between a smile and a cataclysmic sob.

All of the fight left my mother. The pistol and scythe-pick thing fell from her hands and she slumped to her knees, crying as well. "No, not my baby," she whimpered, almost too quiet to hear. "Why did they take you...?"

I couldn't hold back. Dropping my own weapons, I leapt at her and buried my face in her chest. My sobs shook the chamber. "Mom... Mommy..." I wept incoherently into her coat.

Slowly she began to stroke my hair, just as she had when she was alive. "Oh sweetheart, Little Owl... I'm so sorry..."

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*I found my mother in the Chalice Dungeon. Or, well, it's not really her. It's a memory. Mom is long since dead, both in reality and in the Dream. But I found her memory from when she explored this dungeon too. I don't even know whether to be happy I found some echo of her, or to weep forever over the fact that she's not real, that we can't have a proper reunion. There's no happily ever after for us: I can't bring her back.*

*Why is Yharnam a place of such suffering? Why must I in particular be so tormented? Was Amelia right? Are we all cursed by their gods?*