

*I haven't written in this journal for a while. Trying to pretend none of this is real, or none of it bothers me. But I have to record this. Not only for my own sake, but to preserve her memory. People need to remember her; how good she was, everything she did and everything that was taken from her. And what was done to her.*

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I could wait no longer. Iosefka needed me. I needed to find a way out of this nightmare. I descended once more to the door that rasped for a password, Laurence's memory blazing to the forefront of my mind. "We are born of the Blood, made men by the Blood, undone by the Blood. Our eyes are yet to open." The voice on the other side of the door joined me in the final phrase, just as Laurence had joined Willem. "Fear the Old Blood," we said.

"Welcome home," the door whispered, and I heard heavy bolts turn within the door – accompanied by what sounded like a death rattle, a steady and ever-weakening exhalation.

I lunged through, hoping that I could save the man, and was confronted by a skeleton in rotting finery. A decaying suit rested on his bones, a worn top hat adorning his skull. This man had been dead for decades. Had it been his spirit guarding the door? I began to doubt the interpretation Alfred had offered: while possible, it was unlikely that someone would give his life to close a door out of simple pettiness. Perhaps there was greater reason for the animosity between Byrgenwerth and the Healing Church. And where did the Vilebloods factor in?

My journey through the tunnel was thankfully quiet, emerging into a stepped plain that descended into forest. The bright, pale moon shone down and this area just felt different from Yharnam or Hemwick. It felt wild, free...for both better and worse.

A handful of Yharnamite maniacs lurked around, most in brighter colors like yellow: probably actual hunters before their degeneration, wearing bright colors much like how modern hunters wear those orange vests. I split open those who got too close, then the commotion drew the rest and soon enough I had slaughtered them all.

I was growing used to it, desensitized to the carnage. I had to kill, so I killed. It reminded me of the casual manner in which the ancient epics spoke of war and killing – a way of life, simply how things were. Maybe, if I focused on those comparisons, I could convince myself I wasn't slowly losing my mind.

The small copses of trees on one side did not a forest make: the actual forest was on the other side of a ravine. It was broad enough that I questioned my ability to jump it, especially if there was some sort of magic barring my way. I really didn't fancy the idea of leaping across only to crash into an invisible wall halfway across and go plummeting down into the misty depths. On this side of the ravine was a small graveyard with a handful of headstones, adjacent to a little round structure barely a story tall. The door was a metal grate, and when I tried it the door was locked. I was about to try and give the door the sack-man jail treatment when a voice rang out from the other side.

"The huntsmen know well enough to stay away," drawled a rather deep baritone. A tall figure slunk into my field of vision, melting out of the darkness with a smooth and confident stride. His clothes reminded me of a classic British bobby. He didn't wear the typical bobby cap, however: what I initially mistook to be a helmet looked more like a repurposed bucket – well, it had clearly been transformed

into a helmet, with layers of metal reinforcing the simple tin cylinder. A single eye gazed out at me from a cycloptic eyehole. “So what does that make you?”

“Someone who doesn’t know well enough,” I quipped back. “I’m looking for the tunnel back into Yharnam, the one under the blood ministration clinic.”

“It would be a swifter journey to your destination were you to come through here and take this elevator,” he replied.

I waited, and he didn’t open the door. “...Well? Are you going to open up?”

“Not in the least,” he chuckled. “I come here on occasion to check the integrity of the gate and the elevator mechanisms. This was once a shortcut for hunters, particularly before the schism between the Church and Byrgenwerth. I am Valtr, Master of the League. In the days when I actually had confederates, they used this convenience as well. But it has been many a year since the League’s confederates have walked these halls – other than myself.”

“And what does that have to do with me?” I pressed.

“Nothing and yet potentially everything.” More cryptic shit, great. “To get to the point and do away with the drama, as you seem unappreciative of such – much to my own dismay – you can consider this an interview. I know not your capability as a hunter, and your emergence from the elevator would draw beasts’ attention if you lack the ability to put them down. That would cause inconvenience for me. So if you can kill your way to the lower section of this elevator and take it up to meet me, I will welcome you to make use of this shortcut whenever you please – and offer you a place within the League, on top of that.”

I paused to shoot a raven that had been sneaking up on me. “And what exactly is this League? Why would I want to join?”

“A prudent question.” He leaned against the bars, eye blazing into my goggles. “The Forbidden Woods have long been an accursed place. Nightmares abound and animals behave wrongly. Serpents and insects, in particular, act as though imbued with evil. This is because they are. Impurity runs rampant within these woods, and can spread to others: parasites within the blood. I simply called them vermin when I discovered them, and the League adopted the terminology. I can teach you to detect vermin, to guard yourself against infestation by such, and how to stamp them out. Perhaps the woods can never be fully cured, but we can prevent the taint from spreading elsewhere.

“If the high-minded crusade interests you not, we have squirreled away numerous supply caches and I can provide you with their locations,” he finished.

“And what’s to stop me from just breaking the door down and making use of this elevator?” I challenged.

“Nothing except your own conscience,” he replied smoothly. Too smoothly. This Valtr was confident in his skills, was likely at least as experienced as Gascoigne... I would be risking my life and making a permanent enemy for potentially very little gain.

“...When I ride that elevator up, I’m gonna kick your ass,” I grumbled.

He laughed. It was a pleasant sound. “Smart woman. What’s your name, Lass? I want to greet you properly when you make it here.”

“...I’m Taylor.”

His single visible eye briefly looked past me, over my shoulder. “I’ll remember that.”

(BREAK)

After that, I made my way across the bridge, juking aside from a huntsman’s shots. My foot came down on some detritus and I heard a click, then the rattle of chains from above. I threw myself down and to the side, and watched as a spike-filled log swung down to impale my opponent. “Traps,” I muttered. “Good to know.”

The typical huntsmen roamed the woods, many of them further degenerated into lanky abominations. They worked together in worrying concert, cooperating to bring me down. I barely survived a gauntlet in which some threw pots of oil at me, others hurled molotovs, and a huge bastard with some sort of grain thresher tried to grind me into chunklets.

The first collection of buildings almost made me sick. The entire thing was colored an odd, luminous red – so much so that I thought there must be some red light source. But no, it was torchlight illuminating thick coatings of blood. Whatever people had lived here, their bodies had been thrown into a pit in the center after exsanguinating slaughter. I found that pit the hard way, juking around the beastmen’s attacks: like the trap pressure plate from before, the fragile boards were hidden under detritus and gave way under the weight of multiple bodies. I and several opponents fell into the pit and I impaled my thigh on a sharpened spike.

I fought like a trapped animal, ripping my enemies apart, then got the gunman above with a molotov before climbing up the ladder to finish him off after he was done burning. I focused on moving forward, pulling out Gehrman’s crude map for advice on where to go. I didn’t want to think about the rotting corpses in the pit, the faces twisted in despair as they died realizing there was no hope of rescue.

I found another group of buildings, these ones less densely populated and without the slathering of blood. Only a few huntsmen and some of those poor mutilated dogs lurked around. The kind from Hemwick, with blades and rakes attached to them. I gave them all death as a mercy, so they didn’t have to suffer.

As I shot the last dog, however, a light flickered on in the building beside me. I could see the silhouette of a bald head, but couldn’t make out anything more. The yellow light was oddly blinding. “That gunshot sounds unfamiliar from the usual residents. Come closer, friend. Let me have a look at you.” His voice was soft, gentle. While not necessarily an indicator of peaceful intent, it at the very least wasn’t immediately threatening.

I stepped a bit closer. “Hello there. How’ve you kept safe with those maniacs around?”

“Ah, old Patches knows many ways to go unnoticed by the more uncouth denizens of this forest,” he spoke with a wry smile on his voice. “And look at you, a hunter of beasts? Glory be. You know not the

value you possess. But more's the pity. The hours of the night are many, and the beasts more than I can count. A veritable hunt unending. Not even death offers solace, and the blood imbibes you..."

This man clearly knew something about hunters of the Dream. But more than that, he said the blood imbibes me. That should be the other way around, shouldn't it? "The blood imbibes me? What do you mean by that?"

He gave a wheezing half-laugh. "A most frightful fate, oh my. But I'm willing to do you a kindness. Step lightly round the right of the Great Cathedral and seek an ancient, shrouded church. The gift of the godhead will grant you strength. Yes," he hummed to himself, "I'm unquestionably certain..."

The window cracked open and something was pushed out. I glanced down to see a strange pitted stone hit the ground. When I looked up again, the light was out and the figure was gone from the window. The rock was some sort of exotic stone, maybe pumice. It made me uncomfortable, but I pocketed it anyway. In this bizarre place I could use any potential advantage.

I pushed past the dog cages and made my way into a cave. Gehrman's map indicated that a trapdoor had once been here, but his information was probably decades out of date. With the slope of the land, it seemed like this had been excavated: perhaps the trapdoor had become inconvenient. The interior of the cave reeked, the sickly-sweet of rotting fruit. Islands of pale sand rested few and far between, the majority of the cave was purplish water.

I pulled down my face covering, stooped down and took a whiff. I recoiled and almost retched. It smelled almost identical to the poison that the flayed beast in the Church of the Good Chalice had shed. I still had some antidote tablets just in case. I'd taken to bringing the threaded cane with me in case I needed to Indiana Jones my way across any more rafters, and there were some stalactites that looked viable.

The metal whip lashed out and latched around the stone, and I swung across as quickly as I could. The rock gave way partway across and I fell in the poison sea, scrambling out and popping an antidote before my veins burned too badly. All of the noise made something move, a monster I had previously mistaken for a rock from a distance: it was like one of the giants from Cathedral Ward, although without the attempt at clothing. It was wrapped in loose bandages like a ravaged, tomb-raided mummy. It clutched a curved blade in its hand, like a shoto or scimitar, and lunged at me.

The old giants were huge but slow, deadly if they caught you. This creature was fast and aggressive, kicking up clouds of sand. Its eye sockets glowed with an eerie light. I lashed the threaded-cane whip into its ankle, planting the blade like a grappling hook, then did everything I could to dodge. It came at me fast and furious, hacking into the beach and kicking up sparks when its blade crashed into the stone pillars at the center of the island. I clutched the cane's grip and did my utmost to stay one step ahead of the monster, whirling around it. I didn't even have time to line up a shot.

Thankfully, I didn't need to. I had hoped to channel *The Empire Strikes Back* and it seemed I would be successful. Every time I dodged, I did so in a counterclockwise direction, looping around the monster again and again. Finally I grabbed the whip's cable with my other hand and heaved with all my might, pulling the whip taut and yanking its legs together, then pulling it off its feet! The giant toppled into the poison water and struggled to right itself. Just as it got its arms under its body, I turned and heaved again, swinging it up and over through the air. I had aimed perfectly, and a stalagmite punched clean through the monster's chest. It spasmed and then fell still.

There were more islands, more giants, and my method became tried-and-true. Some islands didn't have suitable stalagmites so I had to swing the giants against the pillars until I bludgeoned them to death. It was slow and dangerous work, but I steadily made my way across to a different section of the cave, and from there to another tunnel.

Steadily the tunnel became less moist and more dry, stone and unworked earth giving way to tiled floor. I opened up a trapdoor, peeking out before forcing both doors wide. The classic Yharnam architecture greeted me. There was a ladder that led to the top of a nearby building, and from there I could see the back of Iosefka's clinic.

I swallowed hard, feeling the icy fear creep across my spine. I didn't know if I would be able to save the first person who'd been kind to me in Yharnam – the first person who'd been kind to me in years... But I would do everything in my power to try.