

The journey through the dark tunnels, built as though they were rooms in some elaborate mansion, was dark and consummately uncomfortable. The darkness I no longer minded: my eyes were far sharper than they'd ever been before (sharper, I expected, than any normal human's) and the tiny lantern on my belt gave enough additional illumination that I could see well enough to dodge the massive wolves in the tunnel. The beasts were colossal, bigger than cars, yet still scrambling around on their bellies and as pitiable as that first monster I'd fought in the clinic. My saw bit deep and ripped them open.

No, the true discomfort was in the cramped space. So dark and winding, with no exit in sight, I could feel familiar sheet-metal confines at the edges of my consciousness. It probably made me more brutal with the wolves than I should have been, something on which I reflected as I tore open a wolf's ribcage with my bare hands, the beast long since dead.

Eventually the tunnels came to an end at a massive pair of double doors. Pinned to the doors, practically glowing in the dim light, was a sheet of specially-treated vellum. I plucked it from where it had been secured by a dagger. *This town is long abandoned, it read. Hunters not wanted here.* Well, Mr. Note, one one count I'm not really a hunter: just a girl trying to escape this hell. And on the other count, it doesn't matter what someone wants. I never wanted to come here, so whoever wrote this note can just deal with it. I placed my hands on the doors and pushed, grinding open the massive barriers.

The moon hung low, lightly obscured by misty clouds. It stared down, glowing a weak yellow, like a dying man looking through a window at the rest of the world. Some of the mist for the clouds, I realized, was actually wispy smoke. As my eyes swept across the cityscape of Old Yharnam, something came over me. I couldn't say exactly what it was, some combination of emotions that I couldn't properly parse. But it was so powerful that I dropped to my knees, staring at the corpses of old buildings that still smoked despite having been burned more than five decades prior. The structures had once been beautiful, homes and places of worship and business all built by hand, with love and care and dedication. And now they hung open, the half-burned skeletons reaching to the skies with ashen fingers of masonry, begging for salvation or even to understand the pain that had been unleashed upon them.

I couldn't say how long I rested there on shiftless legs, eyes drifting glassily across the long-dead sadness. Eventually, I suppose I became inured to the ghosts of the past. Accepting their pain and moving on, hoping to learn from it. I still looked with awe at Old Yharnam. While the new city was mighty and built upon itself to an obscene level, on some level it lacked this...personal aspect. For better or worse, Yharnam was a city built in worship. Everything was constructed for that purpose, to glorify the Church and the gods. This place, Old Yharnam, I could already feel in it the kind of impression that I got from Brockton Bay's historic district: it was built with a sense of community, the people coming together not for any greater purpose or to glorify themselves or others, but simply out of love and caring for their families and neighbors. Oh, the size of this dead city and the heights of the buildings eventually gave lie to my observations, but even here at the top of the city the little cobblestone bridge held that feeling of something deeply personal. This had been a community foremost, and no matter how high they had built the people hadn't forgotten that.

In my introspection, I almost didn't react quickly enough as a beast leapt through the coiling smoke, claws bared to rip out my throat. I yelped in a way I hadn't in weeks of fighting through Yharnam (God, time was starting to blur. It hadn't been more than, what, two weeks in the real world? But death after death in Yharnam, I'd probably been here for a month if not longer if you totaled up all the time I spent wandering, fighting, dying...) and leapt backward, snapping up the saw spear to tear open the monster's neck. As it choked on its own blood, I looked down at the beast and cringed inwardly. It was

a terribly human-looking creature, emaciated with grayish skin clinging to its bones. Patches of black fur grew from it, some of which were covered in tightly-wound bandages. Its eyes had glowed with sickly yellow pinpricks of light, and its jaws were only mildly distended – reminding me more of a bulldog or other snubbed canine rather than the elongated wolf muzzles.

The creature's chest heaved as it breathed its last, giving its death rattle. My ears perked up as more beasts began to stand, scrabbling against the lovingly-laid cobblestones and preparing to attack. I withdrew the weapon Gilbert had given me, which I'd learned was properly called a flamesprayer. If these damn things hadn't had enough the first time the city burned, I'd give them more until they learned.

In the middle of hacking my way through the throng of burning beasts, a voice pierced the carnage, carried by some makeshift director's megaphone. "You there! Hunter! Didn't you see the warning?" Someone was alive here, living among the beasts? Then Iosefka's words from my first night came back to me. *Some beasts have enough humanity to pretend.* Was this a beast that still thought it was a person? A disturbing thought. "Turn back at once," the man's voice bellowed. "Old Yharnam, burned and abandoned by men, is now home only to beasts." I managed to figure out that the voice was coming from a figure perched on the massive clock tower, sitting at some sort of perch. "They are of no harm to those above. Turn back, or the hunter will face the hunt."

Easy for him to say, when these monsters weren't clawing at him. To try to partly appease this maniac, I staged a fighting retreat and moved back up the staircase I'd been descending. The beasts kept coming, afraid only of the fire my weapon spewed. Then bullets began to skip off the stone, followed closely by the staccato boom of an ancient rotary gun. That crazy bastard was shooting at me with a goddamn chaingun! He was ranging, clearly not having fired it in a good deal of time, working to aim it with what had to be primitive sights.

I darted forward, hiding behind a massive and beautiful statue. Where above the religious statues were Lovecraftian, here they were closer to the gorgeous Renaissance sculptures that glorified beauty. Bullets twanged as they were deflected by the ridiculously sturdy stone. The last beast fell, lunging for me as I took cover, ending up impaled on my spear.

After a few seconds of sustained fire, he stopped wasting ammo. I took off my hat and put it on the end of my spear, waving it in lieu of a white flag. "I'm not so foolish as to be fooled by a simple hat on a stick," he boomed.

I stepped out on the same side I'd been waving the hat, cupping my hands around my mouth and shouting as loud as I could. "I wasn't trying to fool you! I want to talk!"

"I can't hear a word, you mooncalf. If you don't want to fight, then turn right around and go back to Yharnam. The beasts here are no threat to you."

Damn it... I really didn't want to spend the whole journey through Old Yharnam getting shot at. "I'll be back!" I yelled, turning around and leaving for the moment. I needed to find something that could be used as a megaphone.

Remembering that Gehrman had helped found the Hunters' Workshop, I went back to the Dream to speak with him. As we looked for metal or something else sturdy that could be turned into a voice-amplifying funnel, I asked him about the maniac on the clock tower.

“Someone defending the beasts?” Gehrman asked incredulously. “Madness. Utter madness. The beasts are lost. The only thing you can do is grant them release in death. Those few beasts who retain enough humanity to speak or even hide their nature, those are the worst of all. They hide depths of hatred that a normal man cannot even comprehend, evil beyond measure. Everything twists to be persecution in their minds, and they strike out at everyone even as they undertake more and more depraved acts. Cannibalism, corpse desecration, mass murder... Abhorrent beasts, we called them, the worst aspects of humanity given form and terrible power.”

“Was one of these beasts shooting at me?” The way Gehrman spoke about such a beast, it sounded like even the old veteran feared them.

“Unlikely. The way beasthood goes, people lose their humanity and ability to use tools as they degenerate. The Abhorrent, they eventually claw their way back to the ability to pretend, but I’ve never heard of one voluntarily using tools. They kill with their hands and teeth until you force them to show their true face.”

*Too proud to show your true face, eh?* Gascoigne’s words rang in my mind. He’d fought monsters like this before, hadn’t he? Killing monsters that pretended to be people... “So, what am I dealing with?”

Gehrman shrugged, clearing off a desk as he began fiddling with vellum and sheet metal. “Some poor sod, probably who lost someone important in the Burning. Latched onto the idea that the people are still trapped in the beasts’ bodies, forced to watch as their bodies commit atrocities.”

“God,” I whispered. “Is that a possibility?” The idea of being forced to watch without any control as my body killed my loved ones...

Another shrug. “Couldn’t say. We can’t exactly question the beasts, and if they are trapped in their bodies then it comes back to my original policy: out of respect for the people they were, give them a quick death. I...” He paused, trying to conceal an almost violent twitch. “I would hate to be trapped in my body, watching as it harms others, knowing that I have no control. It is no mercy to leave someone alive in a state like that. You head outside, now. Ask the birdbath things for a torch or something: beasts dislike fire something fierce, and if you can ward them off without killing it might give you the time needed to reason with the gunman. Or to line up a shot.”

I could tell he was sending me away for some reason, something he didn’t want to talk about, didn’t want to think about. Gehrman had lost a lot, and so I opted not to press. Maybe I’d ask him later.

An hour or so later, with a new sturdy torch in hand, I received a makeshift armored megaphone. Hopefully it’d be useful.

(BREAK)

I returned to Old Yharnam and was pleasantly surprised when the beasts did indeed avoid me. They clustered, claws bared and fangs slavering, but though they made threat displays none came close enough to strike. The torch was doing its job. I held the megaphone before my mouth. “I told you I’d be back,” I boomed.

“What in the gods’ good names is wrong with you, girl?” came the reply. “I told you to leave. There is nothing here for you.”

“You don’t even know who I am,” I retaliated. “You have no idea why I’m here.”

“I know you’re a skilled hunter. Adept, merciless, half-cut with blood as the best hunters are. I saw how smoothly you killed, which is why I must stop you.”

Half-cut with blood? What did that even mean? “You presume I’m here to hunt, that I came here to kill beasts. I only kill to defend myself. I’m a hunter in name only, fighting by necessity!” One of the beasts got closer and I whacked it in the face with the torch. “Back off!” It yowled and fell back, scrambling on the ground as the fur on its face licked with flame.

“Are you, now?” He sounded patronizing. “And so what brings you to Old Yharnam, dead and cursed and left solely to the beasts? What beside the hunger for more creatures to hunt?”

“The chance to escape this hell! I’ve spent night after night in Yharnam, killing and dying, rescuing those I can. I don’t belong here! I need whatever relic is inside the Church of the Good Chalice, so I can persuade the Healing Church to give me an audience. Right now they’re my only hope to find some way out of here. Yharnam is not my home. I never wanted to come here. I... I want to sleep and not come here.”

He was silent for a long time, more than a minute. I had to thump the beasts several more times in the interim. “...Go, then. Harm not the beasts. They are victims of this madness. If you can promise me that, I’ll not hinder you.”

“I can’t promise outright pacifism, but I can promise that I won’t hurt them unless there’s no other option. If I’m backed into a corner and a beast wants to kill me, I’ll choose my life over the beast’s. But I won’t hunt them and I won’t pursue them.”

“More reasonable than anything I’ve come to expect from a hunter.” He leaned on his gun, hands off the triggers from what I could see. “I suppose I can live with that until you fully embrace the truth. What’s your name, lass? I want to remember it, as I expect to hear it spoken by others one day.”

“It’s Taylor.” I’d come to realize quickly that people either didn’t have surnames or they didn’t give them out openly.

“And I am Djura, last of the Powder Kegs’ legacy. I no longer dream, but I was once a hunter too,” he replied, sounding very tired. “There’s nothing more horrific than a hunt. In case you fail to realize, the things you hunt...they’re not beasts, they’re people. One day you’ll see. But for now, off you get before I change my mind.”

I wasn’t in the mood to debate the beasts’ humanity through a megaphone while in the sights of a freaking chaingun. I took my leave by his permission and dodged through the beasts, descending into the corpse of the city.

Once I was out of Djura’s sight, the beasts became more vicious. Some had white cloths thrown over them, and at first it took me a bit to figure out what they even were. I thought I was dealing with some sort of new goblin, especially as their claws and teeth made my skin fester. Then I remembered

Gehrman's story about the ashen-blood plague. These beasts had been covered with sheets because they'd been presumed dead, then these infected monsters got back up and started wandering around!

In one house, still set for dinner, I found a packet of white tablets along with some parchment with instructions. Apparently it was medicine to cure or at least mitigate ashen-blood. I popped a tablet and maybe it was the placebo effect but I felt better for it.

Beasts burst through walls to ambush me, and the torch was no longer effective. It made me wonder if the beasts up top were more docile because Djura was aware of them and believed them to be people. Doll called Yharnam 'the dreaming world'. It made me wonder just how much of this was real. I'd been here, in this same night, for days on end. Even discounting time resetting, I'd spent well more than a full night's time and it was still evening. Old Yharnam had been burned fifty years ago but still smoldered. Unless the beasts were chronologically immortal, I'd expect most of them to be dead by now. Just how much of this world was powered by belief, anchored by symbolism?

I emerged into a clearing below the clock tower, plumes of smoke concealing more beasts. And in the center, standing as though the beasts were his audience, was a man in a black leather hood. He turned to me and brandished his own saw spear. The man's face, with a shaggy chinstrap beard, looked incredibly sad but his stance and overall presence didn't radiate sadness like Gehrman did.

"A new companion?" the man shouted, projecting as if he was in a stage play. "No, you smell of blood and ash and weapon oil. You are here to kill, not to join in our grief. I will be your dance partner, then, and drink you dry!" He snapped the spear to its extended form and lunged for me.

The man didn't fight as well as Gascoigne, but he was still a hunter: fast, aggressive, always on the move and looking for a better angle. Pity for him that I'd cut my teeth on a far more deadly opponent. The hidden beasts joined in the fight, waiting to attack me from behind as the hunter and I dodged around one another. The pseudo-courtyard had some charred trees in a manmade copse at the center and we wheeled around it, lunging and parrying, sawblades biting together and tangling. I fired my pistol and he jerkily dodged; he fired his and I flowed out of the way. I was confident I could win this fight, at least until a beast attacked and I ran it through. The hunter capitalized on my overextension and brought his spear down, forcing me to abandon my weapon or lose my arm. He swung again and I fired, catching him mid-swing and leaving him stunned for a moment.

What happened next was done on sheer instinct. I moved in, locking my fingers into a spear shape, and drove them beneath his ribcage. My long talons sought out his heart and I closed my claw around it, feeling it beating violently. I tore the organ free, slathered in blood, my distended fingers slowly transforming back into a normal hand. I stared at that hand in mute horror, realizing that it had – ever so briefly – been akin to the claw of a beast.

I opted to keep moving. I could have my existential breakdown after I was done in this hellhole.