

Soon enough the day ended. Dad and I made dinner together (I was hesitant to suggest lasagna, so I went adjacent and we made pasta bolognese), made small talk that felt rather natural, and then it was time for bed. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow, standing in the Dream.

Gehrman sat before the massive tree in the sectioned-off area of the Dream, the field of flowers where I'd first awoken. The gate was shut and wouldn't open, but he looked over at me. "I was wondering how long you'd try to avoid coming back. I don't know if that speaks to work ethic or hopelessness. But before you go to the Forbidden Woods I have one more recommendation for you. After you check in with the people in Yharnam, head back to the Grand Cathedral. Take a right when you exit and follow the path. I've been informed that there's something very important in the village of Hemwick that would be of great help to you." His morose face twisted into a slight smirk. "I'll not bother trying to explain what it is; it'd just confuse you. Get it, bring it back here, and you can learn by doing."

(BREAK)

I opted to do things in reverse order. The wound was still far too raw to tell my friends in Yharnam that my hopes had been dashed and I was trapped here until some esoteric event where Gehrman could somehow free me. Instead I chose to awaken at the Grand Cathedral. I inspected the place, tried the massive stone doors in back flanking the altar, but couldn't budge them. Something in my bones told me they were sealed tight, inaccessible.

Upon exiting the ajar double-doors of the entrance, I saw the two black-clad doctors with the inverse-Mark stakes. They were still facing outward, unaware of me. I strode forward silently, drawing both weapons. Cleaver in my left hand, spear in my right, I flicked them both open at the last second. The mechanical sound drew their attention, and as they turned I buried the cleaver in the left one's neck while the spear point punched through the other's throat. They were dead before they really knew what had happened.

I headed rightward and into a tunnel, wending my way through the rough-hewn stone corridor. The tunnel overall appeared natural, worn by time and burrowing creatures, but had then been opened further by tools and steps had been carved to facilitate safer walking.

*Hemwick, the villagers called their home. A matriarchal community with very different burial practices and some natural connection to those outside our normal perception. Kin blood? A legacy of Pthumeru? They were certainly tall enough, if lacking the typical beauty. Pthumerian degenerates, perhaps. Their guardians were dangerous, but we needed to examine corpses. Study the skulls' interiors.*

*They practiced cremation. There were no skulls to study. But at the same time, the ashes...they resonated. The Blood was present, in some minor and twisted amount. We would expand in their direction, offer them territory for their own expansion if only they joined us. General autonomy in exchange for ashes...*

My eyes flickered and rolled back to face outside of my skull once again. I'd been babbling a steady stream of what was nonsense to my ears, and I was pressing my face into a dirt wall. I shook myself, brushed off the dirt. There was too much happening to me all at once. I needed to focus on the here and now, do what I came to do. Then perhaps I could ask Gehrman and Doll. Even if they had the answers, though, would they be able – be allowed – to tell me?

The tunnel opened into a loose forest filled with headstones. Grave markers as far as the eye could see, stacked atop one another much like in the Dream. I supposed that meant this was less a burial site and more of a memorial, unless each cluster of stones represented a mass grave. No, probably not, there really wasn't enough space for that many bodies, and—

I juked out of the way as a bullet sailed past my head. A huntsman muttered bitterly and began to reload. I closed the distance just as he raised his rifle again, and split his skull. I heard a staccato burst, three guns fired in sequence, and leapt to avoid the volley. This was a killing field, gunmen stationed to cover one another. I'd have to be very careful...

A horrible noise drew me from my contemplation. I couldn't describe it if asked, there are no words to properly convey the corpse-breath sound of reality folding in on itself. From a will-o'-wisp of red light, in an effect not unlike a slow-motion version of the transporter from Star Trek, there appeared something...wrong.

At first blush, as my eyes adjusted, I wondered if this was the Logarius Alfred had mentioned. Hemwick was apparently connected in some way to this Cainhurst, and the figure that appeared did superficially resemble a tall and skinny man with a wild beard and mane of hair. The creature, however, was not human and likely had never been. It was black or dark green, or both, its body had the texture of dried leaves. Two white eyes glowed out of an otherwise featureless mass that was almost like vines, or the branches of a bush. Its spindly hands gripped a pair of sickles.

When I was a child, my mother loved reading myths with me. Some of her favorites to share were the Celtic ones, in no small part because of how creative and varied the world of the faerie was. The thing before me, it reminded me of one of the stories of changelings – superficially, a changeling resembled the human child it had been chosen to replace, but beneath the skin it was a mass of branches, twigs, leaves. This thing, it wasn't human. It didn't have leaves, but its whole body felt plantlike. Was its head a mass of roots, perhaps? All I could think was, *Is this a grown-up changeling?*

And then it was on me, moving faster than anything other than a proper hunter, those sickles biting through the air with such speed as to leave a trail. I harkened back to the step-dancing from within the nightmarish prison, taking high and quick steps to avoid tripping over branches or headstones. I deflected with my spear but the thing kept coming and I had to keep juking to avoid bullets.

“Alright, y'know what? Fuck you!” It was rare that I spoke when I was acting as a hunter, but in this moment I was far more Taylor, the girl whose mom read her cool stories when she was little. If this bastard looked like a plant, he could burn like one. I whipped out the flamesprayer and hosed him down. He croaked at me in return, the sound like a death rattle, and continued pursuit. I led him and his friends (of course more of them would show up) on a merry chase through the trees as I killed the gunmen, spinning around to douse the tree-men with more fire every so often. While they didn't burn as easily as wood, they certainly didn't enjoy being set on fire, and eventually the last one crumbled to dust.

I made it to the tunnel, trudged through another long corridor, and emerged back in Yharnam. “Ah, shit.” I'd gotten turned around. Well, time to trudge BACK through the corridor and wander around that shitty forest again. Thankfully, this time no more monsters showed up to harass me.

So the other end of the forest led to a different tunnel, this one choked with even more gravestones and stinking a bit like an old factory. I made my way through, and my brain skipped a beat when I emerged.

Yharnam was clearly broken. The people there were insane, huntsmen and hunters deludedly following the same paths of action while seeing normal people as monsters. But they still behaved like people, still followed an orderly and understandable course of action even if their reasons were insane.

I beheld fire. What had begun as some sort of funeral pyre, maybe a crucifixion as well, had become casual arson. Wagons burned, boxes burned, and towering hags in voluminous robes sort of like old Russian grandmas danced and twirled and threw firebombs upon the wreckage while warbling tuneless songs like drunken maniacs. Seeing them, their pallid, grayish skin; their unnaturally long arms; their overextended necks; their long noses and chins... *Oh god, I know where Desmond came from.*

They didn't even notice me at first, the nearest one holding some bizarre half-melted polearm thing and staring into the sky as she crooned a song that hurt my ears. I'm not exactly sure what solidified my decision to strike, whether it was their empty eyes or the fact that they were armed and burning down their own things, but I flicked open the saw cleaver and swung.

I split open the first woman and stepped over her corpse, already swinging for the next. They screamed, babbled angry pejoratives much like the huntsmen, but their great height and propensity for long weapons made them more trouble to deal with. I had to weave around strikes to close the distance and slay them. Heading up the path, past the massive cobbled-stone walls, led me to a circular location with a single massive tree in the center. A landmark, maybe? The steps led up here and then there was another high wall with steps carved into it. At least twenty feet high. Who'd choose to live in such a vertically-inclined hellhole?

Before I could further contemplate geographical foolishness, that same corpse-breath noise came from in front of me, before the tree. Another of those sickle-wielding changeling monsters emerged and lunged for me. My cleaver met its sickle in a shower of sparks, then I was almost knocked off my feet when a firebomb impacted the side of my head, causing a flower of heat to bloom from my face. There were more of those crazy bitches on the hilltop, hurling weapons and curses down at me! The sound of claws on stone, light steps, dogs. I turned to peg the first one with my pistol and it collapsed, but didn't die. When I saw it clearly, I was consumed with anger and revulsion.

The pair of wolfhounds that descended were similar to the blood-slick, slack-jawed beasts that had killed me so often. These ones were covered in rope and wire, blades stuck through their bodies as if to make them into walking pincushions. A broad, hooked weapon – like two narrow scythe blades stuck together – was secured in each one's mouth, and what appeared to be little garden rakes were tied to their feet. These things were twisted, tortured, made monstrous. I backpedaled further, using the narrow steps and high walls to my advantage as a bottleneck, and once again withdrew the flamesprayer. Using my cleaver simply to parry the sickle and slap back the dogs, I kept spraying until they were all crispy and no longer twitching.

Passing the tree and heading up the stairs, I dealt with the women at the top, then nearly got my head taken off by a huntsmen's assistant who'd been hiding further up the winding path. The huge brute swung his brick and I slipped around him before cleaving his head in two.

The rest of my journey went the same: wander up winding, continually ascending terrain – narrow roads surrounded by high walls – with numerous maniacs lying in wait. I was hit with mallets, cleavers, bricks, and even a meat tenderizer straight out of a kitchen.

The path opened up again to a sad sky, oddly brighter than the rest of Yharnam. It was dark night everywhere else, but with the sheer amount of gray clouds in the sky it appeared more like overcast day here. The terrain was mostly flat, this area surrounded again by tall walls of dirt and stone. In each corner was a collection of limp trees and gravestones, and wandering the area was a pair of monsters I'd not seen since my first time exiting Iosefka's clinic. Huge, bulbous humanoids in billowing black cloaks carrying enormous polearms, and two of them to boot. They circled in patrol around a towering stone obelisk.

Waiting for one to approach, I hefted a rock and threw it as hard as I could at the creature's head. With how hard its head seemed to snap to the side, I definitely got its attention, and it turned to face me. Well, I couldn't see its face under the hood, but it was certainly squaring off. I tightened my grip on the pistol. If I could catch it mid-swing, maybe I could claw its organs out.

The huge thing charged, winding up for a swing, and the moment it began to move its arm forward I shot it in the chest. It staggered, affording me the chance. As I'd become adept at, I plunged my hand into its chest cavity and clawed out what I could. It fell back but all too quickly got up again. I mistimed my shot and it one-handed the polearm, catching me in the midsection and sending me flying in a spray of blood, spiraling into the wall. I pried myself from the wall and injected a blood vial before ducking another swing, sliding forward to hack at its ankles. One more cut to the hamstring and that seemed to be enough exsanguination. It dropped dead.

Its partner was easier to dispatch as I managed to bait it into charging me a second time. Then I took stock of the area. The path looped around the obelisk, splitting into three. One led the way I'd come, one led to yet another flight of stone stairs, and the third led into a wall of fog. That must have been the glamour of fog that Alfred mentioned blocking the way to Cainhurst. The obelisk was elegant yet tragic, each dark-gray stone face reminding me of a mausoleum door: vaulted and elegant, yet unmistakably something of great sorrow and respect. As I didn't relish the idea of getting lost in some nightmarish fog, I opted to keep going upward for now.

I heard things as I ascended, words buzzing in my ears with the high-pitched drone of a mosquito – and causing just as much distress.

*“Why does it come? For its kin?”*

*“It knows not. It comes for simple curiosity.”*

*“Send it away! Our good work is not yet done!”*

*“No, draw it close! We need more, and another to study will also be helpful.”*

*“Call them, call them!”*

*“The bait is placed, the bell is rung. They are cats in their way; they will come when they care to.”*

I passed yet more run-down hovels, finally seeing what had to be my destination: a towering yet decrepit structure on the highest hill, a cliff that loomed over the sea. I let myself get pincered by three of the madwomen and a huge halberd monster, so when it swung its weapon I vaulted over it: the three hags were chopped in two, and I lodged my spear in the thing's skull. The big guy had been guarding another treasure chest. Inside was...something. It wasn't quite physical but I could pick it up. The

ephemeral thing felt about the size and texture of a sand dollar, so I put it in my pocket when the little ones didn't show up to take it off my hands.

The manor house was beyond decrepit. It reeked of mold and rot brought on by salty sea air, and I had no idea how it was still standing. There wasn't much to stop me: apparently almost everything had already been sent my way. Stairs led to a basement, and at first I paused to wonder how a house on a cliff could have a basement. Then I remembered it was Yharnam, the Dreaming World.

The basement was colossal, easily bigger than the manor itself. It was some sort of library and Renaissance-era alchemist's storage, books and bottled strangeness on innumerable shelves. A bridge connected the two walls of bookshelves.

I saw one of the stooped ladies from the jail, like the one that had carved out my eye. Only, this one was utterly covered in eyeballs. They dangled from fishing line, easily more than a hundred. In her left hand was something covered in even more eyes, dozens, so many it was utterly obscured from view. How many people had died to provide her those eyes? How many lives had she carelessly ended to give herself that sick fashion statement?

*"She is young. Stupid. Ignorant. Of little use to us."*

*"Powerful, though. And healthy eyes. So good..."*

*"Keep the head intact. She will have nothing to offer our studies, so dead or living matters little."*

I flicked open the saw cleaver and gave chase. She tried to hobble away but was weighed down by the sheer number of eyeballs adorning her. When I struck her, squashed the eyes, she shrieked more in rage than pain. And then she dissolved into mist and vanished.

Another changeling emerged from the floor, and as I dueled with it a torrent of energy shots came at me, shot from the corner. The old witch was invisible and taking potshots! I led the changeling on a merry chase in my pursuit of the witch until she died. And then got back up. It was then that I learned it was not one witch, but two. Which meant that twice as many people had died for their eyes. It also explained the conversations I'd been somehow hearing in my mind.

Other than their spells, which took time to manifest, the old women were no threat. They were so old and weighted down with their...bounty, that they could barely move. As long as I stayed a step ahead of the changelings, which continued to multiply, I could chase them down. I figured out that one could revive the other, so I needed to put the hurt on them both equally.

If it wasn't for the tedium of the fight, I'd have impressed myself with the Errol Flynn acrobatics of vaulting the bridge, leaping along shelves, tackling a changeling and using it as a skateboard down the stairs. I was consistently one step ahead, and my flamesprayer made up for any missteps.

At long last, the first witch fell and I body-checked my way through papery monsters to strike down the second. She looked at me, her hideous visage set in a grim line. She knew what was coming, and had no way to stop it. As my blade hacked into her, she muttered morosely, voice barely marred by pain. "We only wanted...to understand...everything..."

Something changed in the air with her death. My bet was that whatever served as bait for the changelings was now gone, as no more arrived. I had to put the remainder down, as they didn't dematerialize with the witches' demise, but at least they stopped popping in.

"What the hell were you guarding?" I muttered to myself, looking down at one of the horrible women. "What did Gehrman want me to find?" My mind went back to the conversations I'd somehow overheard. They thought I was looking for my kin... Had these monsters captured a hunter? A second thought, which I dismissed so violently that I promptly forgot I'd ever considered it, was that they'd somehow gotten their hands on my mother's corpse.

At the far end of the cellar was a heavy reinforced door, blocked off with a crossbar and sporting a grated window. Inside...was a hunter, slumped dead in a chair. I removed the crossbar and then pulled the pins from the hinges, casting the door aside so it couldn't be shut on me in some kind of trap. Numerous tools were strewn out on several surgeons' trays, pieces of long-dried and mummified flesh arranged from where the hunter had been tortured.

The little ones moaned, drawing my attention, as they gathered around a strange device. God help my poor brain, but the first thing I thought of upon seeing it was that it looked like a medieval Etch-A-Sketch. "Is that what Gehrman wanted me to find?" They nodded enthusiastically. "Okay. Take it back to the Dream for me?" One saluted cutely as I'd taught it in a fit of pique after a death, and they dragged the tool away.

I took in a deep breath. I should return to the Dream myself to learn what that tool did, and outfit myself better. The next step would be to find my friends in Yharnam and give them the news that I wouldn't be escaping anytime soon.