

Coded in Blood (A Transistor/Bloodborne Crossover)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/27653300) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/27653300>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	Gen
Fandoms:	Transistor (Video Game) , Bloodborne (Video Game)
Relationships:	Other Relationship Tags to Be Added , Red & Subject The Boxer
Characters:	Royce Bracket , Ebrietas (Bloodborne) , Bailey Gilande , Red (Transistor) , Subject The Boxer , LOTS of Supporting OCs , Other Character Tags to Be Added , Gascoigne (Bloodborne) , Plain Doll (Bloodborne) , The Choir (Bloodborne) - Character , Eileen the Crow (Bloodborne) , Lillian Platt , Amelia (Bloodborne) , Sybil Reisz
Additional Tags:	Crossovers & Fandom Fusions , Crossover , Canon-Typical Violence , Body Horror , Cosmic Horror , Typical Bloodborne Stuff honestly , Blood and Violence , Headcanons about just about everything , Bloodborne is very vague , Work In Progress , Seriously this is a WIP and may not see many updates
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-11-21 Updated: 2021-03-10 Words: 24,908 Chapters: 10/?

Coded in Blood (A Transistor/Bloodborne Crossover)

by [SableGear0](#)

Summary

"Bloodsistor" now has an actual title! A Transistor/Bloodborne crossover fic that is VERY MUCH UNFINISHED AND IN PROGRESS, I CANNOT STRESS THIS ENOUGH. This piece may see major edits and rewrites as/if it updates. This is mainly a place to host it so I can share it easily.

That said, please enjoy what I have so far!

===

Deep in the Hintertombs beneath Yharnam, a member of the Choir finds something unique. Something even the Choir's captive Great One seems unfamiliar with. The night of the perigee moon, a promise of an exceptionally violent Hunt, draws near. Unsatisfied, this Choirman leaves the high halls of his peers to search for answers on the bloody night of the Hunt. Meanwhile two outsiders, a songstress and a pugilist, come to Yharnam seeking treatment for their illness. Left to survive in the dark and terrible night, they find themselves caught up in unravelling the ancient secrets coded deep in Yharnam's grim history of Blood and Beasts.

Chapter 1: A Mere Object

Chapter Summary

A member of the Choir finds something unusual while Tomb-prospecting. Unfortunately, it's a bit of a fight to keep it.

The expedition was sent to plumb the lower Hintertombs. Split from the rest of their group, two Choirmen picked their way through the twisting caverns. They wore the black mantles of their robes flipped forward and knotted over their mouths and noses; together with the black lace of their blindfolds, their faces were entirely obscured. They held their torches high, not merely for light, but to keep the open flame away from the noxious vapours seeping through the floor and out of the sickly pools around their feet.

The taller man kept a hand on the wall as they moved. His palm brushed over the carved suggestion of a doorframe and he stalled.

“Here.”

“What is it?”

He lifted his hand and took a step back, tracing the ghost of the frame with his torch. “I think...” One hand went to press the middle of the wall inside the frame and pushed through, the texture of rough stone dissipating like smoke to reveal an opening within the frame. “There.”

“You’re good at finding those.”

“You can tell by the feel.”

The taller man leaned into the new passage, only wide enough for one body. His partner glanced both ways along the tunnel they had been traversing, “Go ahead. I’ll keep watch. Call if you need me.”

“Right.”

It was standard procedure, really. Always travel in pairs when splitting from the group and leapfrog past one another to ensure the area is safe. One would keep watch at an intersection while the other explored a path. If it was safe, the guard would move past their partner to explore further.

The taller man had to duck to fit into the newly uncovered tunnel. At least the floor here was dry, the air less fouled by the rot that pervaded the tombs. The narrow tunnel took a

twist, slanting down ever so slightly. There were no more side passages, just rough hand-hewn rock sloping down to a small chamber at the very end.

The small room was round; an eerily perfect sphere, its diameter just wider than the span of his arms, high enough for him to stand straight. Its curved floor was littered with fine gravel, tomb fungus grew up the sloped walls. And something leaned against the far wall, watching him enter.

Or so it felt. The thing was nearly as tall as he was. Inert. A mere object, but it felt aware. The Choirmen pushed the blindfold of his hat up from his face, revealing ardent green eyes, and held his torch out for a clearer look.

The object had a shape most akin to a sword, if a sword could be grown from something organic. The flared hilt looked like part of a fish. The blade, made of a blue-green stone, was engraved with veins and tendrils that wrapped around four marks on its surface; one large dome or bulge, and three smaller pits. The protrusion in the center was unmistakably an eye, the pits were empty. The sides of the blade had odd bony flares. The bottom had three flat teeth, that were most certainly actual teeth. The handle grew like a twisted bone, its pommel a clawed grip around a murky orb of translucent stone.

This was a Great One relic. There was nothing else it could be. But why was it here? Hidden away in a dead-end tunnel far out in the Hintertombs, rather than enshrined in a Pthumerian altar or lovingly placed in a tomb? Such a rare thing...

He should have called his partner in to examine it with him, but it was so much more interesting, so much more satisfying, to pick it up himself. He took the ossified handle in his right hand, like a staff rather than a sword, and lifted it just a bit to test its weight.

It was hefty, for certain. A touch heavier than a greatsword of the same length, and the balance was all wrong. But it could be moved, that was the important part. It was not as heavy as he had initially assumed. It must not be of solid stone, then.

"Royce? Hey, you there?" his partner called down the tunnel after him, faint echoes cut up by the uneven stone. He knew better than that, than to yell. He was going to give them away if he kept shouting.

"I'm here," Royce called back, just loud enough for his voice to carry. "Come down, I found something where the tunnel ends."

He looked down at the relic and blinked. There were words in his eyes, in his mind, that hadn't been there before. As if they were being shown to him to read.

Lower Hintertomb Root, Layer Three.

He let go of the relic and the words were gone.

It knew.

It knew where it was. Where they were.

Did it know on its own? Or had it sifted the information out of his mind to orient itself? What was this thing? He pulled his blindfold back down over his eyes. A futile precaution.

“Royce? How much furth—? Oh,” his partner almost bumped into him emerging from the tunnel, “It’s closer than I thought.”

“How far did you think it was?”

“You were quiet for a long while. I figured you were on your way back when you answered me. What have you...” Even with his blindfold on, the shorter man’s wide-eyed expression was plain to see. “What... is that...?”

Royce looked from the object to his partner. It took effort to keep the sarcasm out of his voice, “It’s a Great One relic. I think that would be obvious, Timoth.”

“But...”

“Why is it here? I was pondering that myself,” Royce folded his free arm, “It occurs to me just now; why would we bother searching the Hintertombs for relics if we never expected to find any? Conversely, why would this be hidden here on a relatively shallow layer outside the main complex? What do you think?”

Timoth was a clever lad, he knew. It just took some prompting to tease it out of him. The shorter Choirman scratched his head by way of adjusting his hat. “Perhaps... it’s not important? Maybe it doesn’t do anything, or it doesn’t work properly... Or perhaps it was stolen and stashed here to be retrieved later?”

Not terrible inferences, given how woefully little they knew. Although it definitely did *something*. Royce shrugged, hand uncrossing to gesture loosely to the relic, “Well, we aim to find out. Let’s take it back, then.”

“Wait—” Timoth took a step forward, one hand out to stop him as he turned to pick it up, “Don’t... We shouldn’t touch it.”

“How are we going to get it out of here then?” When Timoth hesitated, Royce rolled his eyes behind his blindfold, “Timoth, we regularly chat with an actual Great One. I think picking up a... whatever this is, sword sculpture, can’t be worse for us than her presence.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, it’s just...” Timoth dug into the bag over his shoulder and drew out a mass of fabric. A large hempen sack, almost big enough for a body. An undignified, but exceedingly practical way to transport finds out of the labyrinth. He passed the sack to Royce, “This whole place has me on edge. When we get back, I’m putting in a formal request to be exempt from these expeditions. Being so far underground like this...”

Royce lifted the relic and slid the sack over its blade, tightening the drawstring around its handle. He glanced at Timoth while the Choirman opined, reading more words that weren’t there.

Stressor: Claustrophobia.

Likelihood of Panic: 7 percent.

“...It just gives me the shakes, you know?”

“Right. Let’s start making our way back then.”

Royce carried the relic over one shoulder, balancing its weight by hooking an arm over its handle and letting the flat of its hilt rest on his upper back. He’d either have to go without a light or without access to his weapon. Timoth understood and assured him the previous tunnel was unoccupied. Even if it wasn’t, they were safe. He was quite the ace with a threaded cane, after all. He would rather have the extra light.

Likelihood of Panic: 10 percent.

At Royce’s prodding, Timoth agreed to press on down the earlier passage in the direction they hadn’t gone yet. The majority of the twisting, looping rooms were empty. The occasional Watcher or rat here or there digging away at the walls, which Timoth dispatched with hesitant ease. All the while that number Royce could read from nowhere crept up. Timoth called a halt at another intersection; a larger chamber lit by abandoned Watcher lanterns that formed a Y-junction with the way they had come.

“I’m sorry, Royce. I – I need to sit down for a minute.”

“That’s alright. Take your time.”

Even that little statement made the number tick up a few points.

Likelihood of Panic: 19 percent.

Interesting.

Timoth wedged his torch in an old sconce and leaned back against the wall, head down, visibly trying to calm his breathing. Royce let him rest while he unwrapped the relic to take another look at it. Nothing about its appearance had changed. The central eye may have been a bit more glassy, more organic and alive-looking. Or he may have been imagining it.

“Can we head back yet and meet up with the others?”

“You don’t want to see how far this goes?” He knew it was cruel to even propose it, having proof of his partner’s phobia. But seeing Timoth’s mood quantified, it was so tempting to see how far he could push the other man.

“No, I don’t. Can we please just go back?” Strange that he would ask for permission. They were equals, and they both knew splitting up was worse than unwise. “Hey,” Timoth had lifted his head, Royce could feel his glare from across the room, “Put that thing away. Come on, Royce. This place is bad enough.”

The number jumped. And the words changed.

Likelihood of Betrayal: 32 percent.

Very interesting.

“I just wanted another look at it. Gods know once we turn it in to the Conductor, we probably won’t get to see it again.” An exaggeration, but the chances of it being locked away and slated for study at some distant date were high.

Timoth stayed crouched and silent. Royce watched the number tick up slowly. How did the relic know to begin with? Could Timoth see a companion measure for him? What would it say?

“You were down there for almost twenty minutes before I called you,” Timoth spoke at length. “You were a two-minute walk away. Why didn’t you say anything when you first found it?”

Likelihood of Betrayal: 47 percent.

Leaps and bounds with this lad.

“I didn’t realize it was that long.”

“What’s going on, Royce?” Timoth pushed himself to his feet, “What’s it doing? Is it speaking to you? Are you seeing or hearing things? *What?*”

“Timoth, you need to keep your voice down.”

“Don’t tell me to be quiet, you’re not answering me!” Timoth flipped his threaded cane from a walking grip to a combat one. An easy, reflexive motion.

Likelihood of Betrayal: 67 percent.

Royce lifted a hand and lowered it slowly, palm down, a gesture for his partner to do the same. As calm as he hoped to look, he felt his voice hitch, “Put the weapon down, Timoth. You’re being irrational. Quite irrational.”

In open defiance of his suggestion, Timoth struck the tip of his cane on the floor, splitting its length into a segmented whip. “You let go of that *thing*, then we’ll talk!”

Let go? Royce blinked. Yes, he did indeed still have a hand around the ossified grip, he hadn’t even realized. Of course, how else would he be watching Timoth’s treasonous impulse rise so accurately?

Likelihood of Betrayal: 89 percent.

“*Royce!?*” Timoth leaned in, ready to take a step forward.

It was annoying. More than frightening, or threatening, more than anything else. His reply was automatic, condescending, “Stop shouting.”

Timoth stepped in and tugged the length of his whip up and out to the side, winding up to lash down and across with it. Royce took the handle of the relic in both hands and stepped forward in turn. Lunging inside of Timoth's reach he swung the length of the relic upward, knocking the other man's arm and weapon aside. There was a crackle and hum of pale blue light – arcane energy along the relic's blade. Royce swung down. The stone weight and chisel teeth of the relic bit hard into the Choirman's front, knocking him onto his back and splitting his chest open in a burst of blood and blue mist.

Timoth tried to lift his head, his trembling broken arm. He gave a gurgle of pain and confusion before falling limp.

No more numbers. No more words.

Royce tugged the mantle down from his face to breathe more easily, tomb stench be damned. He was no stranger to death, but it had been a long time since he had taken a life outside the Hunt.

He lifted the blade of the relic out of his ex-partner's body. The eyes were awake, all of them. The small ones faded back into empty pits after a few seconds and the large one calmed as the arcane glow left the object. Unfortunate that this was its first field test. And unfortunate that it was now stained with blood that was identifiably human.

A faint echo of movement sounded from one of the paths of the Y-junction. Watchers, or worse. Why had Timoth felt the need to be so loud? Royce took only a moment to quickly wipe down the relic with the length of Timoth's robes before covering it with the sack again. No one would come back this way if they knew the route was dangerous.

Royce pondered the spots of blood on his own robes as he retraced their steps back to the rest of the Choir expedition. Most of it was from labyrinth denizens. A few stray specks of human blood would go unnoticed. Like the surgical dress of the Healing Church, there were subtle enchantments woven into Choir attire; to protect the wearer from illness, but also to ensure the stains of their bloody work washed out clean and pure.

It was by no means a perfect crime, but there was a comfortable degree of deniability.

Steps to the Entrance: 644.

He met the other members of the expedition near the entrance stair, coming back to them at a jog. They waved their torches in salute, beckoning him over. There were two other working pairs; three men and a woman in total. The woman spoke first, stepping up to examine him.

"Royce! What happened, where's Timoth?"

"Bloodlickers. I..." Royce shook his head, "Couldn't bring him back. The relic was more important." Hopefully that was enough. With their poisonous spit and penchant for feeding on corpses, bloodlickers were the sort of thing one didn't go back to. They should be an ideal cover for a body left behind.

The woman nodded solemnly, the others bowed their heads and touched their hat brims in respect. “That’s a shame. He was a bright lad, he deserved better... At least this place is a somewhat proper tomb.” She shifted her weight, trying to lean around him to see what he was carrying. “So, what have you found?”

Royce flipped the relic down off his shoulder and uncovered it partway, enough to show the fin-like hilt and the top of its central eye. “I have no idea, but it has the right look.”

Expressions once solemn turned to nods of agreement. The Choir gathered, said a short prayer for their fallen brother, and ascended to the surface.

Chapter 2: Unusual Effects

Chapter Summary

A brief look at the Choir in the aftermath of the expedition.

The Choir held a proper memorial service for their lost member after the expedition returned to their chapel in the Upper Cathedral Ward. Their Conductor Brigitte led them in prayer and a brief meditation before they were dismissed; the expedition members summoned to her office to be debriefed.

They were asked in turn to describe their expedition to the Conductor while a scribe recorded their accounts. The formations and architecture they saw, the creatures they encountered, the items they retrieved, any injuries or strange phenomena they may have experienced. Royce gave his account after the first pair were finished. He described the location and manner in which the relic had been hidden, the route he and Timoth took, and the pack of bloodlickers they had been unable to fend off, burdened as they were with the artifact. He neglected to describe the effect the relic seemed to have. It was better left for a formal write-up.

The pair after him also mentioned encountering bloodlickers on their route, Royce was inwardly relieved to learn. The one woman in the group, Bailey, spoke of them with a particular snarl of contempt. Her tone made the scribe, a girl younger than the majority, visibly uncomfortable. She looked to Brigitte for reassurance, but the Conductor merely gestured for her to continue writing.

At the conclusion of the debriefing, Brigitte thanked them for their efforts and encouraged them to rest before returning to their work in the chapel. She asked Royce to stay behind when the others were dismissed.

Brigitte nodded to her scribe, “Melanie, you can stop recording now. Thank-you. You may leave if you wish.”

The younger girl, just a few years into her teens, nodded politely and began packing away her equipment. Taking her time to linger and listen.

The Conductor stood from her chair and moved around to the front of her desk to lean back on it. She took a pause for a breath, then, “A shame what happened to Timoth. I’m sorry for his loss.”

“We all are.” Without the benefit of his blindfold cap, Royce avoided eye contact by staring ahead and down at the edge of Brigitte’s desk. Their mutual grief felt like a formality.

Indeed, Brigitte was a woman of business, “Did you experience any unusual effects when interacting with the artifact?”

“I did.”

“Why did you not say such in your debriefing?”

“The effect was... unique. Difficult to describe. I thought it would be better left to a separate report.

“I see... And I presume you will be requesting permission to continue studying the artifact?”

“Yes. May I?”

“Of course,” Brigitte smiled, “You already have some familiarity with the relic. I trust you to do what you see fit.”

Royce bowed his head, “Thank-you, Conductor.”

As the Choir Conductor, Brigitte was primarily a figurehead. Although it did fall to her to direct and assign research as needed, her primary role was maintaining contact between the Choir and the other officials of the Healing Church. As such she was often away from the chapel or tied up in correspondence. The Choir itself functioned largely without her guidance, as intended. Aside from Brigitte there was no official hierarchy among the Choir members. They were, as they often reminded one another as an ironical barb when arguments arose, all equals.

“Do you have any questions for me before you are dismissed, Royce?”

“I do, actually. Why have we chosen to focus our efforts on the Hintertombs? Apart from one lucky find, prior expeditions to the Hintertombs have yielded little in the way of significant materials or discoveries. It rather seems a waste to me.”

Brigitte nodded, “I can see why, and given that logic I know you won’t find my explanation entirely satisfactory, but those lucky finds are exactly what we are betting on. The Hintertombs are constantly expanding and changing as the Watchers dig ever deeper and wider. While the excavations are crude, there is always the chance they will connect to something we would be unable to reach ourselves.”

Royce hummed, brows lowering. Brigitte lifted her hands and shrugged.

“Obviously the exception does not prove the rule. The Hintertombs are of interest because of their ever-expanding nature. Much of the lower labyrinth has already been explored in the past...” She turned grim for a moment, “Recovering the Daughter of the Cosmos took a heavy toll on the Church’s numbers and resources. Although we have not been expressly forbidden from plumbing the lowest levels, it is well known they are much more dangerous than the Hintertombs. And given that we have already recovered much of what would be of interest there, it is advisable to avoid the lowest levels.”

Royce nodded, mulling over her words, “Thank-you for your transparency, Conductor.”

“And thank-you again for your effort, Royce. As with the others, I encourage you to take time to rest before resuming any work. You are dismissed.”

-V-

The Choir chapel was situated at the very top of Yharnam’s Cathedral ward. The access to ground level extended up from the Church Workshop tower, and the bulk of the chapel was built out from the nearby cliffside. While the Choir themselves referred to their private aerie as a chapel, most Yharnamites knew it as the Orphanage.

The ill-sounding mystery of it kept the public’s attention away. In a place like Yharnam, one’s blood ties – their spouse, family, and parentage – were essential bonds that made up one’s social being. Those without such ties had an unspoken taboo about them, and it was these sad, unmoored little souls that made up the first members of the Choir. Since then, the city’s parentless were taken into the care of the Church, and those with the right kind of potential became apprentices, and eventually members, of the Choir.

From their place high above Yharnam, they had an unrivalled view of the city’s spread and skyline. The intricate spires and steeples, the shadowed gables, arched windows, the dull sheen of wrought iron and slate shingles. The smoke.

Royce often found himself leaning on the carved rails around the chapel’s courtyard, looking down at the rest of Yharnam. There was always smoke over the city. Shy wisps of it on warm, clear days, thick clouds of it when the weather turned cold. So thick sometimes it turned the snow grey with ash as the city stoked its countless fires to stay warm.

It was worst on nights of the Hunt. Smoke would hang like a pall over Yharnam, lit from below by the bilious yellow-orange of bonfires, torches, and pyres. From above it was difficult to tell if the city itself was burning. One had to wait until morning when the smoke cleared to see if Yharnam still stood.

Of course, not all Hunts were so catastrophic. On nights when the full moon was distant and mild, the Hunt took on the air of a chore. The common man could easily participate with the guidance of a proper Hunter. Blood was spilled, beasts were slain and burned, and the streets were cleansed for another lunar cycle. It was only when the moon hove close and balefully bright that Yharnam was in any true danger.

“I thought Brigitte said you weren’t allowed to smoke anymore.”

Bailey was at his side. Royce paused to force an awareness of his automatic motions. He’d been filling and tamping his pipe while he leaned on the railing looking down, hands guided entirely by the force of habit.

“And who is she, my mother?” he replied. They scoffed in unison. Church orphans, both of them. He bit the stem of his pipe to search out a match, struck it and lit, and flicked the matchstick over the rail into the abyss of the city below. He took a short draw, “Not allowed *inside*, specifically in the library or dormitories. Or near the emissaries.”

“What about the common rooms?”

“With permission and an open window.”

“Fair enough.”

Quiet again. Bailey was a rare creature; a scholar that knew when to stop talking. He appreciated that prudent quiet. She had a watchful presence. Others felt the need to monitor themselves around her, but he found her passive attention refreshing. He glanced over at her. She was short, with long dark hair that she kept tied up in an ornate wrap when not wearing her hat. They were both dressed casually being off-duty, hatless and in only the most basic layers of their robes.

“Did you want to talk?” he asked her without looking.

“About what?”

“Timoth, I assume.”

Bailey deftly turned the offer back on him, “How are you feeling?”

“Well enough, I suppose. Everyone seems to think I’m upset about it.”

“Are you?”

He looked to her, one brow raised, “Are *you*?”

Bailey shrugged, “No.”

He shrugged back, “There you go.” Not upset. Well, not sad, at least. Perhaps a bit upset. Still frustrated, really, that he’d had to take an ally’s life in self-defense. Over something so foolish. A phobia, a bad decision, and a misunderstanding. It bothered him, but not in the way the others assumed. “How are the others taking it?”

Bailey leaned on the railing and looked down, “Varies. About as you’d expect. I think Logan is trying to show the rest of us up by being the first to go back to work.”

Royce huffed smoke through his teeth, “Figures. What’s he been up to?”

“Communing with Ebrietas. Trying to, anyway. Seems she’s in one of her moods again, he’s been having trouble.” She stepped back from the railing and smirked at him, “Of course he wouldn’t want you knowing that he probably needs help.”

“Who’s helping?” He took a long draw and exhaled a cloud of his own into Yharnam’s sky, “Clearly I’m just butting in where I’m not wanted and stealing his thunder.”

Bailey chuckled, "I figured you would."

"I'd rather give it some time, since we returned just yesterday, but..." he tapped a finger against the belly of his pipe, "Let me finish this and clean it out, then I'll go meddle where I'm not wanted."

Chapter 3: "Oh, Fair Maiden"

Chapter Summary

Royce communes with Ebrietas, and has an argument with a fellow Choirman.

The Choir were keepers of some of the Healing Church's deepest secrets. Their knowledge of blood, of its types and its uses, of diseases and ministration, of the creatures that lived beyond this world, all stemmed from one source. Ages ago, deep beneath Yharnam in the labyrinth constructed by the ancient Pthumerians, Healing Church prospectors found it. A Great One, left behind on earth in some distant time by its own kind. The Church adopted this creature, took it back to the surface and hid it away to be studied. The Choir were tasked with its care and scrutiny, to learn all they could from it and perhaps foster relations with other creatures from beyond the sky.

They called it Ebrietas, Daughter of the Cosmos. She was many things to the Choir. In some senses a friend, a mentor, and a guest – in others, a test subject, a curiosity, a prisoner. It was the Choir's purpose to protect Ebrietas and learn from her, but that also entailed keeping her hidden, restricted, and observing her closely.

Ebrietas's chamber was attached to the main chapel, separated by only an elevator and a short passage. One could be forgiven for mistaking it for a natural cave. It was in fact once a wing of the chapel that extended even further past the complex. Long since collapsed into ruin, the stone in the cavernous space had become warped by the Great One's alien presence and the strange magics she wielded when her temper took her.

Royce and Bailey took the time to change into their proper Choir robes. They found Logan loitering in the upper gallery of the chapel nave, complaining loudly to another Choirman about how difficult Ebrietas was being.

Royce adjusted his hat, blindfold down, intending to move casually past him on the narrow platform, but Logan stepped in his way.

"Where are *you* going?"

"To commune with Ebrietas," he said simply.

Logan lifted one side of his blindfold to show a sardonic raised eyebrow, "Oh really. You know she's not talking to anyone, right?"

Royce left a silent pause by way of reply, then tried to move past Logan again. The other man grabbed the gallery railing to block his path again.

"Hey! Did you get approval for that?"

“Did *you*?”

Logan’s face scrunched up when Bailey and the other Choirman sniggered at him. He stepped aside, arms folded. “Just don’t make it worse,” he grumbled. Royce swept past him with a smile.

Ebrietas’s chamber was quite large, some hundred or more feet in both directions, and almost as high as it was wide. Enough room for the Great One to move around comfortably. She sat hunched over in the far corner, wings folded, curled up on herself in an unhappy heap.

Royce paced himself crossing the room, giving her ample time to realize he was there. Approaching the Great One was like walking from one climate into another. The air felt different around her in a way a human mind struggled to quantify. The temperature moved not up or down but sideways somehow, a not-quite-tactile current stirring around her. A presence that extended beyond the physical.

He stopped a respectful distance away and waited a moment. Nothing. Ebrietas was sulking, he had seen her do this before. She would pretend to ignore him for as long as she wanted, fully aware that the Choir would always let her make the first move.

There was an element of formality she expected as well. If it had been some time since the last communion, or if she was in a dour mood, she expected a proper greeting before conversing. A particular gesture that indicated a desire to communicate. Royce extended his arms – one outward to the side and parallel to the ground, palm up; the other upwards, palm in – and waited.

The origin of the gesture was unclear. It was something from the very oldest iteration of the Choir that they had preserved. Some liked to joke that its origin was accidental; that the first tomb prospector to encounter Ebrietas had panicked and dropped his weapons, freezing in this position, and the Great One had taken it as a gesture of peace, allowing him to approach. Others posited it was a custom developed by the Pthumerians via regular contact with the Great Ones, perhaps in imitation of a sign or rune the cosmic beings recognized as a greeting.

Regardless, the gesture to make contact had to be held for some time. After about a minute he switched arms, tilting to form an L in the other direction. Something about the switch was essential, most cosmic beings would only engage once the greeter switched sides. Perhaps it was a signal within a signal, a second extension of the invitation. *I am ready to speak now, are you?*

Still nothing. Ebrietas kept her back to him. Her wings stirred, wafting as if to brush him away. “Come now,” he whispered, more to himself than to her, changing arms again, “Come on now...”

The second switch got her attention. The Daughter of the Cosmos turned slowly, shifting her bulk around to face him. She was... strange, to say the least. Her appearance, no matter how often one visited her, was always viscerally unsettling at the very first impression, before the mind and body calmed. Her head was a massive orb of shell partly covering a

mane of tubules, like the suckers of a sea creature. Among these tubules were two stalks bearing emerald eyes as large as a man's fist. The shell of her face split in half up the middle, when she vocalized it would flex open to reveal tender red meat beneath.

The rest of her body was a pale mass of flesh that formed the vaguest suggestion of a kneeling bipedal creature. Her back was hunched, and her shoulders bore multiple sets of tentacle limbs, the main pairs bifurcated like a set of abstract hands. Her wings extended from lower on her back; venous frames like the wings of a bat made not from bone and flesh but the blood-vessels within. Her lower body terminated in two large tapering tails, each like the foot of a slug in both appearance and function. Even hunched over she was nearly five times his height.

Ebrietas faced him but did not otherwise move. He had her permission to come near. Royce lowered his arms and approached at a measured walk. Closer now, her upset was palpable. The air around her became difficult to breathe; as one might struggle to inhale when facing into the wind, but also as if the air around him was moving away, fleeing from him, drawn to Ebrietas.

"Oh, fair maiden, why is it that you weep?" His personal greeting to her was a line from a psalm. Not written about her in specific, but she seemed to like the association. "What troubles you, Ebrietas?"

She let out a sound. A low rumble coupled with a muffled trumpeting. A mournful sigh. He extended a hand and one of her tendrils wrapped around it. She leaned closer as he stepped in to be within arm's reach of her.

"What troubles you?"

Among the tangle of impressions, he heard a memory of a sound. No distinct words, but the exact tone and pitch of Timoth's voice. She knew he had not come back. She knew something had happened to him, and she missed him.

What had happened to Timoth?

He couldn't lie to her, but he could avoid telling her. He shunted the memory aside with a thought of refusal and she seemed to understand. He didn't want to talk about it. The others could tell her when she was more receptive to company.

There was a sense of relief about her. She had at least been able to express her concern to someone. If there were others who had willing answers for her, she was content to wait for them. The air around her loosened somewhat.

Ebrietas looped a tendril around Royce's middle and pulled him closer, leaning her head down to touch him. Her sensory suckers prodded the fabric of his robes, green eyes twitching, flicking up and down his form. He patted her shell-cheek with his free hand while she examined him, biting back a flustered smile. It was like being sniffed by a very, *very* large dog.

She sent him impressions to shape her message; embers, orange light, a field of burnt and limbless trees. She could smell the smoke on him. It always seemed to baffle her why he smelled like smoke, yet only on occasion. He had tried to explain the habit to her before, but she had dismissed it as nonsense. No living creature would do that willingly, he must be joking. He got the same response when he tried to explain to her what alcohol was. Such a ludicrous jest, that humans would willingly poison themselves, and for fun!

Ebrietas lurched back with a chittering honk. She had found something new about him. Something was different. Eyes... she was asking about the eyes from the labyrinth. She had sensed his contact with the strange new relic. Had she smelled it on him? Or had it left some other mark only something like her could detect?

“Yes, I found something fascinating. Really quite fascinating. I wonder if you know what it might be. I’d like you to help me study it. The way it speaks to me is very different from what you do. It shows me words, but only words. What it says must be read, so I wonder if it was meant for humans to use.” Royce gave the tendril around his hand a squeeze, “What do you think? Will you help me study it?”

Ebrietas settled back on her haunches to ponder the request, letting go of his hand. A deep, quiet noise began emanating from her; the Great One’s thinking-sound was like the roil of the sea.

“It doesn’t have to be right now, not right this instant. We can take some time if you like.”

Ebrietas burbled at him. That was not a sound he was familiar with, perhaps she felt he was rushing her. At length her whooshing sounds stopped. No answer to his question. Royce nodded. He could always ask her again later.

“Would you like to sit together for a while? We don’t have to talk, we can just sit...”

Ebrietas was already turning away back to her corner. She let out another rumbling sigh.

“I’ll tell the others to leave you alone for a while, then, shall I?”

She wafted her wings at him. Dismissive, but a confirmation of his last offer. She wanted to be by herself for a time.

-/-

Rarely was there ever a complete halt to activity at the chapel. With only about two dozen of them in total, there were always tasks waiting. Given that their cosmic guests were most active when the stars were out, it was common for Choirmen to spend time with the kin or Ebrietas well after dark and into the wee hours before sunrise. Even when the kin and Daughter of the cosmos were inactive, as they were now, there were still overnight duties to be done; meal preparation, cleaning, guard duty, astronomical observation.

In the absence of assigned work, most the Choir were still night-owls by habit, lingering in their various common rooms before retiring to the dormitories for the night.

Bailey sat cross-legged in a chair with a book on her lap, dressed in her nightgown and draped with a blanket. One elbow propped on the arm of her chair, her head in that hand, the other hand lazily traced text on the pages before her. Royce sat across from her by an open window, equivalently casual in just a shirt and trousers, leaning on the sill and finishing up the dregs of his pipe. Another man sat with them, nearest to the small hearth. Tall and broad, but he worked with a delicate hand at the sewing that occupied his attention.

They were content to ignore one another until the common room door swung open. Royce and Bailey looked up to acknowledge the newcomer; Logan.

“Hey, Bailey, where’s Nina?” he asked without greeting or pretense.

“She’s on kitchen duty tonight. You’d know that if you listened to anything she said,” Bailey’s attention was back on her book, she missed Logan’s indignant twitch.

“I listen to her,” Logan huffed and crossed his arms, “I just forgot.” He looked over at Royce, seated furthest from the door. “And what do you have to say for yourself?”

“Whatever could you *possibly* mean by that?” he drew the words out through a mouthful of smoke, facing out the window.

“Butting in on my commune with Ebrietas!” Logan’s attention snapped to Bailey, “What did you say to him?”

“Don’t pin this on me. I merely observed that you were struggling.”

Logan fumed in silence for a moment until he couldn’t contain his frustration, “*Well!?*” he spread his arms in a snap, demanding an answer.

Royce and Bailey looked over in unison but gave no reply. The man by the hearth spoke up, looking at Bailey, “Bailey, you usually use a mattress stitch for tears like this, right?”

“If it’s not frayed, just backstitch it together. If it’s fraying, fold the edges like a new seam and mattress stitch it into a dart. It’s not as pretty but it holds.”

“Thanks.”

“*Hey!*”

“Ebrietas was upset about Timoth and wanted to be left alone, despite your best efforts to pester her,” Royce tapped out his pipe over the windowsill, “Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Was that so hard? You’d think you people being raised by priests would have taught you some manners.”

Royce, Bailey, and the other man turned their attention to Logan simultaneously in lethal silence. Logan continued his tirade.

“You spend all this time buried in history books you’d think you could learn how to show some respect to your—”

“Our what?” The man by the hearth cut him off.

“Your...” Logan hesitated. Royce spoke in the pause.

“That’s an excellent question, Uilleam. Our what, exactly? You’re not our elder. What’s that word?” He made a circling gesture with his empty pipe, “There’s another word that goes in that phrase, isn’t there?”

Logan’s hands clenched into fists, his face beginning to redden. Royce continued.

“You think being able to trace your blood makes you superior to us in some way? It doesn’t. Are you really that unsure of your place in the world that you try to hold your parentage over a group of orphaned scholars to make yourself feel better? That sort of desperate posturing is a sure sign of a frail heart and an empty mind.”

Bailey and Uilleam looked from Royce to Logan and back, wide-eyed.

“You – you can’t talk to me like that!”

Green eyes lit a wicked smile, “And what will you do, cry to mother? Or perhaps just Brigitte, since she’s nearer.” Royce settled back in his chair, setting his pipe aside and shaking his head, “Ye gods, name a man after a martyr and he thinks himself a saint,” he muttered.

Logan lunged across the room, seizing Royce by the collar of his loose shirt, trying to pull him upright. “Say that to my face, you bastard!”

Royce took his hands with an unsettling gentleness, freeing his collar. He disliked using his height to intimidate people, but sometimes it was the easiest card to play. He stood up straight and looked down at Logan. A full head taller than the other man. Still holding his hands. He spoke in a low, precise tone.

“I treat my equals with exactly as much respect as I believe they deserve. Exactly as much. You joined the Choir by the grace of nepotism alone. Respect is earned, and you have accomplished nothing to earn it from me. You do poor work with an even poorer attitude. You are brash, rude, and entitled. And if you try to hold yourself above me again, I am going to cut you back down to my level. Because we are all equals here,” he squeezed Logan’s hands before letting them go, “and you’d do well to remember that.”

Logan’s hands snapped back down to his sides. He took a step backward, then turned and fled the common room at a brisk walk. The silence stretched for a moment until Bailey spoke.

“That was cold.” Impossible to tell if she was concerned or impressed.

Royce ignored her comment, “I’m going to turn in. Goodnight, Bailey, Uilleam.”

They watched him leave for the dormitories with a mix of caution and confusion. Uilleam checked his sewing over and resumed his mending. Bailey marked her place in her book and set it down.

“Well,” Uilleam pulled his thread with renewed confidence, “I’ve seen my share of fights, but I’ve never seen a man get punched squarely in the ego like that.”

Bailey just hummed.

“Kind of refreshing, don’t you think?”

She shook her head.

“Heading to bed, then?”

“Not for a bit... Tell me how things were here while we were away.”

Chapter 4: Not Unlike Children

Chapter Summary

Another brief look at the Choir and their cosmic kin. Royce spends some time studying the artifact from the Hintertombs.

It felt wrong to name the thing. No appellation seemed to stick. Any effort to pin down its nature with a simple title seemed to slip off and be forgotten or feel wrong on the lips when spoken. The best he managed was the ‘Eye of Progress’; that stuck well enough to be used repeatedly.

After a mandatory rest, Royce spent his time with the Eye, recording and describing it. A detailed drawing of it to start, including its dimensions – irritatingly inconsistent, it seemed to change shape ever so slightly when left alone, so he was only able to approximate.

Its blue-green stone blade was etched with curving, almost organic patterns. They felt familiar, but the link eluded him. The eye in it behaved more like a glass ornament than a living organ. It showed only the tiniest reaction to changes in light and did not track moving objects at all. The smaller empty pits, which he knew could become eyes, showed no response to stimulus.

The odd flanges and chisel-like projections near the base of its blade resembled bone and teeth, and indeed they were. They could be etched and chipped, any material removed could be dissolved in acid. And it regrew with blood.

Not his own, obviously. He knew better than to simply feed an unidentified Great One relic his own blood without some experimentation first. The Church kept jars upon jars of the stuff for various purposes. What he gave it was just a basic blend of low-grade blood – the ‘cooking wine’ of ministration supply.

The Eye’s unwieldy size and weight made him doubt it was meant to be used as a weapon, despite its shape. He suspected instead it was meant to be some kind of tool or interface, its hilt and handle intended for ease of transport. If it was intended for use by Pthumerians, then its size made sense. Its words, as well, lent credence to the theory. When he began working with it again it would present him with words and numbers to read. The Eye observed, counted things, and reported them back to him. Most often it was irrelevant trivia.

Pages: 485, when a book was set down near it.

Steps Taken: 76, when he ceased pacing the room.

Times overheard: 2, when someone passed by in the hallway outside and heard him

speaking to himself.

Other times it would offer more telling insights. He came to rely on it to track the time he spent digging through old manuscripts for reference to it, experimenting with it, or writing about it.

Time worked: 7 hours, 52 minutes.

But it was the arcane charge. That burst of energy the Eye had yielded when he fought Timoth with it. That was what vexed him most. What purpose did that serve? It had taken days of trial-and-error testing to finally determine the trigger for it. The relic itself changed shape when engaged – what did that mean? Was it conforming better to whatever utility purpose it was meant to serve? Was it actually a weapon changing to a more aggressive configuration?

All the work yielded was more questions. It was so rewarding but so maddening at the same time. But that was why he was here, what he loved most about the Choir. The disturbing degree of intellectual freedom.

A knock made him gasp and fumble his pen, dropping it under the work table. Someone, he recognized the high female voice as Nina, called to him from outside the small study room.

“Royce? You still at work in there?”

“Yes,” he sighed, trying to calm his breathing.

“You should probably take a break, it’s getting late. Also, the others wanted to know if, um...” he heard her trying the knob, “Can I come in?”

“Yes.”

Nina opened the door a crack, just enough to lean her head and shoulders in. She was taller than Bailey, slender and willowy, she wore her straw-blonde hair back in braids. She drummed her fingers on the edge of the door, “The others were out with the emissaries in the gardens and they were wondering if you, um,” she glanced away, “wanted to come out to play?”

Royce’s irritation softened into a reluctant smile, “No, thank-you. You’re right that I should get some fresh air, but I’m not really in the mood for a game. I’ll be out shortly.”

Nina gave him a little wave, “Well, you know where to find us!” and she was gone, leaving the door ajar.

Royce found his pen and set it down on the table with his notes alongside the Eye of Progress. He touched the stone blade one last time as if to say goodbye to it.

Time worked: 8 hours, 33 minutes.

Seemed about right.

The Choir chapel was home to creatures other than Ebrietas and the Choir themselves. Creatures a sort of step in between human and Great One. They had been human once, but through experimentation had ascended, attained a new form and mind. Those in the care of the Orphanage that did not show potential for study or politics were instead transformed. The Church called creatures of their kind ‘kin of the cosmos,’ the Choir in specific referred to their unusual peers as simply ‘the emissaries.’

These celestial emissaries had been the first to properly commune with Ebrietas and, using their once-human understanding as a bridge, the Choir themselves were soon able to gain a degree of understanding about how she communicated. The most detailed information from her still came through the emissaries, but most Choirmen could now establish a loose connection with the Great One for less pressing questions.

The celestial emissaries, though grown in body, had become young in mind. There was a kind of innocence about them that made them ideal for communication and accomplishing a kind of cultural exchange with Ebrietas, but it also meant they bored easily and had to be cared for in a way not unlike children. For many of the Choir, it was a welcome diversion. The orphans of Yharnam and the Cosmos coming together to recapture the scraps of a mutually lost childhood.

Half a dozen Choirmen – fully robed and capped, how ridiculous – and eight emissaries were using the lower portion of the lumenflower gardens as a makeshift pitch, playing a simple game of football. Nina was goaltending for her side; Royce could tell it was her by her bearing and the braids looping out from under her cap. He walked around the raised outer path of the garden, pausing for a bit to watch the game.

The emissaries were not the most coordinated creatures, hence their extra number. They certainly needed them to make it a fair game. Blue-grey gelatinous humanoids with oversized heads like bulbous squids’ mantles, they toddled after the ball with a total lack of grace. The Choirmen, many being scholars rather than athletes, were a relatively even match.

Nina waved to him as he passed by – taking a ball to the gut while her head was turned. She coughed and laughed, winded but game to continue, and kicked the ball back into the pitch. Royce left for the outer terraces instead; he would walk the gardens when they were quieter.

-\\-

Lumenflowers were not unlike sunflowers; tall, broad-faced flowers with silvery rather than yellow petals. Their blooms opened under starlight rather than during the day. According to the oldest members of the Choir, they were something brought to earth by the Great Ones.

The Choir cultivated them for a number of purposes. For their aesthetics, certainly, for the large blooms were charming even when closed in the daytime. But also for more practical reasons; their presence seemed to comfort Ebrietas and soothe the unpredictable agitations of the kin. Lastly, their leaves and stalks hosted the tiny phantasms that lived as symbiotes to

Great Ones; invertebrates that could be harvested for study or used as foci to channel arcane energy.

Supposedly the Healing Church had once kept larger lumenflower gardens that were home to some impressively large specimens, but the structures supporting them had since been abandoned, leaving only the small courtyard at the heart of the Choir chapel.

Royce picked a phantasm from his sleeve and set it back on the flower he had just brushed against. One tended to find themselves covered in the tiny pearlescent things when maintaining the plants at night. He wasn't gardening, just wading through the plants, taking in their moon-scented blooms and clearing his head before turning in for the night.

Bailey joined him, sitting on the steps down to the garden and looking up at the sky. She stayed silent until he made his way around to her, leaning on a column by where she sat.

"You see Logan on your way out?" she asked.

"No."

"I think he's on kitchen duty, just wondered if you bumped into him."

"No, I haven't." He looked up at her, "Should you be up right now?"

Bailey shrugged, "I traded Johann for laundry duty, so I've been napping all day. And I wanted to talk to you."

"Really?" Royce feigned the barest hint of surprise, "You make it seem like such a chore at every other hour of the day."

Bailey just huffed at him, still looking up. He followed her gaze. Sparse clouds obscured a handful of stars, a slender waxing crescent moon gliding down toward the horizon.

"We missed the last full during the expedition," he mused.

"Next full moon will be at perigee," Bailey glanced over to see his manner stiffen.

He didn't look her way, "Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?"

"I assume you'll be joining the Hunt again."

"Of course."

"Have you talked to Brigitte yet?"

"Not yet."

"Yurie will be headed to Byrgenwerth before then. She'll probably be stationed there over the night of the Hunt. Do you think Brigitte will send you with her?"

Royce relaxed a bit, “I hope not. I’ve done a night shift at Byrgenwerth before. It was boring.”

Bailey smiled at him, “You’d rather be out cleansing the foul streets with the rest of the mob?”

“If it’s more interesting.”

She chuckled, “You should calm that bloodlust of yours.” He looked over at her, green eyes wide. She met his expression with a neutral half-smile, “It might get you in trouble.”

Royce kept his attention on her, determined not to give anything away with his expression. Eventually Bailey looked away, back up to the sky, and he had a chance to relax.

“What’s it like?” she asked.

“You mean the Hunt? About what you’d expect.”

“What about during a perigee moon? I’ve heard it’s worse then.”

“It is... Wait, you said *Yurie* was going to Byrgenwerth? I thought we had good relations with them.”

“That doesn’t bode well for them, does it?”

“No...” Yurie was a well-respected Choirwoman, she had once refused the position of Conductor to maintain her work in the field. While a diligent scholar, the rest of the Choir knew Yurie better as a skilled fighter and assassin. If she was sent somewhere, it was assured to be a bloody assignment. Royce hummed, considering the Choir’s other field agents, “Have we heard anything from Henri or Preston?”

“Not that I know of. I don’t expect Yahar’gul would yield its secrets easily. Still, you’d think we would have heard something by now. Perhaps it’s hard to find a safe way to contact us.”

“Let’s hope that’s all it is.”

A pause. Royce glanced at Bailey. She was looking up at the sky. When she noticed she had his attention, she patted the stair next to her, beckoning him to sit. He mounted the steps, lingering on the stair she indicated, but instead passed her by, hands folded behind his back.

“I’m going to turn in. Goodnight, Bailey.”

“Rest well.”

Chapter 5: Glaringly Incomplete

Chapter Summary

Royce quits his day job.

Information 60 percent complete.

The words hung in his eyes while he listened to the otherworldly warbling of Ebrietas communicating with her kin. Two other Choirmen and two of the blue-skinned emissaries were also in attendance, plying the Daughter of the Cosmos with questions while Royce observed the Eye of Progress.

Dividing his attention between the conversation and the Eye should not have been difficult, watching for changes in the Eye's behavior as the questions were answered. But the words stung his mind and dragged his focus away. Sixty percent? What was missing?

And how did it know?

That was all the Eye showed him now. He blinked the words away to listen to the conversation. The psychic contact spilled over to all present, not just the inquirers. The Eye was right, there was something missing. Sensations dulled as if wrapped in cotton and wordless phrases cut short. Pieces removed. Ebrietas was withholding something.

They were asking about the origin of the Plague of Beasts. What was the source of the illness? They knew all too well how it spread but where did it first come from? What made blood become beast blood, and why did it have such strange, transformative effects on humans? Ebrietas skirted their questions. She spoke of blood as a cure and reflected on the knowledge of ministration she had shared in the past. Her word for blood – if it could be called a word – was like the sound of a heartbeat and a rush of liquid. An unsettling visceral sound.

The Choirmen chased the question in circles until both they and Ebrietas began to tire of the communion. She changed her tune here; she maintained that was all she knew, that there was nothing more she could tell them on the matter. Royce mulled the number over as both parties bid their formal goodbyes.

Sixty percent... Somewhere in there was a considerable omission. He watched Ebrietas as his own group began to move away, focusing on a thought.

Why are you lying to us?

The mental contact retreated.

He followed the group away, distracted by his own thoughts until Logan – of course it was Logan – snapped at him near the entrance to the chapel building.

“Damn it, Royce!”

“What?”

“Can you not carry that *thing*,” Logan gestured to the Eye of Progress, “like a damn *pike* while we’re trying to get into the elevator? You almost hit me.”

Royce blinked. He had a habit of carrying the Eye over his shoulder, like a greatsword or a spear. To satisfy Logan’s complaint he flipped it teeth-down, resting it on his foot.

When they crowded into the elevator, the emissaries shied away from the Eye. Ebrietas had not recognized the relic when asked and had not expressed any strong opinions on it. This at least, seemed truthful. The Eye itself had assessed her reaction as *Intention: Neutral*.

But...

Sixty percent?

All the decades of contact, of research and experimentation, and what Ebrietas had told them was just over half of... What? Half of *all* that she knew? If that was the case, the gap was understandable. There was surely knowledge of her own culture and language and history beyond human ken that would be pointless to try to share. But the fact that the Eye had picked out that number, and in a conversation about the Plague, that was what troubled him. Sixty percent of what she knew about Blood and the Beast Plague. It was a lot, but it was not nearly enough.

And what else had she lied to them about?

-V-

Would he have been less upset if it were a lower number? If Ebrietas had only been sharing a fraction of her knowledge, rather than a glaringly incomplete majority? It was difficult to say. To know that she had been so helpful, so willing, and yet so reticent. And for so long. It was not a betrayal he could suffer lightly.

Brigitte didn’t know, he didn’t bother to tell her because she wouldn’t have cared. At most she would treat the problem with more pointed questions and yield nothing. And the others, well, the others would have tried to stop him. A few days carefully apportioning supplies and tools to a place he could easily retrieve them was all the preparation Royce could spare, but all that he needed. The night of the Hunt was fast approaching. That dire perigee moon demanded his attention.

He could have just as easily asked for permission, but it would not be granted with the condition he wanted. The Eye of Progress had to come with him. He would need its insight to

solve this, to follow the branches of sickness and corruption down to the root.

It was just before dawn. The city watchmen on the bridge to Yharnam proper would be rotating. They wouldn't stop him however; they knew better than to question a Choirman. It was their own sentries he had to be wary of, but he would be passing them at the end of their shift, and with luck they would not be quite so keen.

"And just where are you off to?"

Unlucky. Royce paused to look back over his free shoulder – the other supporting the Eye, covered in linen wraps to conceal it – at the sentry. He pushed his blindfold up with one hand to give his would-be arrestor a critical glare.

"Don't test me, Logan," he replied; quiet, almost conversational.

"Where are you going?"

"I said don't test me," Royce turned away.

"You're not leaving with that thing–"

"Are you going to stop me?" He looked back again.

Logan was halfway poised for a fight, the silver-chased canister of a Rosmarinus in hand. But his cane was leaning on the rail a few steps away, and they both knew the arcane firearm was of little use against someone garbed in their own blessed robes. Logan shifted his weight back, hesitating. "I'll tell the others," he held back a stammer, but lacked conviction.

"Go ahead. The full moon is less than four days out, that's plenty of time for enough slander to ruin a career, if you're clever."

Logan caught the implied insult and stepped forward again with a snarl, "So you're just stealing from us and walking away? You'll be branded a..." he backed off yet again when Royce adjusted his grip on the Eye.

"'Traitor' is the easy one, but I think the word you're looking for is 'Heretic.' And I'm fine with that." Part of him had always wanted a title. Royce turned back to the bridge and kept walking.

Logan followed him a few steps, audibly struggling for something to say to make him stop. He called after the now ex-Choirman with as much bile as he could muster, "You've got a target on your back, Royce!"

He stalled, turning right around to meet Logan's glare with a genuine smile. "What a quaint turn of phrase. That's the first thing out of your mouth I've ever liked." Then Royce was on his way, musing to himself as he crossed the bridge, unbothered by the city watch, drumming his fingers on the Eye's handle.

"I really rather like that."

Chapter 6: "Are you a Hunter?"

Chapter Summary

Two outsiders come to Yharnam, and make their first local connections.

“Hey, Red... We’re not going to get away with this, are we?”

The woman retrieved her sword with a grunt, prompting a rivulet of blood to pour from its now-empty space between the antlered brows of a Cleric Beast. She flicked the blade clean with a low sigh, turning to face the man who had spoken. An old friend. They had been through a lot together but this, this was without doubt the worst to date.

He was splattered with blood, they both were. Perhaps he was more clever about it; most of his face was hidden by the high collar of his overcoat and the fabric wraps shielding his eyes. From behind the collar, on that clean strip of face, she could make out an uncertain half-smile. She smiled back.

“I figured we’d come here and get us both cured but...” he pulled off his own weapons, a heavy pair of silver knuckledusters, and wiped his hands clean on the back of his coattails, “I have to say I’m not impressed. Yharnam sucks.”

The woman chuckled.

The man gestured to his throat, “How are you doing? Any change or are you still...?”

She opened her mouth, only managing a small strangled sound, unable to manage words. She shook her head.

“Figures. It took your voice... I’m so sorry, Red. If we ever find that crazy doctor again—”

Red shook her head again, reaching out a hand to touch her friend, but hesitating at the layer of damp blood. He reached out to her in turn but had the same realization. They shared a light touch of hands instead.

“Right... Well, let’s see what’s past this gate.” The man stepped gingerly around the fallen Cleric Beast to investigate the large wrought-iron gate at the end of the bridge. After a few moments of prying at the bars and the adjacent wooden door, accompanied by some muffled profanity, he gave up with a heavy sigh.

“Alright, so the gate doesn’t open.”

Red approached, lighting a torch to hold it between the bars of the gate, offering some light.

“And even if it did, looks like it’s barricaded from the other side. Great,” her partner turned to her and shrugged, “What do you think? Where to now?”

Red paused a moment to consider their surroundings. The residential area below the bridge, the spires of the Yharnam skyline, the Grand Cathedral looming over them beyond the impassable gatehouse.

“This town sucks...”

Red let out a small grunt to get her partner’s attention. He moved to the rail of the bridge beside her to see what she was indicating. With her torch she pointed out a courtyard and a broad set of steps leading uphill in the general direction of the Grand Cathedral.

“Hm... You think that connects to the Cathedral grounds?”

Red nodded.

“Well it’s worth a shot. Worst case we have to climb some fences, right?”

Red hummed in agreement.

“Hey...”

“Hm?” Red snuffed her torch out against the stonework rail.

“You’re really something, you know?” He pulled her in for a hug, to a small squeak of surprise. There was a pause, then a small groan of realization. Red’s partner lifted his arm off her back – a wet, sticky sound and sensation, congealing beastblood adhering them together.

“Oh, oh no... This was a bad idea...”

-\\-

“We came all this way and it just goes back around!?” Red’s partner scrunched his hat down onto his head in frustration and kicked at the gate they’d just opened, “How do all these streets go in circles!?”

Red sighed and leaned on a fence near at hand. The light in the barred window behind her flickered, a small figure casting an indistinct shadow. The voice of a young girl filtered out from behind the glass and bars, soft and uncertain.

“Who... are you? I don’t know your voice, but I know that smell... Are you a hunter?”

Red adopted a scrunched expression and tried to wipe down her coat as her partner replied, “Uh, yeah – yes, we’re hunters. Can we...” he looked to Red, who shrugged, “help... you?”

“Oh, if you could, please, will you look for my mum? Daddy never came back from the hunt and she went to find him, but now she’s gone too I’m afraid. I’m all alone, and scared.”

“Hey, it’s okay, we’ll try to find your parents. What are their names?”

“My mum’s name is Viola. She wears a red jeweled brooch. It’s so big and— and beautiful. You won’t miss it!”

“Alright. And what about your dad, what’s his name?”

“Maybe you know him, the other hunters call him ‘Father Tennegan,’ but mum just calls him ‘Wave.’ Oh, but you must be careful, sometimes he forgets us, and— here...”

Red and her partner looked to one another. She mouthed the word *‘forgets?’* Any reply her partner would have given was interrupted by the creak of the window lurching open a crack from the bottom. A small hand reached out, pushing something out onto the windowsill.

“If you find my mum, give her this music box. It plays one of daddy’s favorite songs. When daddy forgets us, we play it for him, so he remembers. Mum’s so silly, running off without it!”

Red snaked a hand between the bars to retrieve the music box; a palm-sized box of lacquered wood, chased with elaborate silver filigree.

“Oh, there’s a miss hunter, too! Hello, miss and mister hunter!” From the gap in the window, the small hand waved to them. Red smiled and waved back with her free hand. Her partner raised a hand awkwardly but didn’t quite wave. “Thank-you so much for your help! I know you can do it, please be careful!” The window shut abruptly with a creak and a heavy clunk.

The man puffed a sigh, “Nicer than those people who lived by the square, at least.”

Red turned the music box over in her hands to examine it before cracking it open. The tune it played was a slow, somber one, like a mournful lullaby. They moved a few steps away from the house but Red let the music play until she could hum along with its short refrain. She closed the box to wind it up again while her partner spoke, hushed so as not to be overheard from the house nearby.

“So, I guess we’re looking for this kid’s parents now. You don’t recall seeing anyone with a distinctive brooch trying to kill us earlier, did you?” Red shook her head. “Well there’s,” he looked up, “*acres* of winding city streets to get lost in. Maybe they just got turned around trying to come home.”

Red tilted her head, raising a skeptical brow.

“What? Stuff’s all blocked off in a lot of places, I bet even people who live here get lost when the streets get barricaded like that.” Red conceded with a shrug and tucked away

the music box.

“So... I guess we try the only way we haven’t gone. There was a spot leading down into an aqueduct, right?”

A nod.

“Where was that again?”

Red lifted a hand to point out a direction and stalled, thinking.

“Maybe let’s go back to the bridge and get our bearings from there? I think there were some steps down to that spot somewhere along the bridge.”

Red nodded and led off as they began to backtrack. At least the streets were cleared back the way they had come. She chuckled to herself along the way and her partner stopped.

“What?”

Half a laugh, and Red patted the pocket she had the music box in with one hand, making air-quotes with the other and mouthing ‘*Miss hunter.*’

“I don’t get it.”

Red rolled her eyes playfully, taking his hand and tugging at his ring finger.

“Oh– hey! Come on, can’t you tease me about that later? We’ve got bigger things to worry about right now.” A flustered blush was rising on his face, hidden behind this high collar and fabric wraps, “Besides, I – You know I love you, Red. I love you so much,” he took her hands, squeezing her back with a chuckle, “But if it means you’d be my ‘*missus hunter,*’ I want to get out of this town *first*, alright?”

Red laughed and nodded, leading the way again, holding his hand.

“Let’s worry about getting through tonight first...”

Chapter 7: Father Tennegan

Chapter Summary

Red and her partner deal with a prominent victim of the Beast Plague, and meet a fellow Hunter with an agenda of his own.

“Back back back back back!”

Red yelped as her partner scooped her up by the waist, lunging around the corner of the bridge railing. A massive ball of wood and iron, chained together and set aflame, rumbled past them – crushing most of the mad huntsmen chasing them back along the bridge. The flaming ball of debris tipped almost lazily over the edge of the street and into the aqueduct below, accompanied by the muffled cries of its accidental victims.

“Alright! It’s official!” Red fired a shot over her partner’s shoulder before he set her down and wheeled around to punch out a reeling huntsman armed with a pitchfork. “Yharnam sucks and the people here are crazy!”

Red followed his retaliation, firing again on another citizen-huntsman with a sabre, staggering him before stepping in to run him clean through with her sword.

“I hate this city!” Her partner flicked his hands clean of blood, “The *second* the sun comes up we’re getting out of here!”

Red ‘*tsk*’d at him and put a hand on his back, urging their advance up the bridge.

“Hey, jerks!” He jogged forward, drawing his blunderbuss from the small of his back, “You think that’s funny? Huh?” Red paced him, clipping her sword into its sharpened sheath to wield it two-handed. “You think that’s any way to treat visitors!?”

The bloated, hulking huntsmen’s minion at the head of the bridge lurched forward, winding up to strike with the granite brick clenched in its fist. Red’s partner stopped short and fired; the blast of quicksilver shot staggering the brute mid-swing. Red took the opening to lunge in, scoring a deep stab into the minion’s belly, then dodging back and around to cut at one stumpy leg before it could recover its balance. She finished the brute with one final stab to the base of its spine, directing its fall by dragging her weapon free in an arc.

Her partner meanwhile had already changed targets to the shaggy-looking huntsman nearby. Armed with only a torch and rickety shield, the Yharnamite went down under a face full of quicksilver shot and heavy body-blows hooked around his pitiful defenses.

The pair paused to catch their breath. “Are we getting good at this?” The man stood bent over with his hands on his knees, “I know I said I hate it here, but I think we’re getting

kind of good at this.”

Red replied with a sigh, using her sword as a prod to search the fallen minion.

“Anything?” She shook her head. “Ah well. How about you, are you hurt?” Another headshake. “Good. I think I’m good.”

Red slung her weapon over her shoulder and approached to check him over. Her partner huffed and grumbled at the slightly rough search.

“Hey, I – *Hey*, I’m okay!” He caught her hands, “I’m *okay*, Red. We’re well stocked on...” he grimaced, “*blood*, let’s just keep going, alright?”

She gave him a serious, prying look.

“I’m a little sore, but I’m fine to keep going. We’ve made good progress; I don’t want things to go all weird again if we leave and come back.” Red conceded with a nod, then pressed a finger to her lips and gestured forward. “Yeah, let’s maybe take this quietly.”

They followed the street up, past a group of bestial huntsmen hunched in a small square, who thankfully paid them no mind. Up a further set of stairs, and to a cemetery.

A distant, wet sound hit them first, the splattering of blood, and the tearing of flesh. A tall man stooped over a corpse, swinging a hunter’s axe into it, painting the walls and gravestones around him with the repeated sprays of blood. Red and her partner drew weapons and approached. The man stalled at the sound of footsteps.

“Beasts all over the shop...” he growled, his accent foreign even to them, “You’ll be one of them,” he raised his head and turned to them, above his aquiline nose his eyes were shrouded by fabric wraps and the wide brim of his hat, “sooner or later...”

“Uh... Father Tennegan?”

With a snarl the Father drew a heavy pistol and fired on the pair, dodging to the side to mirror their movements, axe raised. Red’s partner tried to circle and close in but found himself warding away by the wide swings of Tennegan’s axe. Red circled his other flank, sword at the ready.

“Your daughter is looking for you! Go home, man!” The man backstepped a series of swings but staggered under a blast of quicksilver shot. Red got in a quick stab to the priest’s side to prevent him from chopping at her partner. Tennegan swatted in her direction and fired at her, too. Red found herself stumbling backwards, tripping over crooked gravestones.

Tennegan lurched after her, swinging down and scoring a glancing blow to her shoulder before she threw herself into a roll and righted herself. The priest wound up for another heavy swing and was thrown aside, shoulder-checked by Red’s partner who followed up with a series of compact hooks to the older man’s face and neck. Tennegan threw him off with a grunt and twisted the haft of his axe, extending it to wield it two-handed. He swung up

in an arc, forcing the other man back – Red’s partner cried out as the axe bit through the layers of his coat, yielding a fine mist of blood.

“Ooh, what’s that smell...?” Tennegan growled. He dragged his axe, rushing at Red for a feint, wheeling around to swing at her partner, “The sweet blood, oh, it sings to me!” He staggered back, panting and drooling, “It’s enough to make a man sick!”

The three circled in step, Red and her partner unable to outpace Tennegan’s movement. Red’s partner took a few shots with his blunderbuss, but even the heavy weapon was unable to stagger Father Tennegan long enough to get into position.

“Red, the song!”

Her partner rushed the priest, taking his attention while Red holstered her pistol and dug out the music box. She flipped the lid open with one hand and the thin, mournful tune filtered into the dusty air.

Father Tennegan staggered to a stop and cried out as if in pain, one hand releasing his weapon to clutch at his head. The pair took their opening, lunging in with fist and blade to slash and pummel until Tennegan threw them both off with a wild roar. Frame bulging beyond human proportions with muscle and rage, he cast aside his axe to fling his bare hands at the hunters.

He caught Red in the side of the head, knocking her sprawling. Her partner fainted in, catching a swing from one of the bestial priest’s arms and using the momentum to vault himself onto the creature’s back. He jammed his blunderbuss against the beast’s head and unloaded as many shots as he could manage before being shaken off, buying time for Red to regain her feet.

She’d lost hold of the music box – a quick glance proved it was not within easy sight, tangled somewhere among the weeds and graves. She drew her pistol again and approached, circling behind their monstrous foe, humming the lullaby as loud as she could manage. The melody still seemed to cut through, and the man-beast howled and cringed, giving them another opportunity to close in and attack. They were well-prepared for his violent thrashing this time and kept their space enough to avoid any debilitating strikes. Between the two of them they brought the old beast-hunter down. He died with a wrenching cry, his body dissolving into breath and ash at the very last.

Red’s partner sat down in the dust with a huff of relief. Red sheathed her weapons and jabbed herself with a blood vial.

“You alright?”

Red grumbled an assent, then returned the question by way of nodding to her partner.

“Me? Just this,” he touched the cut on his chest, “and a couple scratches and bruises. Think we made out alright, though.” He took the vial she offered him and jabbed it into his leg. “Ah– I really hate doing that, but it *does* help. And right away, too. So,” Red pulled him

to his feet, “I guess... We found that poor girl’s dad. I wonder...” he cast around the jumbled graves and Red nodded, motioning for them to split up to search.

Red poked around the headstones, brushing weeds and branches aside to glance at names and search for the telltale glint of the music box’s adornments, or for a red brooch. Her partner took the stairs up and around the courtyard. She did indeed manage to find the small box and brushed it off to stow it in her coat again. It was a few minutes before he called down to her.

“Hey, Red... You might want to see this.”

She followed him up the stairs to find him crouching by the body of a woman; she lay sprawled on the roof of a shack adjoining the inner wall. He held out his hand to show the red jeweled brooch resting in his palm. Red took a breath in through her teeth and shook her head.

“This doesn’t look good. I hope... I hope she fell or something and he didn’t...”

Red rested a hand on his shoulder, stopping him from continuing.

“Right,” he pushed himself to his feet, “I guess we should – I mean, do we tell her?”

Red shook her head.

“You sure? I feel like she deserves to know.”

Red shook her head again and touched the spot over her heart. Her partner took a moment to think and sighed, “Poor kid’s all alone, but... it’s probably safest if she stays there. Let’s... we should at least tell her something. Here,” he handed her the brooch, “Maybe you should hang onto this.”

Red nodded and took him by the arm, guiding him down the stairs and back the way they had come.

Someone was already in the cemetery courtyard.

A tall figure in white was lighting the Hunter’s lamp that had materialized after Father Tennegan’s death. They carried something huge over their shoulder, like an ornate slab or bizarre sculpture. Red’s partner drew his blunderbuss and held out an arm to stall her, stepping back up the stairs. But the stranger had already noticed them.

They wore a sort of flattened black tricorne, and when they looked up the pair could see their eyes were covered by dark fabric. The stranger, male by their voice, called up to them at a level barely above normal speech, “’Hoy, you two!” he waved at them with a gloved hand, “Still have your wits about you?”

The pair made no reply. Red’s partner felt her press a hand to his back to nudge him forward down the stairs, but he remained unmoving, gun drawn.

The stranger spread his free arm wide, the other still balancing his strange cargo, “I’m a Hunter of the Healing Church. I mean you no harm. Unless of course you’re already blood-addled, but then,” the stranger shrugged, “You wouldn’t be so patient as to listen, I suppose.”

Red’s partner lowered his weapon, and they descended the curving stairs slowly, keeping a wary watch on the stranger. He turned with them and stepped away from the lamp when they reached ground level.

“Just making sure,” Red’s partner gestured loosely with his blunderbuss, “We’ve had more than our share of trouble already tonight.”

The stranger nodded, “I certainly don’t begrudge you a measure of caution. Quite an exceptional night. Though I assure you I’ve already crossed paths with the Hunter of Hunters. Were I any danger to you, I wouldn’t be here.”

Red nodded, remembering the fierce woman in the beaked mask and feathered cape. While she hadn’t seemed visibly armed, the confidence with which she spoke did not ring false.

“So, who are you, again?” her partner asked.

“Ah, yes, introductions,” the stranger flipped the large object down off his shoulders – a shape like a greatsword but carved of blue-green stone, a glassy red eye, bone-hued blades – and buried it point-down in the packed earth, “Pleasantries are so rarely a part of all this.” He folded his hands before himself and bowed, “Royce, Choirman and Hunter of the Healing Church.” He retrieved the sword-like item and swung it up onto his shoulders again, “And yourselves?”

“This is Red. I’m... Nobody important. We’re from out of town.”

“I figured as much.”

“Is that going to be a problem?”

“No, no,” Royce stepped back, one hand up, “Certainly not. I’m just surprised, you see. You chose a rather... inopportune night to spend in Yharnam. Unless, of course, it was your *intention* to join the Hunt?”

Red made an uncertain noise, glancing down and away. Her partner likewise avoided Royce’s veiled gaze, “Not... exactly. No.”

“Hm. Well, I’ll leave you your reasons, Miss Red and Mister...” Royce tilted his head, “Nobody?” He received a grunt in response. “I have a proposal, then, since you’re still sane and if you’re so inclined. Seeing as we’re all out and about on the night of the Hunt, why not travel together for a while? You’re, well, *new*, so it might be to your benefit to have a Yharnam native and experienced hunter in your company.”

Red tipped her head, appraising the churchman. He was tall, but his actual build was difficult to discern past the layers of his robes. The white outer coat was heavily embroidered

along its hems, the wide sleeves cinched up almost to his elbows with laces. Perhaps the hat was most unusual; not unlike the standard-issue hunter's hats she and her partner had donned, but the brim sat higher on the head, and a dense panel of dark lace hid the wearer's eyes and nose.

Her partner holstered his firearm, folding his arms across his chest, "And what do *you* get out of this?"

"I have a few errands to run tonight. It might be nice to have extra hands if we're going the same way."

The two hunters looked to one another. Red seemed to think for a moment, then gave a blink and a tiny nod. Red's partner glanced back to Royce, "Two things first. Can you," he gestured vaguely at head-height, "Take that *thing* of your face when you're talking to us?"

"Oh, of course," Royce lowered his head to adjust his hat with his free hand, tucking the lace panel up under the brim of the hat, "Forgot I was wearing this, force of habit. Keeps the blood out of one's eyes and all that." He had heavy brows and sharp, stern features, wide green eyes. "Better?"

"Thanks. And second," Red's partner pointed over Royce's shoulder, "What on earth is that?"

"Hm?" Royce made to turn before he realized what the other man was referring to, "Ah, *this*?" He shrugged, turning the strange item onto its edge to show its details for a moment, "Frankly, I've no idea—"

"What—?"

"—Though it serves well enough as a weapon."

Both Red and her partner blinked dumbly.

"Satisfied?"

"I... guess so. Alright, then, I guess we're working together."

"Splendid."

Chapter 8: Exchange in the Dream

Chapter Summary

The Hunters reach Oedon Chapel. Red and her partner meet their assistant in the Hunter's Dream, properly and for the first time. Some vital information is exchanged.

“Oh, it’s the miss and mister hunter! Have you found my mum and dad?” The young girl’s voice came muffled through the barred glass.

Red’s partner leaned closer to the window, “Hey, kid. We’re...” he glanced to Red, who shook her head, “We’re still looking. Sorry, but we haven’t found them just yet.”

“Oh, okay. I can wait but... isn’t there something I can do? Maybe mum and dad are stuck out there waiting for me to come and find them. What do you think?”

“I think you should stay home. You’re safest inside. Keep your windows and doors closed, and just wait for morning.”

“I see, I can wait. I won’t be afraid. I know, I do. The morning always comes...”

“You’ll be alright, kid. Just sit tight and stay safe.”

“Thank-you mister and miss hunter.” The silhouette behind the drapes drifted away.

Red’s partner breathed a rough sigh as he stepped away from the window, “That did *not* feel good.” Red patted him on the arm. “You’re sure that was the right thing to do?”

She gave him a solemn nod.

Royce had been loitering nearby and fell into step with them as they headed back towards the cemetery. With his blindfold up, it was clear he was appraising the pair as they walked. Red kept a stern eye on him in return.

“So, you said you’re a hunter of the Church, right?” her partner spoke up.

“I am.”

“What do these hunts usually involve? Nobody really told us anything beyond ‘slay beasts and stay alive.’”

“That is the essence of it, really. Slay beasts, stay alive, stay sane if you’re able. That proves a bit of a chore for some, as I’m sure you’ve seen. Happens faster for the laymen, the citizen huntsmen. But they’re less trouble than a blood-drunk hunter.”

“What exactly does that mean? You said something about that earlier, too.”

“Well, I’m sure you can guess. Bloodshed can beget bloodlust. I haven’t seen or heard too much of the outside, but my understanding is that it’s worse in Yharnam. Hunters come to crave blood – both spilling and consuming it. The Healing Church does its part to curtail this, and the more savage methods of the Hunt are outlawed. But ‘the Hunt makes Hunters mad,’ as our Crow friend has surely said to you. It’s not inevitable, but it’s not uncommon.”

“At least it’s not guaranteed.”

They passed through the crumbling cemetery and up the courtyard steps to a heavy wrought-iron gate. Royce produced a key and offered it to Red, “I think the old priest dropped this. I assume it fits the gate.”

She nodded and took the key, trying the lock. It took a bit of force, but she was able to turn the key. The gates swung open with a labored creak.

“Been ages since I visited Oedon Chapel,” Royce mused as they passed through, “Never thought to come in the back way.”

They travelled through a narrow passage and up a ladder, through a sort of small library or records-room. Red’s partner kicked at a large wooden chest before opening it. He had to crouch down to reach inside, pulling out a strange screw-press device, its foot stained with rust and dried blood.

“What on earth...?”

“*That’s* where that went!” Royce peered over his shoulder at the item, “I turned the workshop upside-down looking for that. How’d it get here?”

“What is it?”

“It’s a tool for tempering hunter weapons. It belongs in the workshop in the Hunter’s Dream.” Royce paused at the other man’s look of puzzlement, raising an eyebrow, “You’ve... *been* to the—?”

“Yes, we’ve been to the Hunter’s Dream.”

“Alright, good. Had me worried for a moment there. We should return that when we’re next able.”

Red and her partner traded a brief look of disbelief.

Passing out of the records-room, they found themselves on the raised bema of a sizeable chapel. Compared to the distant bustle of the hunt outside and the sound of the wind, things here were quiet and still but for the faint crackle of braziers. A thick, heady scent permeated the air; smoky, woody, and sweet. Red and her partner had to stifle weak coughs, but Royce took a deep breath of the smoky air.

“Oh... you must be hunters...” Red gasped and jumped away from the source of the nasal voice; a red-shrouded figure seated or perhaps sprawled on the floor near where they

had come in. The figure blinked his milky eyes and turned his head back and forth as if trying to locate the group, “Very sorry, the incense must’ve masked your scent. Er, good, good, I’ve been waiting for one of your ilk.”

Red kept her distance, but her partner crouched down to be level with the strange chapel-dweller and get a closer look, as it was clear he could not see them in return. “You’ve been sheltering here?”

“I have. These hunts have everyone all locked up inside. Waiting for it to end... It always does, always has, y’know. Since forever.” A dark, distant look crossed the dweller’s leathery face, “But it won’t end very nicely, not this time. Even some folks hiding inside are going bad. The screams of womenfolk, the stench of blood, the snarls of beasts... none of em’s too uncommon now.” He shook his head, “Yharnam’s done fer. I tell ya,” then perked up, “But if you spot anyone with their wits about ‘em, tell ‘em about this here Oedon Chapel. They’ll be safe here.” He motioned vaguely to the space around himself with gaunt hands, “The incense wards off the beasts. Spread the word; tell ‘em to come on over. If you wouldn’t mind...” He retreated into the folds of his shroud with a nervous chuckle.

“We’ll, uh, keep an eye out,” Red’s partner reached for one of the dweller’s hands. The stranger started when he felt the contact but shook the hunter’s hand heartily once he understood the intent.

“Oh, bless ye, good hunters! It’s been a mite lonely here, just me.”

Red gave the dweller a healthy distance, moving over to light the lamp at the center of the bema. She breathed a small sigh of relief. A chance at respite. The two men joined her at the lamp and, in a warping of space, the three of them vanished.

-\\-

In the Hunter’s Dream, the three of them took pause to stretch and breathe easy; their aches and scrapes undone by travel into the dream. Royce asked for the press tool and breezed past them once he had it. The others made to follow him but stopped short at the stairs of the workshop building.

Red’s partner stumbled back, pointing at the unfamiliar woman waiting at the base of the stairs.

“Th-the...?”

“Welcome home, good hunters,” she bobbed a brief curtsey, “What is it you desire?”

“The doll...?”

“Hm?” Royce turned back from the top of the stairs, “What about her?”

“It... *talks*...?”

“Of course she talks—”

“It was just sitting there the last time!”

“—Will you contain yourself, man? There’s no need to shout.” He left a pause. The other man dropped his arm, letting it hang. “The doll is an integral part of the dream. You didn’t see her for what she was when you first arrived?”

Red and her friend shook their heads in tandem.

“She was made to help hunters by offering guidance and cultivating strength. She’s nothing to fear.” The Doll looked to him with a placid smile, and he gestured to the other hunters, “You may as well give them the pitch. I have some work to do.” Royce turned and entered the workshop.

The Doll bobbed another curtsy. She spoke slowly and softly, with an accent suggesting a far northern dialect, “Hello, good hunters. I am a doll, here in this dream to look after you. Honourable hunters, pursue the echoes of blood and I will channel them into your strength. You will hunt beasts and I will be here for you, to embolden your sickly spirit.”

“Ah-alright...” He took a few steps back and turned to Red with a dry whisper, “Hey, Red... Some things the old guy said *just* started making sense, and...” They both eyed the Doll with a look of horror, “Oh *no*...”

After a moment of clattering around inside the workshop, Royce called outside to them, “You’ve some blood echoes about you, right?” When he received no reply, he leaned his head outside to find them still a few paces away from the Doll, “You have to take her hand, you know.”

“I don’t... think I want to.”

“Well, at least come inside, then. I may as well show you how to temper your weapons.”

The pair skirted around the Doll, who seemed entirely unbothered by their behaviour. Inside the workshop, Royce had set aside his huge slab-sword and was clearing a worktable for them.

“Not so many hunters out tonight, not that I’ve seen anyway. Lucky we ran across one another. Now then,” he held out a hand, “Your weapons, if I may?”

Red gave him a wary look. Her partner retrieved his weapons and handed them over, “Here, start with mine.”

Royce took the silver knuckledusters with a look of confusion and surprise, “Where did you get these?”

“The little guys brought them to me the first time we landed here in the dream.”

“Bizarre. How utterly bizarre.” He set one down on the table and turned the other over in his hands, reading the engravings and testing the grip, “Punching beasts to death isn’t generally the approach of choice for Yharnam hunters. And yet the messengers brought you these...” He set them side by side on the table, “And stranger still they look Church-made.”

“How can you tell?”

“The engravings, ‘*Thy blood is foul*’ and ‘*For thine own sake*’. They’re part of a litany; ‘*It is for thine own sake I punish thee. I wring thy blood from thee like water. Thy blood is foul and thou must be cleansed. Let the good blood guide thee.*’ These must be the product of some cheeky Church smith...” his voice lowered as he murmured to himself, “Cast from silver so they were clearly meant for beasts. Like an Old Hunter weapon, what was her name...? Simple woman...”

Red’s partner cleared his throat to bring the other man back to the present.

“Right! Sorry. Let’s see what sort of blood gems it will take.”

“Blood– I’m sorry, blood *what*?”

Royce shook his head and set to work, sorting out a collection of small crystalline objects and applying one to a knuckleduster with the press they had recovered. He talked while he made his selection and worked the press, “I know you’re going to want me to explain every little thing but just believe me when I say that blood is more versatile than water to a Yharnamite. Perhaps more essential as well. Its behaviours, products, components – all made use by Hunters and Churchmen to some degree.

“Things in the blood harden and lend themselves to strengthening hunter weapons, other parts stay liquid and lend themselves to healing and ministration. It can take a lifetime of study and practice to know what is best used for what. Suffice to say I’ve been at this for over two decades in one way or another. Here,” he passed the weapons back to their owner, “That won’t change the heft of them, but you should find they hit a mite harder now. Keep an eye out for bigger blood gems and we can *really* improve these.” He nodded to Red, “Miss Red, if you’re willing?”

She unstrapped and relinquished her weapon with a marked hesitation. Royce gave it the same treatment, along with a quick sharpening to the edges of both the blade and scabbard. “Same to you; we can do more with these as they improve. Don’t neglect their maintenance, either.”

“What about yours?”

“It didn’t seem to take to anything I had on me, will have to keep searching.” He passed the sword back to Red, “A Ludwig’s blade is a good choice. I’d be carrying one myself if I didn’t have that,” he tipped his head to where his weapon lay at rest.

“You have a name for that thing?”

Royce shrugged and made an uncertain noise, “I’ve been calling it ‘the Eye of Progress,’ ‘the Eye’ for short. Like I said, I’m not one hundred percent *entirely* sure what it is, so, any name is purely provisional.”

“I... see... So, clear something up for me—”

“You first.”

“Huh?”

Royce folded his arms and stepped back to perch on the edge of a nearby desk, “While I’m glad you’re willing to cooperate, information isn’t free, you see. I’ve told you what you’ll need to survive the night. That you can have. No need to trade for the basics. Anything more and I’m going to want answers in return. And I do respect your right to your secrets, of course. But if you’re asking, expect me to ask back. Seem fair?”

Red gave a sigh and a shrug to her partner, mouthing a tight ‘*Figures*.’ The pair shared a look and she nodded reluctantly. The help was more important than what little they had to hide.

Her partner grumbled into his high collar before conceding, “Alright, fine. Shoot.”

“While I understand your reluctance to give me your name, there must be *something* I can call you, sir. A title or the like. What’s your line of work?”

“I was... a competition fighter before I met Red.”

“A pugilist, hm?” Royce relaxed his arms, letting his hands rest on the desk behind him, “Alright, your go.”

The Pugilist looked to Red, who thought for a moment, then shrugged. No pressing questions. He nodded, “Okay, so I was going to ask; you said you’ve been doing this for decades, but you introduced yourself as a choirman? Don’t mean to be rude, but I don’t really see the connection there.”

“Oh, no, you misunderstand. The Choir is the highest echelon of the Healing Church. I’m a scholar, and a hunter on occasion. Not a performer.” He let out a wheezy chuckle, “Not by any stretch. I couldn’t carry a tune in a bucket.”

The Pugilist set his hands on his hips, “So you’re kind of a big deal around here, then?”

“Hardly. My turn.” He turned to Red, keen and intent, “What brings a pair of outsiders to Yharnam? You can omit your reasons for joining the hunt, of course. But I can’t help but be curious.” When the Pugilist began to reply, Royce held up a hand, “I mean no offense, but I’m sure the lady can speak for herself.”

Red sighed and hugged herself, looking away.

“She can’t, actually.”

“Oh?”

“That’s...” he touched Red gently on the arm, “Should I just... *tell* him?” She gave a stiff nod as a reply, and he patted her on the back, “So... We came to Yharnam for medical attention. We were both sick and people kept telling us if anything could cure us, it was Yharnam blood ministration. But we must have been given bad info. The doctor we found was a total quack, and we ended up getting dosed with – I don’t know, whatever it is that drags hunters into the dream. We woke up from treatment and the town was in chaos... and Red had lost her voice.”

“Hold on...” Royce stood up from the desk to search his various belt pouches, sitting down again with a notebook and pen in hand, “Tell me everything you can remember about the clinic, the physician, and your treatment.”

“Is this your question?”

“It’s,” a blink, and perhaps a moment of hesitation, “my *job*. All blood ministration is ultimately sanctioned by the Healing Church. Naturally, any city will see its share of unscrupulous doctors, but it’s the Church’s duty to ensure safe and effective ministrations by ferreting out those outliers. Now, please,” he gestured with the pen, “Tell me everything you can remember.”

“Well, it was a small clinic, ‘Iosefka’s Clinic,’ I think? But it wasn’t the owner that did our procedures. He was... an older guy, I think. Scraggly looking, had a beard and used a wheelchair. Wore a tall hat and wraps over his eyes. No trace of him after we woke up. We met Iosefka herself after, once the hunt had begun. She locked herself into the back half of the clinic.”

“And where was the clinic located?”

“Near-ish the bridge to the...” he tried to draw the route in the air in front of him but couldn’t manage to parse it out, “We’ll just show you when we’re in the area next.”

“Fair enough. Now... I won’t pry about what condition you were looking to cure, but has it persisted since your treatment?”

“Uh,” Red and her partner looked to one another, “No, not for me. Red?” She shook her head. “Not you either? I actually feel pretty good, other than the stuck-in-the-dream-fighting-beasts part.”

“Interesting. And any other side-effects beyond your acquired aphasia, Miss Red? Any difficulty understanding speech or writing things down?”

She shook her head.

“And are you completely incapable of vocalizing, or...?”

Red took a breath in and hummed a few bars of the lullaby from the music box.

Royce nodded, murmuring to himself as he wrote, "Limited vocalizations and retention of linguistic and musical cognition... Interesting." He chewed the end of his pen for a moment, "To be perfectly honest..." Royce shrugged, "I've never seen a reaction like this. I've seen botched ministrations before but usually the results are much more gruesome."

"So, what does that mean?"

"At the moment, I'm not sure." He tucked his pen and notebook away, "I'm not familiar with this clinic. But hopefully come morning I can recommend you a more legitimate service, and they can start working to reverse your condition."

"Well, thanks. What do you get out of helping us, anyway?"

"I told you. It's..." Royce's gaze slid away from them, "my job."

Chapter 9: "Not friendly!"

Chapter Summary

The three Hunters make their way through the Cathedral Ward, intent on reaching the Grand Cathedral. Red and the Pugilist meet some unusual locals, and Royce shows off some arcane armament.

Geared up and refreshed, they returned to Oedon Chapel. Red tightened the straps on her sword sheath and made sure her pistol was fully loaded. Her partner loaded his blunderbuss and checked the grips on his knuckledusters. Royce adjusted the Eye of Progress over his shoulder and checked a strange, canister-shaped firearm at his hip, then pulled the blindfold of his cap back down over his face.

He nodded to the pair, "Lead on, then, hunters."

"Us? Don't you know where everything is around here?"

"I do, but we'll get where I'm going in time. I'm not exactly in a rush." At the unconvinced looks he received, he held up his free hand. "Alright. For the sake of a direction, I'm headed to the Grand Cathedral. I want to speak to the Vicar there. Is that satisfactory?"

"Is it close?"

"Just up the hill, though the grounds might be locked down due to the Hunt."

Red sighed and slapped a hand to her forehead.

Royce shrugged, "What?"

"Is there a way in?" the Pugilist asked.

"I'm sure we can find one if we're thorough."

The Pugilist grumbled and led the way out of the chapel, "Bringing you along better be worth it."

"I assure you, I'll..." Royce glanced over his shoulder as he followed outside, his words trailing off as he stopped and turned to face back towards the building. He let out a muted "Oh..." rather than finish his thought.

"What is it?"

“It’s... nothing,” he shook his head, moving to follow the others, “Sorry, rather distracted. I assure you I’ll do my best. Starting now.”

He let the pair lead and they pressed on through the twisting streets and small courtyards. Royce showed no hesitation challenging the Church watchmen, weaving easily into their combat rhythm to finish off wounded foes – often with just a single brutal strike from the Eye.

Heavy steps and a muffled jangling sound gave the group pause. Red let out a small gasp and pointed to the source. Her partner balked, gaping.

“Is that... a *giant*?”

“By your reaction I’m guessing you don’t have them where you’re from?”

“Nope.”

“Then yes, it is a giant. The Church employs them as guards and groundskeepers.”

“Are they gonna be hostile too?”

“More than likely.”

“Even towards you?”

“One way to find out.”

Red let out a disappointed hum, and her partner turned to her. “What is it?” Red gave a sad shrug, gesturing vaguely towards the giant stumping around nearby. “Oh. First interesting thing we see that might be friendly and we’ll probably have to kill it.” Red nodded and sighed. “I getcha. Sorry, Red.”

“It’s worth a test, at least,” Royce nodded to them, “Stay put a moment?” Without waiting for confirmation, he jogged towards the white-robed giant.

From a short distance they heard him issue an indistinct greeting, to which the giant responded with a grunt and a downward swing of its axe.

“Nope! Not friendly!” Royce shouted back to them, dodging away and circling around the giant’s legs, “Not friendly!” He brought the giant to its knees with a low sweep of his weapon. A pale blue light limned the strange apparatus as he hacked at the stumbling giant with wide, heavy strokes, bringing the creature down. “Alright, well,” he huffed to catch his breath, flicking some blood from his gloves and overcoat, “Hypothesis confirmed, I suppose. Church giants: not friendly. That’s a shame. Looks like *everyone’s* off their heads tonight.”

Around the chapel and up a curving set of steps, the Pugilist pointed out the great gates that opened into a wide round courtyard. “They just leave these open?”

“No... These should be shut tight until the end of the Hunt. Rather inauspicious...”

“What does that mean?”

“My best guess is that someone got here ahead of us, but there’s really no way to tell.”

Red brought a hand to her face in thought, then gave the two men a thumbs-up.

The Pugilist shrugged, “I think Red’s right, let’s call this a win until proven otherwise.”

There were a handful more giants patrolling the open grounds, which Royce offered to dispatch for them, in deference to Red. Unlike the finesse Red’s weapon required, or the trained skill her partner fought with, watching Royce do battle with the Eye of Progress was a different spectacle altogether. While there were elements of some kind of training – his own claims to experience and footwork spoke to some expertise with a greatsword – the rest of his movements betrayed the weight of the Eye and sheer strength needed to keep it going; leaning and turning his whole body with the weapon to maintain its momentum though changes in grip and direction.

However long he had been working with it, he seemed to have developed a reliable approach, at last for humanoid enemies. Low sweeps to catch a target’s legs that flowed upwards to become downward strikes, then back across again in a cycle. Unfortunately, he seemed to tire quickly from the effort, but nothing they had faced so far, not even the bulky giants, could withstand more than a few direct strikes before crumpling.

He set his weapon aside against the monument at the center of the grounds and knelt down. Red and her partner approached to check on him, but both opted to keep a respectful distance when they realized he was kneeling with his head bent and hands clasped in prayer. Instead, they searched the circular grounds – seemingly another graveyard, dotted with small headstones – for anything they could scrounge from the fresher corpses scattered here.

At length he rose to join them, collecting his weapon again. The Pugilist gave him a firm nod, “Everything alright?”

“The giants are faithful servants of the Church. They know no other life. It’s a shame to have to put them down. Unavoidable, it seems, but certainly a shame.”

Red pointed towards the barred gates at the far end of the clearing. Her partner spoke for her, “Looks like we’ll need to find a way around. We’re locked out, but I bet that opens from the other side.”

Royce nodded and gestured for them to lead again. They passed through one of the archways out of the grounds and into a side-street, their surroundings immediately becoming claustrophobic and restrictive.

Something grabbed Red – a pale, gangly humanoid with a beard of tendrils – her partner reacted instantly to her yelp of surprise, socking it in the side of its bald head to shake it off her. The creature stumbled and croaked in pain, rushing forward again with its clawed hands outstretched. The Pugilist kicked it back, struck it again with a hook to the head; a

blast from his firearm staggered it, and a shot from Red's pistol finished it off. It crumpled to the cobbles, leaking a thin, beige-coloured fluid instead of blood.

The Pugilist stirred it with his foot, examining its stretched grey skin and face of wiry tendrils. "What the hell was *that*? Hey, mister 'expert!'" he turned to Royce, standing unperturbed nearby, "What the hell was that!?"

The Choirman wandered over to stand by the creature. With his eyes covered, the only change in his expression was his mouth, pressed into a flat line. He hummed and tapped his fingers on the handle of his weapon. Then turned to continue down into the cramped streets.

"What, no input?"

"None yet. But keep your voice down and stay alert. We're at a disadvantage down here."

Red and the Pugilist shared a look and a nod. They were still coming to learn their guide's quirks, but Royce hadn't turned so serious until now. The pair readied their weapons and followed.

Down in the narrow streets, things were obscured by a dense fog rising from the sewage grates. While her partner remained steadfast, Red coughed at the stench, and even Royce seemed to struggle against the smell. Royce kept an eye on their surroundings while the Red and the Pugilist rapped on a few doors and windows.

The first Yharnamite shouted the man down for being an outsider – the Pugilist had to bite back his own string of retorts; they were trying to stay quiet. The next seemed to be a woman, a velvety voice greeted Red's knock,

"Oh, my, what a queer scent. But I'd take it over the stench of blood and beasts any day. What is it, then? I'm off during hunts and besides this is no place for ladies." A soft, affected laugh from behind the door, "Wouldn't want to drag you down too... Heh heh..." Red took a step back, blushing in the dim light.

"What was her deal?" her partner asked quietly. Red tugged at her collar with a flustered hum but made no gesture of reply. "What about you, Royce? You find any... Huh? Where'd he—?"

Gunshots and muffled shouting followed the Choirman out of the fog as he emerged on their side, backing up with his strange canister-like firearm at the ready, weapon over his shoulder to guard his back. A shaggy huntsman lunged after him but seemed to writhe in pain in the silvery mist that trailed between Royce and the cloud of fog. Red drew and fired a pair of shots past Royce, downing the Yharnamite and making the Choirman flinch.

"Don't—" he showed his teeth when he spoke, but any admonishment was cut short by more gunshots from further down the alley and the barking of a dog. He tipped his head to show he was rolling his eyes, backing up to put the two outsiders ahead of him. "Alright, they're yours if you want them."

The Pugilist stepped up to take the lead, knocking the dog out of the air with a well-timed blunderbuss shot when it leapt from the fog. Red moved past him into the tight space with weaving steps, dodging rifle shots to reach their origin point and skewering the offending huntsman. More rifle-fire pushed her back towards the alley, grazing shots that made her hiss with pain. Her partner pushed past her in turn, firing on the riflemen as they reloaded, creating an opening for them both to advance to the top of the stairs and down their targets on the level above the open terrace where they found themselves.

A snarl from behind them signaled an enemy that they had missed. Another bestial huntsman, wielding a saw of some sort, tried to rush the stairs from the bottom of the terrace. From the fog, a mass of corpse-pale tentacles lanced towards him with a roar like the rush of falling water. Pierced and battered, the huntsman collapsed like a ragdoll as the tendrils retreated out of sight. Red and her partner braced their fighting stances when a figure emerged from the fog. Royce, fussing with one of his laced sleeves one-handed.

“Tell me that was you,” the Pugilist called down to him.

“Hm?”

“That just now. With the tentacles. Was that you?”

“Of course it was. What else would it be?” He seemed almost insulted by the other man’s incredulity.

Red mouthed a ‘*What?*’

“Hey!” her partner flicked the muzzle of his blunderbuss at Royce when he tried to mount the stairs, “Not another step until you explain that!”

“Oh, for...” Royce rolled his covered eyes again, holding up his free hand, “*Alright*. But I’m starting to get tired of explaining things to you.”

“Start talking.”

“You realize if I really *did* want you dead, I could have done it by now, right?”

“Not helping your case, churchman. Talk.”

“Alright, alright.” He set the Eye of Progress aside, leaning it against the wall. He fussed with his sleeve again, feeling around inside it with his right hand, murmuring to himself, “Come on out, come on. There.” Royce held up his left hand, palm up towards them. “Can you see it from there?”

Something small and silvery was resting in the palm of his black-gloved hand. The Pugilist edged down the steps, weapon still at the ready for a closer look.

“It’s... a slug?”

“It’s an arcane focus. Quite frankly I forgot I had it with me until just then. I also assumed you two were further ahead. Assumed you were further ahead of me, didn’t expect

you to see that.”

“Prove it.”

“Pardon?”

The Pugilist gestured to the unassuming creature stuck to his hand, “Do that again.”

Royce cocked his head, “Are you scared or not?”

“Two things scare me and you’re not one of them, bud. Show me, I want to see how it works.”

Royce made his pressed expression again, then smiled – though how genuinely it was difficult to tell. “Very well, then. Though it’s not so much of a ‘how.’ It’s more... well...” He twitched his fingers, beckoning the pearly grey-green slug around to the back of his hand as he turned it palm-down. He braced his back against the brick wall and faced the open terrace. With his outstretched hand he made a quick claw-like gesture. The space around his hand warped and rippled, distorting the view of his arm and anything around it. From that warp the pallid tendrils flashed out with that same rushing sound, grasping at empty air for an instant, before retreating as quickly as they had come, back into the warp that also vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

“Satisfied?” The Pugilist said nothing. Royce adjusted his sleeve again, hiding his tiny passenger, “As I said, I had been hoping to keep that, well, up my sleeve for a bit longer. I didn’t expect you two to see that.”

“So that thing... it’s just been hanging out... In your sleeve?”

“Well, it was in my pocket earlier, but yes?”

The Pugilist gave his head a small shake, “Got any other weird bugs on you that you’d like to share with the class?” From behind him, Red gave a small chuckle, having approached for a closer look.

“Could we just continue on?” Royce took up his weapon, slinging it over his shoulder, “I have a lot of work to do tonight. If it’s any consolation, I expect things will only get more difficult, meaning I will likely have need to call on the rest of my ‘weird’ arsenal.”

The three moved on, up the stairs and through a narrow passage that led along a series of low rooftops towards the Grand Cathedral.

“And you did say ‘arcane,’ right?”

“I did.”

“Damn. Well, Red, looks like I owe you.”

A small, satisfied chuckle.

“What’s this, then?”

“Er, we made a bet on the way to Yharnam. Turns out magic is real, so, I have to make good on that wager now. Probably on the way home?”

A shrug.

“Wait, *that* was what convinced you?”

“I was kind of hoping I’d get a pass on the whole Hunter’s Dream thing. Since we had to die to get there.”

Red made a show of considering the point before shrugging again.

“You two... are shockingly cavalier about this whole thing. Shockingly so.”

“Hey,” the Pugilist gestured with his firearm, “That’s the gate from before, right? Looks like it’s guarded on this side.”

Red hummed, then mimed pulling a lever and the gate rising. Her partner and Royce nodded in agreement.

“They have dogs...” Royce looked down over the edge of the rooftop. They hadn’t been noticed yet. “And a giant...” He motioned to an opening past the great staircase before them, “I suspect that route might loop back closer to Oedon Chapel as well. I’ll lead and take the giant if you two can handle the watchmen and dogs.”

On a silent signal, the three sprang into action. Royce dropped down and bolted past the church watchmen to engage the giant. Red and the Pugilist followed, using their height advantage to score plunging hits on the hunting dogs before targeting their masters. Royce hacked the giant in the leg but took a bullet to the side from one of the watchmen, throwing his footing. Rather than try to flee, the Choirman stood his ground, determined to take down the giant. Red and her partner dispatched the watchmen with ease, but Royce stumbled again trying to take a second swing at the giant.

He landed a glancing blow to its lower body, but the giant swatted him aside with its axe. He failed to roll with the hit and was unable to regain his feet before the giant brought its axe down again. Red gasped and averted her eyes, her partner cried out in surprise. Royce made a short, strangled noise and no other sound. The pair glanced his way to see only a bloodstain and fading ash in his place.

“Red, get the lever!” the Pugilist barked before bringing a hand to his mouth and letting out a sharp whistle. The giant turned stiffly to face him, lumbering forward and raising its axe. Red darted past it to pull the lever and open the gate, then snapped her sword into its sheath and waited for an opening.

The giant brought its weapon down with a heavy, two-handed swing, putting its full weight behind the strike. The Pugilist dodged aside easily – then doubled back, abruptly circling in the other direction.

“Hit its leg!”

The giant struggled to right itself; bone and sinew protruding through the skin of one rotting leg, popped out of place by the overextended swing. Red lunged in to hack at the wounded limb, forcing the giant further off balance. Her partner cracked at its other shin with his silver-clad fists and between them they toppled it entirely, Red ending the fight with a well-placed stab high on its chest.

“Damn, Red.”

She flicked blood off her sword then returned the trick-sheathe to her back and unclipped the smaller blade. With a short grunt, she tossed the slim sword, letting it spin on its axis before catching the handle again.

“Starting to think I need a heavier weapon, here.”

Royce’s prior prediction proved true, the side-route cut between the dense buildings led to another high gate, past which was the other courtyard of Oedon Chapel. They unbarred the gate and descended a set of broad steps back to the chapel level. In the courtyard, leaning on a railing overlooking the streets below, they were met with a familiar face, and a familiar mask.

Royce had recovered and opted to wait for them; he stood slouched against the rail, his weapon propped nearby, fiddling with a small silver vessel around his neck. A few paces away was the Hunter of Hunters in her beaked mask. She, too, leaned upon the broad stone rail, checking her weapons; a pair of fanged and curved blades the learning hunters’ eyes could see fit together at the hilt. Yet another trick weapon. Despite the casual air, it was clear this was merely an affect. The Choirmen was tense, his weapon put aside purposefully so as not to seem a threat. And the Hunter of Hunters had her weapons in hand, a veiled assurance that she would fight if provoked.

“Oh,” she nodded to the pair, a minimal movement, “Hello there. Good timing.”

“Not giving you trouble, is he?” The Pugilist nodded to Royce.

“No, he can behave himself when he’s a mind to.” Royce held up a hand as if to say ‘*what?*’ but did not speak. The masked hunter continued in her subtle burr, “I wanted to warn ye. Do not go near the old tomb below Oedon Chapel here in the Cathedral Ward.” She clipped her blades together and sheathed them at her side, “Henryk, an old hunter, has gone mad. He’s my mark, and I’ve tracked him this far. He’ll be headed down to the Tomb of Oedon soon, so keep a fair distance until my business there is done.”

“You’re sure you don’t need a hand?”

She shook her head, “Like I’ve told ye before; focus on yer beasts and leave the hunting of Hunters to me. It’s always been the trade of outsiders, but there’s no need for ye to get mixed up in it while I’m still here. Stay safe and keep yer wits about ye.”

“If it’s not prying, we never got your name before. Would you mind sharing it with us?”

The masked woman tilted her head, suggesting a smile, “Lillian. They call me Lillian the Crow. Yourselves?”

“I’m, uh... doesn’t really matter. This is Red. That’s—”

“Royce. I can introduce myself, thank-you.”

The Pugilist shrugged, and Lillian nodded slowly, “Well, take care of yerselves. I’ve my own business to attend to.”

With his gaze covered, Royce appeared to be looking straight ahead when he spoke to them, “You two should return to the Dream to resupply. Then we’re headed to the Grand Cathedral at the top of the hill.”

Red bit back a grin she only showed once they had moved into the Chapel proper, then passed into the Hunter’s Dream.

“What was that about?”

Red mimed as though dramatically stabbing herself in the heart and her partner sniggered.

“Yeah, he did seem pretty upset. Let’s gear up and get back to him.”

Lillian was absent by the time they returned to Oedon Chapel. Royce was still sulking by the railing.

“You alright there?”

“No permanent injuries. Nothing physical, at least,” he grumbled, “Just my pride.”

Chapter 10: Vicar Reisz

Chapter Summary

The Hunters make a new friend, after some minor trepidation.

“You going to be alright, there?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t have to be embarrassed you know.”

“I’m fine.”

“There’s no shame in dying, I mean, those giants are huge.”

“Can you not—”

“Red and I have died a couple times already. It’s not *fun*, but—”

“Hey!” Royce whirled on the other man, who staggered to step back, “Will you drop it already?”

Red stepped between them, gently pushing them apart. She shook her head at her partner who gave a little shrug.

Royce took a breath, brushing Red’s hand aside, “I *said* I am fine. It’s just frustrating. I’m *fine*, just frustrated.” Another breath, “I shouldn’t be making rookie mistakes like that.”

Red reached out to him again to pat his arm. He didn’t shake her off this time but nodded towards the Grand Cathedral.

“Stay sharp, we’re getting close, and it’s still guarded.”

“Still?” The Pugilist craned his neck to look up the steep stairway. Barring the path to the double doors of the Grand Cathedral were two Church watchmen carrying heavy forked poles – the same kind of stakes Yharnamites used to crucify and burn captured beasts. “Damn. Looks like they spotted us.”

“I’ll take the back one and get the doors. Don’t get hit.”

Royce ducked past them and mounted the stairs. Both watchmen turned to follow his movement, giving the hunters a chance to attack. Red’s partner sprang in first, landing what

he had hoped would be a ringing blow to the back of the watchman's head. The tall figure was barely bowed by it and turned sharply, striking out with the butt of his heavy stake.

The Pugilist took the hit to the chest and stumbled back down the stairs. Red fired on the watchman as he wound up to strike with the forked end of his stake, but again, the bullet failed to stall him, and her partner took a glancing blow from one of the carved wooden points. Though the injury was minor, Red watched her partner begin to crumple, clutching at his chest and gasping for breath.

She clipped her weapon into its sheath and charged in, stabbing under the watchman's arm as he raised his weapon again. That proved a hit solid enough to stagger him.

"Get him inside!" Royce called down to her, pointing to the doors before bringing his weapon down on the watchman in a high two-handed arc that caught on the wooden stake, locking them together.

Red slung her weapon over her shoulder and helped her partner to his feet. Behind the fabric shielding his eyes, she could see they were wide and frantic; his breath was coming in quick rasps and he was trembling violently. She kept an arm around him, hauling him up the stairs and into the cover of the Cathedral entrance.

She sat him down against the wall a safe distance from the door. He was breathless, hands clawed, limbs contracted and seizing.

"Red— Red, I — am I dying? Am I—? I— I can't— I—"

Red knelt and ran her hands over him. No serious wounds, no bleeding, but he was panicking. She put an arm around his neck, pulling him close while her other hand rubbed his back. This close she could feel his heart hammering in his chest, even through thick layers of clothing. She mustered what little of her voice was left to hum and shush him softly, hoping her muted half-vocal sounds could be of some comfort.

"They're going to burn me, they're— I'm not a beast, I'm not a beast! I'm not—!"

"*Shhh...*" Red hugged him close, nuzzling into the space between his collar and his neck, trying to guide his breathing to a slow with the movement of her hand on his back. '*I'm here,*' she tried to say, lips brushing his skin, '*I'm here.*'

It took a moment, but her partner's breathing began to calm, and he managed to get his trembling arms around her middle in return.

"Red... Hey, Red... You're okay?" She hummed and nodded, still holding him close. "What happened? I thought they— I thought..."

"*Shh...*"

"I... I need some space for a second," he pushed her away gently, leaning his head back against the wall with a tight sigh, "What was that?"

“I told you not to get hit,” Royce’s matter-of-fact admonishment made them both look over. He had a long, diagonal splatter of blood marking his robes but was otherwise unharmed, “But you’re not both soaked in blood, so that’s a good sign. I expected you’d tip over and hemorrhage.”

“Hem– *huh*?” The Pugilist tried to sit forward but Red pushed him back.

“I’m sorry, I suppose I shouldn’t say things like that while you’re still coming down from a frenzy.”

“Yeah I– I’m gonna need a minute or two here.”

Royce made a cursory effort to clean himself up while he waited for Red and her partner to recover themselves. He only managed to smudge most of the blood onto a darker part of his attire, turning the splatter into a smear.

Once he had calmed himself the Pugilist stretched out his limbs, groaning at the tension. “When you said ‘don’t get hit’ I thought that was just common sense. What *was* that? It felt like my heart was going to explode...”

“A frenzy-state. Panic so extreme the body risks damaging itself. If you’d stayed like that much longer, you’d have suffered massive hemorrhaging.”

From behind his high collar, the Pugilist smirked at the Choirman, “That has the ring of experience to it.”

Royce returned the joyless smirk, “I’ve been through it a handful of times. It’s never pleasant. So next time I *tell you* not to get hit–”

“Yeah, yeah,” the Pugilist pushed himself to his feet using the wall for balance.

“I’m serious. It could well be lethal. And I’ve only enough sedative for myself at present. You’d be on your own if that happens again.”

“Aw, come on, not willing to share?”

Red rolled her eyes at her partner’s wheedling tone. Royce let out a rough breath through his teeth and looked away.

“Don’t guilt me like this,” he growled, then dug through his pockets, “I’ll admit these aren’t too difficult to come by, not for me at least, but I am trying to conserve them.” He held out a pair of small glass bottles by their stubby necks. Faded paper labels on amber glass did nothing to hide their dark red contents. “I’ll have you know it’s much more liable to kill *me*, not that it matters, I’m sure. One apiece and don’t squander these. Alright?”

“Are these...” the Pugilist took the bottles, handing one to Red, holding the other up to the faint light of the interior lanterns, “Just jars of blood?”

“Blood and opium, technically.”

“Great,” the Pugilist grimaced, “So like laudanum but worse, in that particular way that Yharnam seems to make everything worse.” He tucked the bottle away, then took a deep, centering breath, “Alright, I think I’m alright now. So... we were here to meet someone?”

“Yes, even though it’s the night of a Hunt, the Vicar should be tending the Grand Cathedral. Vicar Reisz, I believe. She’s the highest-ranking member of the public facet of the Healing Church. It’s imperative I speak with her.”

Red tilted her head, pointing down at the floor then outside to the sky as if to ask ‘*Tonight?*’ Her partner caught on. “She’s got a point. I don’t know the details on church protocol, obviously, but you couldn’t have made an appointment or something before tonight?”

“The situation is complicated. Can we leave it at that?”

Red thought for a moment. She mimed as if shuffling papers, then as though granting a benediction. The Pugilist nodded, “That makes sense. I guess she’d be busy before the Hunt. Gotta bless all that blood.”

“That’s not— never mind.”

Royce led them up the steps to the cavernous nave of the Grand Cathedral. Candles and the wan light from outside cast the space in cold shadows. At the far end of the great hall, an elaborate altar decorated the apse; a tiered monument topped by a sculpture of a headless figure pouring something out of a simple vessel. Before it, seeming small at such a distance, knelt a woman in white. Her faint prayers echoed in the dim apse.

“Our thirst for blood satiates us, soothes our fears. Seek the old blood, but beware the frailty of men. Their wills are weak, minds young...”

“Vicar?” Royce called out to her, approaching ahead of the other two, “Vicar Reisz?”

“The foul beasts will dangle nectar and lure the meek into the depths. Remain wary of the frailty... of men. Their wills are weak, minds young...”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Vicar, but I need to speak with you.”

“Were it not— were it not for... fear, death would go... unlamented. Seek... Seek the old... b-blood...” This close the stammer in her words and the tremor in her shoulder was plain to see. The Vicar hunched forward, seeming to clutch at her chest. Her murmured prayers died into stuttering, raspy breaths.

Royce made to reach out to her, then recoiled, gesturing and stepping back, “Move, move away from her!”

The Vicar jolted as she doubled over, gasps turning into cries of pain. Her frame began to stretch and twist, bones groaning and snapping, flesh tearing in sprays of blood, undercut by her screams of agony that deepened into grating howls. White-gold fur grew to

cover her rapidly expanding body as she tore free of her robes, the blessed garb hanging in shreds around her new, bestial form.

Clawed paws shifted under her as she turned to face them. A wolflike head, jaws fixed in a sinister parody of a grin, covered by the torn remains of her wimple; her broad-brimmed hat speared through by one of the narrow, branching antlers that had burst from her brow.

“*Y-YOU...*” The beastly Vicar’s pointed snout turned to Royce. She threw her head back and howled, stretching to a height four or five times that of the hunters, before striking out with a clenched paw.

The Choirman narrowly avoided the first swing. He was forced back some distance by the Vicar’s continued swipes. Red and the Pugilist split away to one side, out of her reach.

“*LIAR!*” Vicar Reisz howled, clasped her paws together for a powerful downward swing. Royce had been trying to put some momentum into his weapon and was unable to avoid the sudden tremor of the strike. He was knocked off his feet and promptly seized in a massive paw, dropping his weapon.

The Pugilist fired his blunderbuss, but the pellets only made the beastly Vicar flinch for an instant. She ignored them, jaws parting to shriek at her captive.

“*CH-CHOIR... MAN!*”

Red caught her partner’s arm, keeping him from firing another round. She mimed a kick and something toppling over.

“Trip her?”

Red nodded. She clipped her sword into its sheath and slapped the broad side of the blade to demonstrate before moving in, batting the beast in the shin with the flat of her weapon.

That was enough to get the Vicar’s attention. She shuffled aside, swatting at Red with her free hand.

“*GO! AWAY!*”

Red ducked the swing, counterattacking with the flat of her blade again, catching the beast on the back of her paw. The Vicar yelped and flinched away, shaking her stinging limb. She jerked forward, staggering when the Pugilist struck her in the back of the leg, catching her weight on her free forepaw. She twisted and threw her captive at the Pugilist, sending them both sprawling across the cathedral floor.

Red took the free moment to shrug out of her long coat, holding it over one arm like a dueling cape. It took effort to swing her greatsword one-handed, but she managed another stinging blow to one of the Vicar’s hind paws. Vicar Reisz turned again, crouched on all fours, head low as if to charge. Red cast her sword aside and lunged at the beast’s head,

wrapping her coat over the snarling muzzle and throwing her weight onto it, trying to drag her to the floor.

The Vicar reared up, bringing a stubborn, clinging Red with her. The Pugilist regained his feet and joined the tangle, seizing a trailing hank of pale fur and hauling himself up the Vicar's flank. He grabbed hold of one of her antlers with one hand, wrapping one of the coat sleeves around his other arm to keep himself secure. Red dangled off the other side of the cleric beast's head, their combined weight starting to drag her down.

"Royce! Get her legs, but don't hurt her!"

Whatever the Choirman said as a reply was lost in the Vicar's howling screams, but the roaring rush of his strange arcane technique made it through unhindered. The cleric beast shrieked when her attempt to turn and face him was cut short and she toppled, falling on her side with the two hunters still clinging to her face.

She struggled to rise, feet kicking and scrabbling on stone. The Pugilist threw his weight on her free arm, grabbing her thumb as he might have for a human opponent – though he had to do so with the motion of a headlock – keeping control of the limb by bending the digit back.

Royce started to circle around to her head, but Red held up a hand to warn him back and out of sight. She was leaning heavily on the Vicar's head, practically draped across the beast's face. With one hand she stroked the spot between her pointed ears, the other lowered to pat the shuddering muzzle through the coat. Through the sound of the Vicar's snuffles and growls, Red hummed.

The melody started as the lullaby she had learned prior, something she hoped would be familiar enough to get the Vicar's attention. The cleric beast grew still, listening, though her breath still came fast and ragged. Red changed her tune, humming a song she had composed years ago. A low, slow love song with a rising chorus.

At great length, the cleric beast calmed, leaving the ghostly echoes of Red's humming as the only sound in the lofty hall. Red finished her song, still stroking the pale fur as one might a lapdog. The Pugilist eased his grip on the paw he held, and the massive limb relaxed to the floor.

He edged a bit closer to the pointed head, "Vicar Reisz...?"

Her pointed ears perked up at the sound of her name, head tilting slightly in Red's grasp. Her voice was ragged and grating, "*Wh... Who...?*"

"We're, uh, from out of town. We came here to talk to you."

"*M-me? No... Go! Go away!*" The great horned head tried to shake out of Red's grasp, but she held firm, petting and shushing gently. "*Where... Ch-Choir, where?*"

"He's over here—" Even without direction the beastly Vicar tried to right herself and pursue her unseen target. The Pugilist put his hands on her muzzle to help Red hold her still,

“Hey! Hey, it’s okay. He’s keeping his distance. He’s not here to hurt you, neither are we.”

The Vicar growled but stayed still. The Pugilist waved at Royce to move off even further and the Choirman gave an exaggerated shrug, retrieved his weapon, and crept away to lean against the wall near the stairs.

“I’m going to take this coat off your face, alright? Will you behave if we let you up?”

The cleric beast’s dark lips curled back in response. The Pugilist rolled his eyes and settled for just removing the coat when Red let go to kneel beside the great snout. Most of the Vicar’s head was still covered by her torn wimple; it stretched like a blindfold across the upper half of her head, but a suggestion of dark, leering eyes could be seen beneath it. She shifted her head side-to-side, trying to get a sniff at Red and her partner. Her muzzle creased into a snarl when she spotted Royce some distance away, but she made no attempt to move.

Red dipped into one of her belt pouches and held her offering out for the Vicar to see; one of the bottles of sedative they’d just been given. Her partner caught on, nodding, “Sedative, huh? Think that’ll help settle you a bit so we can chat?”

After a pensive growl, the cleric beast let out a huff through her nose and parted her jaws, sticking out her tongue. Red suppressed a giggle at the sight and uncorked the bottle, pouring the slow-flowing drugged blood onto the beast’s tongue and into her mouth. She shut her jaws and worked them a bit, trying to swallow the viscous medicine.

Vicar Reisz lay still on the floor, waiting for the sedative to take effect. Red still knelt beside her, slowly stroking the curly white-gold fur of her mane to help her relax. After a few minutes, the Vicar shifted. Hunching and groaning, it was as if her initial transformation ran in reverse; bones cracking and creaking, fur falling away in scraps, antlers and snout retracting as she shrank back to human size with a drawn moan of pain.

The Vicar hugged herself with a shudder and a choked retch. She felt her face and held her head, still hunched over.

“I... I’m me...” She pressed her hands to the floor, looking at her bruised and blood-streaked arms, “I’m me again... Thank—” she sat up, giving a short gasp and having to catch the shreds of her robes as she did so to keep herself covered, “Thank you...”

The Pugilist turned his back abruptly, trying to be polite, “Y-you’re welcome. Red, can you...?”

Red hummed in conformation, passing the Vicar her coat, which she gratefully shrugged into to cover up. “Thank-you, again. Now, I know you three wanted to talk,” she lowered her head, holding it in one hand, “But can that wait a bit? And... can I get changed first? There should be some spare robes in the sacristy. Can you lend me a hand?”

Red helped the Vicar to her feet. She glanced at Royce warily, managing to muster a shout in his direction, “I’ll not have you smoking in here, Choirman!”

Royce didn't bother to look up from packing a pipe when he called back, "Relax, I'm headed outside."

"You'd better be!" Vicar Reisz shook her head, "Anyway, we keep everything over here, just to the side of the altar..."

Red helped the Vicar over to the small sacristy chamber and waited by the door while she changed. When she emerged, she was still quite frazzled and rather bloodied, but at the very least her attire was whole again; a white laced blouse and long skirt with a matching mantelet. Without her wimple to restrain it, her hair was a voluminous mane of platinum curls, the same hue as her beastly coat.

"Couldn't find another headscarf," she grumbled, trying to pull her hair back into some semblance of order, "Guess I'll just have to make do with my poor hat..." she crossed the nave to pick up the accessory in question, its crown pierced through from her transformation. "Well, I suppose that could be worse, too." She dusted it off and donned it, straightening the peculiar ornament attached at the band. "Now then," she nodded towards Red's partner, who was making his way outside, "Shall we try this again?"

Outside on the steps to the Grand Cathedral, Royce was lounging against the railing, smoking his pipe and looking up at the sky. Night had fallen, and the full moon rode high, bright, and close. He nodded to the others as they joined him on the stairway.

The Pugilist scratched his head through his hat, "Night already? Have we really been at this that long?"

"It's all relative," the Choirman drawled. He looked to the women and nodded his greeting. "Vicar Reisz, I see you've collected yourself."

"No thanks to you," she spat. She turned to the others with a formal bow, hands clasped before herself, "My name is Sybil Reisz, Fourth Vicar of the Healing Church. Thank you both, again. I... owe you my life, I suppose. Now," she set her hands on her hips, "what business brings two outsiders and a member of the Choir to my cathedral?"

"The blood supply is tainted," Royce said bluntly.

Apparently, the Vicar had been expecting this response, she turned it back on him just as plainly, "And whose fault is that I wonder?"

"Yours."

"*Excuse me?*"

"Something has tainted the Church's supply of both medical and ritual blood, obviously, as it's affecting both clerics – to a hideous degree, as we've just seen – and laymen. That supply, if you'll recall, Vicar, that supply is *your* responsibility. Your Blood Saints and ritual stocks are compromised somewhere up the chain."

Sybil blinked wide, dark eyes in shock before settling into a glare. Red and her partner exchanged a glance of nervous amusement, together shifting back just a bit to give the bickering clergy space.

“Listen here, Choirman. You don’t get to come down from your high halls with no warning, and dredge up problems with no solutions—”

“I have a solution. Halt all ministration.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Halt all ministration and cancel all pending procedures. Simple.”

“There would be *riots!*”

“There will be *worse* if people keep consuming tainted blood.”

“It’s not the blood supply, it can’t be. And if it *is*, it’s *your* fault. Our screening procedures for Blood Saints were drawn up by the Choir!”

“The procedures are wrong. The whole system is broken.”

“The...” Sybil blinked, stepping back a pace, “What?”

“Don’t panic, Vicar,” he took a draw on his pipe, exhaling with a sigh, “But the Choir’s knowledge is incomplete. I might be the only one who knows. Certainly the only one who’s said something.”

“Then... I’m right. This is your fault.”

“Is that really the part of this argument you want to win?”

“So, what do we *do*, then?”

“Like I said, halt all ministr—”

“I know that part. But on the night of a Hunt?” Sybil shrugged, gesturing at the empty streets around them, “Who’s here to listen to me?”

“Come morning, then.”

“Fine,” Sybil passed her hands over her face, already dreading the work to come, “I’ll start organizing recalls come morning. This is going to be a nightmare.”

“It’s a necessary step. But we’ll still need to locate the source.” Royce tapped out his pipe behind himself against the railing, “And I don’t think raiding every single convent in Yharnam on the night of a Hunt is the way to do it. This... This goes deep. Somewhere beyond my experience and vision.”

Sybil folded her arms into her wide sleeves, shaking her head, “That doesn’t inspire confidence, coming from you. Who do we go to then...? Byrgenwerth?”

“The Byrgenwerth scholars want nothing to do with blood. Though,” Royce touched his blindfold, “our old Master did rightfully fear it. Perhaps there’s something buried in his studies we can use. The whole grounds around the place have been declared forbidden, and quite frankly I haven’t been there in ages. I wouldn’t know how to get there now.”

“It’s... not *too* far from here. I think,” Sybil looked up at the sky, tilting her head, “I *think*. Gods it *has* been ages, though. There should be a path *somewhere* from the Cathedral Ward.”

“We’ll drop you off at the chapel, then, and take a look around,” the Pugilist suggested, now that it was safe to join their conversation.

Sybil uncrossed her arms, “Pardon?”

He gestured towards the smaller building down the hill, “We’ve been asked to gather any survivors we find at Oedon Chapel, treat it like a sort of safehouse. We can leave you there and search the—”

“What makes you think I’m not coming with you?”

“You’re not armed, for one,” Royce cut in.

“Just,” Sybil held up her hands, “Let me search the Cathedral Ward with you? Please? Let me help, I...” she dropped her hands, hiding nervous fists in her wide sleeves, “I owe you that much. And I need to be outside for a bit. I’ll stay out of your way, and I’ll wait at the chapel after. I promise.”

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!