

Exiled.Realm

Prologue

Darkness enveloped me completely. The circumstances that had led me here were like mist in my recollection, utterly impossible to grasp and comprehend. I felt slightly lightheaded as I stumbled forward, further into the impenetrable abyss I found myself within. My senses were subdued and I scarcely felt the ground I was stepping on, despite my impression that I was walking barefooted.

The further I ventured, the more the veil on me seemed to shift and become less overbearing. The shading wool over my eyes began to lift ever-so-slightly with every step, but, even as sight was returned to me, it did little to make my surroundings comprehensible.

But then, from one moment to the next, the ground below my feet became ‘visible’, though it mostly just looked like a dark-grey carpet of tangled-up shadows. I knelt to touch it with my fingers, but the fabric of the ground was like tendrils of fog that slipped between my fingers.

A sound, or, rather, a voice, then hailed me from all around.

“*Welcome.*”

I looked up, finding suddenly that a mirror stood before me, its frame made of the same incomprehensible shadow-woven fabric. Its surface was like unpolished silver or smoked glass.

“Hello?” I called to the voice. “Where am I?”

The voice erupted from within the mirror in response.

“*Choose who you were meant to be,*” it said.

I looked deeply into the smoky mirror and, in the same moment, it instantly cleared and my perfect replica stared back at me. I instinctively touched my fingers to the surface, and our hands met. Then an out-of-body experience pulled my perspective back and away so that I found myself looking down on my own body.

Choose, the voice had told me. I repeated this to myself and wondered its meaning, but it seemed quite obvious.

I imagined leaning further in to get a better look, and my vision zoomed right up close to the face... my face... I thought how I had always hated those dark-purple half-moons below my tired eyes and bordering my nose, and, in a moment, they vanished, replaced with the same complexion as the rest of my face.

For one terrifying instance, I imagined myself with a beard, and a *Fu Manchu* manifested on my upper lip and fell down below my chin, stopping only above my torso.

I blinked the image away and wondered what else I could do to this worn-out and depressed-looking body of mine.

After a bit of sculpting, I had the visage of an Asian supermodel, similar to *Ishihara Satomi*, whom I'd often seen in magazines before coming here, wherever *here* was... But then I thought about it. Was this really who I was? Who I wanted to be.

"Revert everything," I told the mirror, and it obliged and remade me as who I was before I came here.

"Okay... maybe just age me back a few years. You know, to my *prime*."

Again the mirror obliged, and now I looked like my mid-twenty-year-old self.

"Perfect. I think I'm done."

"This choice can only be changed once more before becoming permanent."

"No, that's okay. I'll stick with this."

"Please choose your name."

Again my first instinct was to change my boring name to something exciting or maybe exotic, like my favourite character in *Shin Megami Tensei IV: Yuriko*. Or maybe her true demon name: *Lilith*. But then I thought about it some more.

"My name is *Aomori Aiko*."

"Is that your final choice? Similar to your appearance, this can only be changed once more before becoming permanent."

"Actually, just call me *Aiko*."

Instead of replying, the image faded away and my perspective was returned to the eyes of my own body, where it belonged... I looked at the mirror-image that was now a younger version of myself, but was otherwise faithful to who I was.. mostly... A bit of vanity was okay, right?

As I watched my other self, the image blurred and the mirror sprouted hundreds of small shadowy arms that reached for me and pulled me into itself.

I am the Thousand Eyes in the Abyss. I am the Watcher of Worlds. I am the All-Seeing.

Through my power, you have been given new life in this World.

This 'Forlorn Kingdom' is the first of many Worlds plagued with a sickness that runs deep. Should you manage to alleviate, or even cure, this sickness, I will reward you with a fragment of my power, a memory of yours returned, and allow you to progress onward to the next World.

But tread carefully: Death in my realm is not final, but with resurrection follows the forfeiture of your memories.

Now then, go forth and face the trials of my realm. I will be watching.

I awoke on the green grass of some strange place, with rolling hills and a gentle wind stirring the greenery all around me into waves that moved back-and-forth.

Where am I?

I stood up and looked around. I was utterly alone and the lingering echoes of *that* alien voice resounded within my mind. It seemed I was in one of those vivid dreams I occasionally had after playing through the night and early morning, although it perhaps felt a bit too real, but I tried to convince myself that it wasn't *that big* of a deal.

Suddenly, a fluttering little butterfly made of incandescent sunlight started circling my head in unadulterated excitement. I held out my hand and it alighted on the first digit of my index finger. I had a look down myself and was surprised to find that I was dressed in what looked like a repurposed flour-sack. I clenched my eyes shut intently and imagined myself wearing a resplendent suit of shining armour.

Might as well go all out if this is a vivid dream.

I also added, for additional flair, the image of a purple-hued Lightsaber™ to go along with my ridiculous getup.

When I opened my eyes, however, I was still wearing the flour-sack-turned-clothing, although the idea that so flimsy a linen fabric could be considered clothing was criminal.

“Hmm, no Lightsaber™ either...”

The glowing butterfly lifted away from my finger and started circling my head frantically again.

“What is it? Also, aren't you supposed to go: *Hey listen!*”

My bright companion did not reply, sadly, but then suddenly just took off down the landscape, leaving a trail of bright light in its wake.

“Hey, wait for me!” I called, as I ran to catch up.¹

¹ I did not for a second consider that this was anything but a dream. Oh, how wrong I was.

Awakening

I opened my eyes slowly, as if waking from a peaceful slumber. An easy wind stroked my hair, the sun above warmed my skin with its amber glow, and the tune of a single flute swam through the air, accompanied by a chorus of birdsong.

How confusing, I thought. I actually hadn't the faintest idea of how I'd gotten here, or why I was lying down in the grass.

What had I just been doing?

I lay there for a while, taking it all in. A nagging sense of *déjà vu* sat in the back of my mind. I could've sworn I'd seen this sight and felt this feeling before, but it was like trying to remember something I'd just forgotten. It lay on the edge of my tongue like a word I wanted to say, but which I couldn't pronounce.

A strong feeling of confusion overwhelmed me. I was suddenly terrified, my heart pounding so hard I thought it might explode. I wanted to cry for a moment, but then it passed.

I tried to move, but it took a second to get my arms and legs to work. My body felt heavy, as though someone was sitting on top of me, pinning me to the ground.

With a groan, I lifted an arm into the air. It felt almost disconnected from me, tingling as if all the blood had been drained from it and was only just now making its way back to the tips of my fingers. I repeated this with my other arm and then my legs, until I managed to pull myself upright.

Just sitting up had exhausted all my energy and I didn't try moving again for a while after that.

As I looked at my surroundings, I saw green grass-covered hills stretching far into the horizon, rolling like waves in the sea. Trees stood by their lonesome on a few of the hills and the sky above was a calming azure expanse. For some reason it was a comforting sight, as if I knew it from somewhere. But I couldn't remember at all.

Panic washed over me again.

How did I get here?

This place didn't look like any place I recognised. It was tranquil and pleasant, but certainly not familiar to me. Also, there wasn't a single hint as to how I came to be lying on the grass. Had I come alone or with someone?

Where is my family? My friends? The people I care about?? Where is...

I realised in horror that I couldn't remember my family at all. They were like faceless dolls in the void that my memory had become. I could remember scattered moments with them, but only from my childhood. Things like my dad picking me up in his arms, or my mother watching over me while cooking dinner.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. I was completely alone here in this strange place.

I breathed in slowly and exhaled. I repeated this a few times until I'd calmed down.

I won't be able to do anything if I give in to anxiety and fear, I told myself.

I inspected my surroundings again. Some metres away, a dirt road stretched past me and across the landscape, leading to a modest-sized, grey town in the distance. From where I sat, I could see that

lanterns were already lit in some of the windows of the nearest houses, and quite a number of people thronged its streets. It was like an old medieval village, which I found peculiar and out-of-place.

I tried getting to my feet, but my head suddenly reeled, and I collapsed onto my knees, the soft earth and tender grass cushioning my fall.

While everything felt very real, and my knees were now throbbing a bit from the impact, there was a strong sense of *wrongness* that I couldn't avoid noticing. It almost felt like a dream, though way more lucid than that.

And then I remembered *that* voice. The grass wasn't real. The birdsong and amber rays of light were likewise manufactured. Even the breath in my lungs was an imitation of the real thing. And my body, it looked sort of like what I could remember, but these limbs that I could feel, they weren't my real limbs. Because...

This world isn't real!

I searched my mind trying to remember why I was here, but it was like tracing a path plotted with holes, as if the memories themselves had been erased. After a few minutes of concentrating, I could recall my tiny windowless apartment, but that was as far as my memory of the real world went. And I had no clue if this was even a recent memory or not.

The memory of *that* voice remained however: its luring, honeysweet words, telling me that I'd been resurrected. It seemed like something out of a game or a delusional fantasy. And as I looked around, I knew that I was no longer on Earth.

With surprising difficulty, I pulled a tuft of grass loose and held it in my hand. It felt so lifelike that I was almost fooled. Almost. Some innate part of me knew this world wasn't real. It had a kind of dreamlike quality to it, with its vibrant-and-fresh greens covering the ground, and mind-addling azures above.

Am I in the dream of some absurd deity? That seemed to be the case, if my memory of its voice was true. Although perhaps 'dream' was too vague a term to describe this world, after all, it was far too lucid an experience to truly be a dream.

What troubled me more was the fact that I hadn't the first idea of how I'd even ended up here. Not to mention, *that* voice mentioned plagues and many worlds I could travel between. It had also said that I would face its 'trials'. There was a sinister image of this place gradually forming in my imagination. If my memories were forfeit upon death, clearly this wasn't the realm of a benevolent God, but rather one of a sadistic entity. Or at least that's what I decided to believe.

When my dizziness had passed, I managed to get to my feet, though I stumbled awkwardly for a few moments before regaining my balance. I tested myself for a bit, walking back and forth as if trying on new shoes.

Why can I remember something as mundane as that?

Well, at least I haven't forgotten how to walk...

I spotted a tree on a nearby hill and decided to go scout the surrounding area from there.

As I made my way up to the top, my breathing laboured and quick, a memory hit me. I was playing a game on my computer, idling away my day. The room was dark and only the blue light of my LED screen lit up my desk and bed. The *click-and-clack* of the mechanical keyboard and mouse sounded in my inner ear, like an auditory hallucination.

What a pitiful existence, I mused self-loathingly.

It felt awful that I could remember something as meaningless as that, but not recall the faces of my family and friends...

I reached the tree cresting the hill and rested against its bark. The surface texture was coarse and tough, though ever-so-slightly squishy when I pressed on it, just like it would've been in the real world. As I ran my hand across its surface absentmindedly, while scouting across this hilly land, I noticed a part of the wood where the bark had been stripped away. The memory of carving my name into the exposed flesh of the tree hit me, and then, with unexpected force, another, more powerful, memory washed over me.

The distant echoes of an argument sounded in my head. The *slam* of a door. A make-up kiss and an apology. The comforting voice of someone whose face I'd now forgotten.

"My name is Aiko," I said to myself. At least the sound of my voice was as I remembered it, though rough from disuse. It was a disturbing feeling to know that I'd once written my name on this tree, but was unable to remember when. And despite once carving my name here, all that now remained was flawless wood with not a single scratch.

Is this some kind of torturous limbo? I wondered darkly.

A sudden shift in the wind, the scrape of metal-on-metal, and the sound of someone breathing hard, made me turn around. A knight clad in beautifully-wrought gleaming silver armour of plate over ring-mail stood at the opposite end of the hill, clutching his knees, breathing in-and-out rapidly, as though he'd run here in a hurry.

With some difficulty, the knight pulled off his helm, exposing a face red from exhaustion, but chiselled and handsome like that of a northern-European model. Why could I remember what *European* looked like, but not the people I'd known in the real world?² His shoulder-length brown hair was a tousled mess, but his eyes were a piercing sky-blue hue. In a deep voice he addressed me:

"I've finally found you, Aiko."

The way with which he spoke my name was caring and tender, as if the two of us had shared many moments together, possibly even intimate ones. But even though his brilliant face and rumbling voice should've registered in my memory, it was blank. Zero response. I'd never in my life met this stranger. Not in this realm nor the real world. Of that I was absolutely certain.

"How do you know my name?" I meant for the words to sound careful, but it came out as an accusation.

The smile, which masterfully curled his lips ever so slightly, disappeared at my words. It was clear that I'd hurt his feelings, somehow.

"I was really hoping you would be able to remember me and the times we spent together." Again, he was speaking as if we should know each other. He was clearly delusional.

"You didn't answer my question," I replied, this time with some force behind it.

"My name is *Kerebor*. Until a few days ago, we were companions, you and I; fighting with the other brave souls at the *Frontier*. We were supposed to break free of this place and meet in the real world one day. You promised me that once. But I suppose you no longer remember..." He was

² Clearly, my priorities of what memories were kept and which were tossed into the shredder of Oblivion were completely out of whack.

speaking in a grandiose tone, as though play-acting for a congregation of kindergartners. I suppose he greatly enjoyed the role of shiny knight.

“I don’t understand anything you’re saying,” I told him.

‘Kerebor’ scratched his head awkwardly. I thought it to be a fitting mannerism for someone going by such a silly name. “I apologise, I’m not very good at explaining things.”

“Give it your best shot,” I said sarcastically. It was clear from the surprised expression on his face that he had not expected me to use such a tone. It was strange that he would expect anything from me at all.

“You had better sit down for this,” he instructed. It was likely more for his own sake, what with his incredible burden of silvery, plated armour, but I obliged nonetheless, as my legs were still rather shaky.

Kerebor splayed his hands out before him after he had plonked down onto the grass in the shade of the lone tree. I sat down opposite him, putting some distance between us, since, regardless of his words, we were obviously strangers.

“Right now, we are in another world—”

I waved my hand in the air in frustration, cutting him off before he even got started. “I know *that!* I want to know why I don’t remember anything.”

Again, a pained and surprised expression on his face. “You used to be a lot different before you died,” he said in a sombre tone befitting of his booming voice.

“I died?”

“You were stabbed by the *King Consort* on the *Spire Stage* of the *Silken Valley*. When you die in this *place*, you lose your memories of that ‘life’.”

“That’s absurd.” Truly it was, but then I remembered *that* voice and I knew he was telling the truth.

“I agree, but it’s an unavoidable part of this Mad God’s game...”

“So how do I leave? There should be a way out of this place... right?”

He shook his head. “No one knows how to escape. Those of us at the *Frontier* believe that, if we can clear every World that’s thrown at us, we will be set free. You used to believe the same thing.

“However, a lot of other people believe there is no ‘real world’, that Earth is just an implanted memory we all share, and that this is our only world. It’s especially common with those that have died many times before. Some people have taken to calling them the *Forsaken*.”

“So, you’re saying that if I die again, I won’t be able to remember we had this talk?” The idea of such a concept was, to say the least, very disturbing.

“We already had this talk once before, actually. Except *you* were the one telling me these things. I’m here to repay that favour.” I wondered why I would ever have wanted to help this guy like he was helping me now, but the answer to that was of course lost when my previous life ended.

“Help me understand something, though. If dying only resets your memories of the life we’re living here, why have I lost the memory of things that happened before I came to this mad realm?”

“I don’t know. It happens to all of us, it seems.” Something in the way he said it made me realise it was bothering him too.

“How many times have I died? Just the once or more?”

“Definitely more than once, perhaps even a dozen times, but I don’t know for sure.”

“Great...” I mumbled to myself. “Anyway, let’s rewind real quick, how can I be sure we actually knew each other?”

Kerebor seemed to consider this for a moment. “Maybe you can ask me a question only a friend of yours would know?”

“That’d work,” I replied. “Hmm...” I wracked my mind, trying to think of some nugget of personal information that wouldn’t be too private but that a friend of mine would know. Considering my immensely shredded memory bank, that was easier said than done. Eventually I just settled for something easy:

“What’s my favourite colour?”

Kerebor grinned like I’d made a joke. *Clearly that was too easy.*

“It’s black. But that’s too easy, ask me something harder.”

“Okay, what’s my favourite kind of food?”

“Anything fried!” he blurted out so suddenly that I couldn’t help but laugh.

He scratched his chin in embarrassment, but then recovered quickly and suddenly listed off a bunch of stuff:

“You have quick reflexes; you’re a just person, but not above breaking the rules; you seem to really like animals, regardless of species, as far as I can tell; your biggest fears are spiders and clowns—”

Again, I couldn’t help but laugh.

Kerebor seemed pretty pleased with himself. “Should I continue?”

“No, no, I believe you. But I don’t remember you at all. It feels kind of awful when you have all these memories of me.”

“Yea...” was all he replied.

“So, anyway, what’s the ‘Frontier’? You keep talking about it like I’m supposed to already know.”

“Sorry. The Frontier is what we call the highest *Stage* reached. This realm is split into many different *Worlds*, each of which has several *Stages* that you need to complete in order to progress. You will soon learn that these Stages are very difficult, and because you only have one opportunity to learn a fight, since death will... well, you know... it means that many never make it very far before *resetting*. Those who do continually progress eventually run into the Frontier, which consists of veteran fighters, and even a few *Immortals*—”

“Immortals?”

“People who have not died at all since being transported here.”

“Those exist?”

“Yes, but they are few in number, and several of them are vicious *PKers*. A few spend their time actively helping the other *players* at the Frontier, but the majority of those that are left tend to just hang around in cities doing very little.”

“What’s a PKer?” Something about it sounded familiar when I said it, as if it was a word I might’ve used before.

“A Player-Killer. Most people refer to those of us who were brought here as ‘Players’, so, essentially, a PKer is someone who will kill other players for their items or sometimes just because they can.” From his face I could immediately tell that he had encountered such players before. It was a mixture of pure hatred, but also fear. I could hardly blame him for it. The thought of players turning

on each other, despite being in the same struggle to survive, was truly the epitome of all that was bad about humankind.

“We’re ‘players’?” I asked incredulously.

“Considering this place resembles a game, with all its rules, items to loot, ways to level up, and so forth, it’s actually not that much of a stretch. Also, the Worlds are populated with *Husks*: empty fabrications of people, who lack the true spark of life found within us who were transported here. Having the ability to distinguish who is real and who is not is important.”

I thought about this for a moment. “For whose entertainment are we playing, I wonder.”

Kerebor just shrugged. “Best not to think too much about it.”

“How long have we been here? I don’t remember even arriving to this place.”

“It’s different for everyone. Apparently, you were one of the first people here, along with *Heiress* and *Aeran*,” he said, as though I should know who those people were. “Some of the Immortals say they’ve been here for over a year, but most people at the Frontier say this has been going on for several years. Also, nobody remembers how they got here, at least we all have that in common.”

“Hmm... So, anyway, where I died—”

“The Spire of the Silken Valley.”

“Yes, thank you... is that where the Frontier is at?”

“No.”

“But didn’t you say I was part of the Frontier?”

“You were, but we went back to an earlier Stage, because you wanted to acquire a special item. You never told me what it was for, but you knew someone with a way to unlock an alternative version of the boss fight.”

“I died in a Stage I’d already cleared, then?”

“Yes, but that is not to say it was a walk in the park. I have never seen a fight so chaotic as that one. There were spiders everywhere. The King Consort killed two other players besides you. And the item that dropped is just a useless *Consumable*.” Despite talking about my death and that of two others, his face was really empty for a moment, as if unfazed by it.³ It was kind of terrifying. For a second, I wondered if he was putting on an act, though it wouldn’t make any sense for him to be here if he didn’t care at least a little. Or would it? I couldn’t actually say, truth be told, and clearly we’d been friends, so I was perhaps just reading too much into it. He seemed to care about me a whole lot at least.

“Do you have it with you?” I was curious to see what it was I’d died for, since I doubted that I’d have gone through so much trouble for something useless.

“Yes, it is in my *Inventory*.”

“Can I see it?”

“Of course.” Kerebor swiped two fingers in front of him, tapped something invisible, scrolled through a list only he could see, and then pulled an object out of the thin air. He opened his gauntleted hand towards me and showed a small glass heart resting in his palm. I knew it was a heart, despite the fact that it looked very alien in shape. It had six tubes connected in pairs to its three chambers. It had an organic yet oval shape, and a light flickered around inside it like a tiny firefly, giving off a

³ Sort of like someone just reading from a grocery shopping list.

dull, barely noticeable, red-orange glow. Gingerly, I picked it up with both hands, and found it to be quite sturdy and not at all fragile like I'd expected.

As if struck by lightning, another memory shot through my mind, more violently than the last. I heard the echoes of someone yelling my name and saw a man holding the '*Glass Heart*' in his hands above me, whispering something impossible to hear as the light faded from my vision.

I opened my eyes again to find Kerebor busily scrolling through his invisible menu again. He hadn't noticed my blackout.

"Hey, can I keep this?" I asked. Clearly there was something about this item, if only I could remember what.

"Sure, I was just planning on selling it anyway." He wasn't interested in it at all, despite me dying to acquire it. What a *chivalrous* knight he was...

"How are you doing that, by the way?" I waved my hand in front of me for emphasis.

"What? The *Menu Access Gesture*? You hold your fingers like this," he said, showing his index and middle fingers stretched, while the other three were curled into the palm. "Then you just pull down in the air in front of you to bring up the menu. From that you can access your Stats, Inventory, Skills & Weapon Progression, World Map, and Group Functions."

I followed his instructions and when I swiped my fingers down in the air in front of me, a little menu appeared out of nowhere and the '*Glass Heart*' vanished from my hands. I clicked on the first option, '*Statistics*', which brought up a screen showing '*Health*', '*Armour Rating*', '*Stamina*', '*Equipment Weight*', '*Movement Speed*', and '*Resistances*' on the left side, and a small moveable 3D image of what I looked like in the middle.

Until now, I hadn't even realised what I was wearing, but, from looking at the screen and then down at myself, I could see that I was outfitted with a very flimsy beige-or-off-white linen tunic and dirt-brown and torn baggy trousers. From what I remembered of myself in the real world, I could also tell that some 'enhancements' had been made to my body. Perhaps there was some way I could change my appearance, or perhaps my appearance now was my ideal self? Although, as I looked back down my body and then at the 3D image, I felt like that wasn't it.

"I see I don't get to start with a weapon... are we supposed to start out by fighting with our hands?" I asked sarcastically.

Kerebor had finally stopped scrolling through his menu and when he looked up our eyes met. He immediately looked away though, red colouring his cheeks. In the past I'd probably have acted the same way, I mean, personality aside, he was quite handsome, for a man, but it wasn't really doing anything for me just now, which was odd, because I did remember having had a boyfriend in the past, even if the memory of what he'd looked like was lost to me.

He cleared his throat and looked at me again. "Normally you would receive your first weapon in *The Forgotten Village* down there, or after you complete your first Stage." He pointed to the town I'd seen in the distance earlier, and, as I looked in the direction, I spotted players, wearing the same humble attire as me, making their way down the road.

As I turned back to look at him, he was once more scrolling some unseen menu. "Wait, what do you mean *normally*?"

Kerebor didn't answer and instead kept scrolling until he found what he was looking for. Then, from the air in front of him, he pulled out a long, black, scabbarded sword and a strange raven-feather

cloak. The biggest surprise was when he handed them to me. “These are yours,” he said. “The sword is a unique lightweight two-hander called ‘*Passing Breeze*’ and the cape is an incredibly-rare *cosmetic* item called ‘*Raven-Black Cloak*’. You’re kind of known for wearing the cloak. For some reason, only you can equip it, kind of like with Heiress’ wings.”

Again with this Heiress person?

I took hold of the items and immediately they vanished, just like the Heart had done moments before. Without knowing why, I performed the menu gesture and pulled up the inventory screen, which showed a grid of squares, with only three occupied by images.

It really is just like a game, I thought to myself. Despite my severe amnesia, the knowledge of how games worked and were designed remained.

I clicked on the cloak and a further window appeared. It showed a close-up of the static item art and read:

‘*Raven-Black Cloak*’

-Cosmetic-
Clothing > Cape

“The Raven Knight wanders the frigid streets of the Lightless City, with nothing but this cloak to keep him warm.”

Equip
Discard

Weight: 1.7 kilos

Below the flavour text were two buttons to ‘Discard’ or ‘Equip’. I clicked ‘Equip’ and suddenly the cloak was on my body, a plume of black raven feathers covering my shoulders and a length of smooth, sturdy fabric hanging down my back.

“Now you just need some better armour to go with that and you will be all ready to start progressing again.” His tone implied that it would be by myself, which I thought was odd, given that he’d come back to find me following my death. Maybe it wasn’t possible for him to help me out?

I looked back at my inventory and clicked on the ‘*Glass Heart*’. The item art was animated, showing the little light flitting back-and-forth within the transparent white glass.

‘*Glass Heart*’

-Consumable-

“Finally sated of his endless yearning, the heartless King Consort now rests at the peak of the Spire he calls home.”

Use
Discard

Weight: 0.3 kilos

According to the item tag, it was a *'Consumable'*, however, the *'Use'* button at the bottom was greyed-out.

Who would want to eat a heart made of glass anyway?

The last item in my inventory was the sword, *'Passing Breeze'*. The item art was static, similar to that of the cloak, once more confirming my suspicion that the *'Glass Heart'* was special somehow.

'Passing Breeze'

-Melee Weapon-

Sword > Two-handed > Katana

"Light enough to be wielded in one hand and capable of cleaving the wind in passing. The swordsman who once wielded this obsidian blade was feared for his ability to tame the breeze that flows across the towering dunes in the desert."

Trait(s):

'Brittle'

'Lightweight'

'Rend Armour'

Equip

Discard

Weight: 0.9 kilos

It had more tags than the other two items: the top-most one indicated it was a *'Katana'*; the three traits beneath read: *'Brittle'*, *'Lightweight'* and *'Rend Armour'*. Each trait had a star symbol next to it and clicking on the star next to *'Brittle'*, it stated: *"Will break when blocking heavy strikes."* The one for *'Lightweight'* said: *"Can be wielded in one hand."* And lastly *'Rend Armour'*: *"Ignores most common types of armour."*

"Isn't that too powerful?"

"What is?" Kerebor replied. Right... he couldn't see what I saw.

"This *Rend Armour* weapon trait. It says it ignores most *common* armour."

He smiled as if I'd said something funny. "I asked you the same thing when you first showed me that weapon. You told me that it was only really useful against *Adds* and early-World Bosses, since most Bosses in later Stages wear special armour that cannot be fully ignored, hence the *common* armour it mentions."

"Adds?" Again, I felt like I should know what it meant, but I just couldn't remember.

“That’s what most people call minor enemies. Some Stages you only fight minor enemies in a sort of *Horde* or *Survival* Mode, and other times bosses will summon Adds to their side as reinforcements.”

“Ah, so it’s not completely useless.”

Kerebor looked at me seriously. “It is a *very* good sword.” This was the first time he had shown me an expression like that. It suited him, honestly. For a moment, I wondered what he’d look like in the real world. I very much doubted *this* was his real face, though to be fair, parts of my body were also greatly exaggerated. I obviously wouldn’t have had any problems with guys in the real world if my breasts were truly *this* big.⁴

I really had to wonder if this place was less of a tortuous limbo fabricated by a Mad Deity and more like a strange adventure paradise, where everyone could placate their anxieties and fears of the future, and just live-kill-die-repeat for perpetuity. Though, it obviously wasn’t much of a paradise if it stole away our memories and didn’t allow us to leave... although maybe once I’d chosen this?

I looked back at ‘*Passing Breeze*’ and read its flavour text. It was yet another reference to someone in this Realm. I wondered if, at some point, I’d encounter any of the characters whose items I were now using.

In the bottom of the item tooltip, I noticed some small text that I’d missed previously, which indicated ‘*Weight*’. After cross-referencing my items, I found that the Raven-Black Cloak was heavier than the sword, weighing in at 1.7 kilograms, while the sword weighed only 900 g. From the ‘*Statistics*’ screen I could see that my total ‘*Equipment Weight*’ was 3.2 kgs, including the ‘*Glass Heart*’ and what little clothing I’d started with.

“How important is Equipment Weight?” I asked.

“Equipment Weight determines your Stamina and Movement Speed. I have heard of some rare items that can even increase these, but, with what little you are wearing right now, you will have the highest possible amount. Before you died, you used to wear plate over leather, which is a good balance between defence and mobility and usually puts you at about Moderate-to-High Speed and seventy-to-eighty percent Stamina.”

“I’m assuming this weight limit is why you were only able to bring me two of my items?”

Kerebor hesitated for a moment. “Yes. Yes, that is right. Even with just those two items I was dangerously close to being over-encumbered, which would have made it impossible for me to move,” he explained, pre-empting my next question. “My plate armour is pretty heavy, but it’s worth it.”

“Hmm,” I mumbled in response and looked back at the menu. The screen showing ‘*Passing Breeze*’ had two buttons that said ‘Discard’ and ‘Equip’. Clicking the latter one, the sword suddenly appeared on my hip, along with a dark belt around my waist. I pulled the straight blade free and held it in my hands. The obsidian blade was cold like glass against my skin. Surprisingly, the hilt had no crossguard, though, with a trait like ‘*Brittle*’, I guessed there was no point in having one, since it wasn’t made for guarding. I could already imagine the fighting style involving this sword being quite precarious. The soft black wrapping on the handle was apparently too long, since it spilled off the end. I couldn’t tell if it was an intended part of the design or just sloppy craftsmanship, but I guess it didn’t matter.

⁴ No, I’m not giving you the measurements.

“A fine blade, is it not?”

“It looks like a katana,” I replied simply. I mean, it lacked a lot of the things that makes a katana a katana, like the *Tsuba*⁵ and the signature curve, but it had certainly drawn inspiration from the weapon.

“From what I have been told, a lot of this realm borrows from ancient cultures of the real world.”

I looked at him with some incredulity. “From *what you’ve been told*? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I cannot recall anything from the real world anymore. I’m not sure when it happened, probably I’ve died many times... You used to ask me a lot about it in the past.”

If he couldn’t remember anything of the real world, didn’t that make him a ‘Forsaken’ like the people he’d mentioned earlier? I decided not to ask him, since it seemed an insensitive thing to bring up.

A soft *ping* sounded in my ear. I instinctively slid the blade back into its black scabbard as though I’d practiced the move a thousand times. Then I opened my menu and found one of the options had an exclamation mark next to it. It was the ‘*Skills & Weapon Progression*’ icon, below ‘*Inventory*’ and above ‘*World Map*’. After clicking it, a different kind of screen popped up, with a list of weapons organised by type: ‘*Axe*’, ‘*Dagger*’, ‘*Mace*’, ‘*Spear*’, ‘*Sword*’, and so on. It was quite an exhaustive list. It included many weapons I’d never even heard of, as well as a long bit at the end all just listed as “????”, whatever that meant.

Selecting ‘*Sword*’ brought up three choices: ‘*Dual-Wielding*’, ‘*One-Handed*’, and ‘*Two-Handed*’. ‘*Two-Handed*’ brought up another category, which labelled various types of two-handed weapons.

Seriously, how in-depth is this??

Choosing ‘*Katana*’ revealed a horizontal branching tree-like path, which showed a glowing circle on the very start of it, which said: ‘*Level 1.*’ Below that, the text read: “*Become more proficient to unlock the next level.*”

At ‘*Level 2*’, the path gave me two choices to pick from, one which was called ‘*Guard*’ and the other ‘*Quick Draw*’. Beyond ‘*Level 2*’ the options were not shown, as though they’d only be revealed to me once I reached the various level thresholds.

Below the branching progression tree was a straight line, above it reading: ‘*Familiarity Level*’, and the name ‘*Passing Breeze*’ next to it. It was currently empty.

I looked back at Kerebor again, who was busy trying to scratch some spot hidden beneath several layers of armour. “Hey. Why does my sword have a level bar?”

He jumped in response. Apparently, he had forgotten I was there, though maybe I also shouldn’t have yelled it... Slowly he turned to look at me, trying to master the embarrassment that shone on his cheeks. He coughed a few times to clear his throat.

“Unique or named weapons, such as your katana, have specific levels tied to them, which, when maxed out, unlock a special ability.”

“What’s the ability for ‘*Passing Breeze*’?”

“I don’t know.”

⁵ The Japanese word for the “crossguard” of a katana.

That's odd, considering everything else he knows about me? Though maybe it's something I ought to keep hidden when I unlock it? Like a trump card?

I was starting to wonder if half the things he had said about us being close in the past were even true. Granted, he had brought me my stuff, but something just felt off. I quickly suppressed my suspicions, scolding myself for being paranoid simply because I had no memory of him.

"I don't see an option for my cape."

"Special armours do not have any Familiarity abilities, but your cloak is also only cosmetic..." Perhaps unintentionally, his response came out sounding very condescending, as if I was supposed to have known these things.

He quickly moved on, "The one exception are shields, which are considered weapons, or part of a weapon set, perhaps. One of the reasons why I survived and was able to bring your items back to you, was because of the 'True Guard' ability that my shield has." At this he pulled out a large, gleaming, mirror-polished shield, the same silvery embellishment on it as the plate mail he was wearing. "It was a unique reward for defeating one of the *Boreal Knights of Gravegard* in an alternate version of the boss fight. The special ability lets me block any incoming attacks for twenty seconds," he bragged proudly.

He seems fine telling me his special ability, but he doesn't know my sword's?? Why is that bothering me so much?

"Did you get your armour from those knights as well?" I asked, trying to suppress my rising suspicions again.

"I actually crafted it myself. Bosses rarely drop an entire set of gear." From his voice I could tell that he thought it was quite an achievement. Without anything to compare it to, I had no idea whether it was or not. "You should see something for crafting skills in a different tab of the progression menu."

I looked back down at the screen in front of me. It took a few seconds to find the 'tab' he was referring to, but it was located at the top of the screen next to 'Weapons', and read: 'Crafting'. When I clicked it, the list of weapons was replaced by a list of skills, starting with 'Alchemy' at the top, 'Brewing' a few steps below it, etc. It was quite exhaustive as well, with ridiculously niche skills like 'Foraging' or 'Animal Husbandry'.

Suddenly feeling restless, I got to my feet and tried to dust the earth and grass from my trousers, though it made very little difference. Hopefully, once I replaced this lousy attire, I could find myself a bath, as, for some reason, I felt like I really needed one.

Kerebor also tried to stand in a hurry, and, I must admit, it kind of amused me watching him awkwardly stumble upright in a painfully slow set of turns and shifting of metal. Granted, his limited mobility was obviously balanced out by the fact that his armour seemed impenetrable.

"Are you gonna go?"

I nodded.

"I see. Before you leave, take *this*." After a quick scroll through his menu, he produced a strange tapered flask in his hand, with viscous red liquid inside it. Likely reading the horror on my face, he explained, "It is a healing potion. You drink it when you are low on health."

"Oh." I felt like I should've remembered that, since, as soon as he mentioned it, it seemed so obvious. When I took it from his hands, it felt very familiar holding it between my fingers.

‘Potent Healing Potion’

-Consumable-

Drink > Potion

“A very potent healing concoction, which once imbibed grants instantaneous healing of even the most serious ailments and wounds, but only moderate regeneration of dismembered limbs.”

Use

Discard

Weight: 0.15 kilos

It was small enough that I could hide it within both of my hands, and its total weight was 150 grams, though it seemed to only contained about 100 millilitres of actual liquid inside it, which would make it possible to consume in one swig.

While fumbling one-handedly with the menu, trying to put away the flask, I asked, “How can I tell if I’m hurt?”

“Your vision will grow dark around the edges and the sound of your heartbeat will be audible in your ears. The more severe these symptoms are, the closer you are to death. Once the black edges creep into your vision is also when you begin to lose memories...” Kerebor’s expression went grim while he explained. I wondered how many times he’d been near death in his current ‘life’.

“You’re kidding me...”

“I wish I was, but no, it’s yet another horrible aspect to this realm...”

“So... what kind of stuff am I gonna forget?”

“People, skills, how to walk normally, etc. Most of these things will return over time, but, the ones that don’t, can only be returned by completing the World you’re in, which can potentially block from being able to progress at all, if you somehow get hit enough to forget how to use your weapon...”

I winced. “I guess I don’t have a choice... not if I want to regain my memories and escape from this place...”

“Yeah. Oh, and memories sacrificed to cast your *‘Watcher Abilities’* also won’t return, so you’ll have to relearn them.”

“Say *what* now?”

“You don’t have to worry about that until you reach the next World,” he assured me. “But you shouldn’t use them, losing your memories permanently is not worth it. Trust me.”

Of all the things he’d told me thus far, this had the most force behind it. I utterly believed that he was right too, nothing was worth sacrificing memories for, least of all some ability, whatever it was.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I told him. “Is there anything else important before I go?”

“Yeah, *when* you make it to *The Lightless City*, find *Ceilameed*, he should be staying at the *Brave Hare* tavern. He is an Immortal you were close friends with in the past. At least that was what you told me.” I noticed his use of *when* and not *if*. He had high hopes of me, this guy.

“Got it.”

“Oh, and you can practice with the *Quartermaster* at the army camp. It’s usually not possible to do a lot of practicing, since the second Stage just throws you into the deep end, also, normally you cannot return to a Stage after you have cleared it, rendering that kind of practicing impossible too. Although, you can return to a Stage if you join the party of someone who has yet to beat it.”

“How do I start this whole *thing*?” I asked, gesturing around us broadly.

“You will encounter either *Captain Tabian* or one of his guardsmen in the *Village* down there, they’ll start you on your quest in this World.”

“Alright. This is a lot to remember, but I’ll try my best to keep all of that in mind,” I replied.

He nodded encouragingly, and I turned away and started my descent down the side of the hill from which he’d come.

I’d made it halfway down the hill, when Kerebor yelled at me from behind. “Be safe, okay! Don’t take too many risks!”

“I won’t!” I yelled back.

As I neared the outskirts of the town, the melody in the air changed to a more upbeat tavern tune that employed several instruments⁶, and a banner popped up in front of me, stating:

“*Now entering Safe Zone ‘The Forgotten Village’.*”

What a reassuring thought that where everybody woke up was not considered a Safe Zone, though clearly there’d be some kind of system preventing player-killers from going seal clubbing amongst the newly-awoken people such as myself, right? Right??

The village could easily be described in one word: *Grey*. Though “*Forgotten*” was quite a stretch, considering how the little streets, alleys, shops, and taverns absolutely thronged with people, many clad in the same shabby clothes as me, well, minus the impressive bird-feathers, cape, and dark scabbard that clapped against my leg with every step.⁷ Several people wore actual armour though, but none as impressive in appearance as Kerebor’s. There were also quite a few who were dressed in what could best be described as ‘town clothes’, which served no functional purpose that I could tell, but just kind of flashed their wealth and questionable taste of colour-coordination. The worst example of this was a rainbow-coloured velvet dress which was overlong and trailed its skirt along the dirty cobbles.

Granted, some of the people I saw might also have been these ‘Husks’ that Kerebor had told me about. The word sounded less like an official designation and more like a slur, due to its quite obvious implications. Perhaps these ‘Husks’ were simply the true denizens of this strange realm and we were the strangers invading their territory.

A few steps down the main street I spotted an alchemy shop nestled halfway into an alleyway between two taller buildings, hiding in the shadows as if the sun’s light could somehow damage its dark, worm-eaten façade. I’d already considered learning alchemy after glancing over some of its capabilities in the crafting window. Plus, the added bonus of being able to make my own healing

⁶ Such as a Hurdy Gurdy, a Fiddle, Flutes, Drums, Tambourines, and several other ones I could not distinguish in the cacophony.

⁷ With how vigorously it was hammering into my leg, I was sure my hip would carry a bruise in the shape of that *damned* thing before the day was done.

potions made it too tempting to pass up on. Particularly because of how terrifying Kerebor had made near-death experiences sound.

The door was as worm-eaten as the rest of the shop's front, and I had to use both arms to pull the cursed thing open. It was fairly evident that the proprietor didn't consider maintenance *that* important. The place did have a certain appeal though, at least if you fancied mossed-over walls, insects, visible decay, and fungus sprouting up through cracks between the floorboards.

"Nice place you have here," I said sarcastically to the man mixing flasks behind the shop counter. He looked up at me with his one good eye, but didn't respond. The hair on his head was wispy, like the kind of hair you'd expect to find on a corpse long-dead. His other eye was barely open, as that side of his face was frozen in a horrifying grimace caused by some chemical burn, which had also seared away part of the hair on his scalp.

When he still remained silent, I said, "I'm looking to learn alchemy."

At this he gave me a yellow-green toothy smile, and in a raspy voice said, "I will teach you what I know, if you help a friend of mine find something that was stolen from him."

A task... *well that was fast*. I honestly hadn't expected to be sent off on an errand so soon. But I guessed I had to complete it before I could unlock the alchemy skill tree. I wondered if it would involve a 'Stage' like what Kerebor had described.

"Where do I find this friend of yours?"

"*Father Adam* lives by himself in the *Old Church* to the north, outside of town."

"Very well."

"When you have found what Father Adam seeks, I will teach you what I know."

"Before I leave, do you know where I can buy some better armour?"

"When you have found what Father Adam seeks, I will teach you what I know," the Alchemist repeated.

"Are you okay?"

"When you have found what Father Adam seeks, I will teach you what I know," the Alchemist repeated for the third time, like a badly-scratched CD refusing to play past the intro riff.

I gave up on trying to illicit a different response from him and simply left the shop. I emerged from the shadow-covered alley and followed the sound of loud voices in the distance. It sounded like several different people were trying to compete for the attention of a great, thrumming crowd. I couldn't actually tell what was being shouted, but the inflection in their voices made it sound like they might be vendors or something of the sort.

As I walked along the dirty cobble road, I noticed quite a few people huddled away by themselves in alleys and the doorway-steps of houses. Some were mumbling to themselves, while others were rocking back-and-forth, or visibly shaking. A few just stared blankly into walls or at the passers-by, as though not fully comprehending what they were seeing.

Is this what happens when you lose all your memories? I wondered.

Forgetting everything about your past likely had a severe impact on your personality. To me, it seemed a fate worse than death. A shiver ran down my spine as I imagined myself in their place, completely alone, with no memories, and an unfamiliar world around me. I tried my best to shake the thought from my mind, but I knew that this was a sight I wouldn't easily forget. The nickname for these people made sense to me now.

‘Forsaken’: Abandoned by this world and the real one. I realised it could also be interpreted as them having abandoned their own memories, but that implied a choice, and I didn’t believe any of us had that in this place.

When the road split into two, I went left, as the other path led to the rolling hills outside of town. Following another stretch of road and another left turn I suddenly emerged into an extremely-busy marketplace with shouting vendors, running bands of children, and players clambering to get to the wares. This was no doubt the source of all the shouting I’d heard. I decided to just have a look at what was on sale and did my best to squeeze past the hungry mobs by every stall. I caught a few glimpses of battered-and-used armour and weapons, though a lot of it seemed very expensive, despite its obvious lack of quality and maintenance.

After a few minutes, I started to notice that I was attracting quite a lot of attention, with the crowds slowly converging on me.

Suddenly, one guy yelled, “Look! It’s *Raven-Black!*” Several others echoed his excitement, and then it was like the floodgates had sprung wide and a true stampede of excitement thundered towards me. I was slowly pushed back up against the brick wall of a local tannery by the mob that’d formed around me.

What the fuck is going on??

I tried my best smile and waved back awkwardly, but they quickly started pushing closer and closer, forcing me to back away before I was trampled or torn limp-from-limp between the many hands grasping for me. Then someone grabbed my cloak, and, for a moment, as the dark cape was pulled over my head, I legitimately feared for my life. I wailed my arms around, trying to create some distance between me and the mob.

“Get your fucking hands off of me!” I yelled furiously.

For good measure, and also to release his grip on my cloak, I torpedoed my foot into his nuts, making him produce a sound not too unlike a squeaky toy caught by a playful dog.⁸ I managed to disengage myself from the crowd shortly after and sprinted across the cobblestones as fast as my feet would carry me. At first, a few of the more excited people chased after me, but after a few minutes of dodging in-and-out of narrow alleyways, my legs never once halting, I soon lost sight of them. Moments later, I heard someone in the distance yell, “Did you see where she went?”

When I eventually found a completely secluded alleyway, twenty-odd minutes later, I stopped running and caught my breath. I couldn’t hear anyone shouting for me anymore, so I assumed I was safe. It was clear that whatever Past Me had done had earned me quite some renown, or notoriety perhaps, so I decided to avoid busy areas for a while, since I didn’t feel like being steamrolled by crazed fans⁹.

After ten minutes had passed, I poked my head around the corner of the building, but thankfully didn’t spot anyone who seemed to be looking for me. The sun was now completely hidden behind the buildings and the sky lit up in a dark-blue light, with a few strands of amber sunlight streaked across it. I tried my best to casually walk down the street as I looked for some place to settle for the night,

⁸ I’d wanted to draw my sword as well, but found myself entirely unable to release my blade from its scabbard, perhaps due to the Safe Zone we were in.

⁹ Granted, I had no way of knowing if they were actually fans of the Past Me, or if I just owed a lot of people money...

though it was hard not to constantly look over my shoulder, paranoid that someone was still following me.

The winds had become brisk and chilly, when I chanced upon a small, nondescript tavern with a brown wood and dark-grey stone front. The building only had two stories and lay on the fringes of the town, but looked pleasant and warm. The single window in the façade cast an orange glow onto the dark street in front of it, and I could hear the sound of laughter from within. Right then I decided that I'd risk getting mobbed if it meant I could enjoy some of that warmth and maybe a nice meal to appease my growling stomach.

As I pulled open the door, a bell chimed, announcing my arrival, and the twenty-or-so patrons inside all turned to look at me. I spotted one young man in the back whose eyes immediately glowed with recognition.

Goddamnit...

Thankfully, a serving girl, wearing a thick reddish-brown dress and a short white apron tied around her waist, approached me before he had the chance to get up. She had a shapely body, ginger hair, and an apple-cheeked face with charming freckles. She practically radiated happiness, and I couldn't help but smile as she took me by the hand and led me to a table in the corner of the tiny tavern. "Would ye like summat to eat or drink?"

"I'm absolutely starving," I explained, "so I'll take whatever you'd recommend."

"Got it! Be reyt back!" she said cheerfully in some kind of strange dialect and returned to the kitchen with bouncing steps.

I could tell the man in the back of the tavern, who'd recognised me, was trying to make up his mind on whether or not he should approach. Before I could see what he decided, the girl returned with a tray, blocking him from my view. She set it down before me with a *clunk* of wood-on-wood, then put a frothing jug of beer and a wooden bowl in front of me. The bowl was filled to the brim with a steaming stew that made my mouth water. From a pocket in her apron, she pulled out a spoon, rubbed it on the corner of her dress to remove some tenacious stain that'd survived the washing after the previous meal, and handed it to me.

Then she asked, "Would ye like to pay now or after?"

Shit...

Unless money had magically appeared in my inventory, I was fairly sure I had no way of paying for any of *this*. I realised I should've gotten some from Kerebor, since he was sure to be loaded, what with his silver armour and whatnot. But you know what they say about hindsight...

I have to admit his timing was pretty spot on, as the young man appeared from behind the serving girl and put down a few coins in front of me.

"I'll pay for it," he said nonchalantly.

He was skinny and looked no more than maybe eighteen. His voice was pretty high-pitched for a man's, but I already knew that appearances were nothing to go by in this realm, as I had yet to see a single ugly person in the entire village, aside from the Alchemist and the few vendors I'd spotted before being mobbed.

It seemed the denizens of this realm mirrored reality, but the people brought here, the so-called 'Players', idolised flawless beauty and were shaped accordingly. There were a lot of people with intense eye-colours, insanely-dyed hair like chromatic or turquoise, hourglass bodies, bulging veiny

muscles, above average height, and so forth. To me, so many of them embodied the beauty seen in fiction and over-edited adverts, lacking the flaws and symmetrical imbalances that create natural beauty.¹⁰

The young man had a gaunt face, but a strong jawline, curly brown hair, and greenish-blue eyes. Though for all I knew, his true appearance could be a forty-eight-year-old balding man, whose go-to outfit, prior to being spirited away to this realm, was nothing but stained underwear and a wife-beater tank-top. Or he could even be a girl, disguised as an effeminate man to avoid the harassment of horny men, who'd hit on any woman they came across. The possibilities were endless. At least the ones I could imagine in my head...

"Thank you, but—"

"I knew it was you," he whispered, as the serving girl left the table.

"Sorry, I don't know you," I said, trying to look apologetic. Hopefully I didn't owe him something...

He looked me up and down, noticing my shabby clothes beneath the black cloak. "So, the rumours were true... I had hoped they weren't."

It took me a second, but then I caught on to what he meant. "Yeah, it seems like I died."

"I want you to know we were all rooting for you. We still are." The amount of conviction in his voice was surprising. Now I was really curious as to why all these people knew me as *Raven-Black*.

"We?" I asked.

"You probably don't know this yet, but most of the players at the Frontier are well-known by those of us who've stopped trying to progress. You were one of the favourites, alongside *Nova* and *Winged Heiress*. Some people like *King Smash* and *Black Aeran* as well, even though they're both notorious Player-Killers."

"Mhmm," I mumbled, mouth full of stew.¹¹

"Do you have enough coins to stay the night here? I'm guessing you are probably still suffering from the *Resurrection Sickness*. It's best to get some rest before you go to the first Stage."

I washed down the stew with a gulp of the frothy beer, and wiped my mouth with the backside of my hand. "I have nothing besides my cloak and sword," I then said. He didn't need to know about the Heart. I also wasn't entirely sure what he meant by '*Resurrection Sickness*', but I guessed that it might have been the reason why I felt so weak the first hour after waking up, though it was mostly gone by now, perhaps owing to the brisk jog away from the hounding mob...

The young man pulled out his menu and in a quick flurry of motions produced a bag that chinked with coins as he set it down in front of me. "Take this, it should keep you covered for a while."

I carefully palmed the heavy bag and stashed it away in my inventory. It felt kind of dirty taking someone else's money like that, but I'd more than likely need it, not only to stay the night at the tavern, but also if I wanted to buy myself some better armour later.

"I'll pay you back when I have the money," I promised, hoping that would avoid me somehow ending up owing the guy a favour. I mean, who knew what he would ask for in return?

¹⁰ Like freckles, which are essentially skin discolouration, but yet incredibly charming.

¹¹ What? I was hungry, and this guy was doing all the talking anyway.

“You don’t have to,” he said. “Just promise me you’ll conquer the Trials and set us free.” That was quite a promise he was asking for there. I also wasn’t sure how he knew everyone would be set free if all the Trials of the Watcher were completed, but hopefully I’d find out soon.

“Erhm... I’ll do my best.”

“That’s all we’re asking for,” he said. Apparently, my words had convinced him, as he was suddenly smiling.

“How’d you get this kind of money anyway?” Hopefully I could pick up some tricks from him. If he had this kind of disposable income, he must’ve been doing something right.

“Most of it is from the repeatable *Errands* in town, but I’ve also been lucky enough to get a few rare items to sell from *Side-Quests*.”

“I see.” That was something to keep in mind at least, if I ever needed coins to buy something.

“Anyway, I won’t take up more of your time. It was a pleasure finally meeting you.” He even knew how to excuse himself like a normal person would. It somehow alleviated some of the stress of nearly being trampled by people earlier.

“The pleasure was all mine,” I said politely in response.

I got up from the table a few minutes later and the serving girl immediately popped up from behind the counter. “How was the food?” she asked cheerfully.

“It was good,” I responded. “I was hoping I could also rent a room for the night.”

“Certainly. That’ll be five silvers.”

I fiddled with my inventory for a minute until I found the money in the bottom of the window and was able to withdraw the correct amount. The silvery coins chinked as they appear out of the air and plopped into my open palm. After putting the coins on the counter, the charming girl led the way up a narrow staircase to the second floor, which was slightly cooler than below, thanks to a window that had been left ajar to freshen the air up. She stopped in front of a door and left again as soon as I opened it.

Inside the modest room was a large mirror, a bed, and a small, square window in the middle of the wall, giving a somewhat impressive view of the rooftops across the village. A cast-iron bathtub sat in the corner of the room and was somehow already filled to the brim with steaming-hot water. It was like they’d read my mind.

As I lay in the bath, a few minutes later, I pondered over the young man’s words.

People are rooting for me, huh?

I didn’t particularly feel like shouldering the burden of other people’s expectations, but if beating these ‘Trials’ would set everyone free, then that seemed like a pretty good thing, right? Whether or not it was actually possible to escape seemed to be a disputed subject, as Kerebor had been sceptical, while the young man had sounded certain. But if it was possible, I was certainly gonna give it a try.

The lure of having my lost memories returned to me was definitely the driving factor. The longer I stayed in this place, the worse my memory loss would get, and, before long, I would become indistinguishable from the Forsaken. I didn’t wanna end up like those people I had seen. Just an empty doll, a husk, void of memory and personality. I *had* to escape this realm. My entire being was literally at stake.

From the sounds of it, it seemed like this Mad God's machinations were no joke, and if a lot of people had given up trying to beat his Trials that probably meant the challenge before me was an astronomical one. Although I assumed that if people had once rooted for me, and placed their hopes in me, I probably had quite the talent for this kind of thing. But that was something I'd figure out pretty quickly, I was sure.

I splashed the water absentmindedly with my feet, creating tiny rippling waves. This was all a lot to take in.

After I'd scrubbed myself clean, I laid down exhaustedly on the bed and as soon as I'd wrapped myself in the soft blanket, I promptly fell asleep.

Father.Adam

I awoke to the soft notes of the tavern music that seemed omnipresent throughout the Village, though I'd yet to find its source. The soft blanket was still wrapped around me like a cocoon and I spent a long time just lying there, watching the yellow-orange sunlight fall across the floor from the single window in the room. Several minutes passed until I finally rose.

While sitting on the edge of my bed, which rested a few centimetres off the ground on four squat wooden legs, I found my starter clothes from the inventory screen and put them on. I decided against equipping the cloak, after all it was pretty eye-catching. The fact that it had stood out as much as it had at evening time was a testament to *that*, and I didn't particularly feel like running halfway across the Village again to lose a mob of people whose sense of privacy and personal boundaries were seriously warped.

I studied myself in the mirror for a minute, and then realised I hadn't even been given any shoes. Somehow, I hadn't noticed the absence when I'd run through the Village the day before. Normally, I would've expected blisters to form on the soles of my feet, but I didn't even feel any soreness.

As I stepped closer to the mirror to inspect myself further, a prompt appeared before me on the reflective surface and asked: "*Would you like to change your appearance?*"

I gave myself a good inspection, turning this-and-that way, and decided that, yes, I would in fact like to tone back some of the more ridiculous parts of my body that Past Me had decided to endow me with.

The control of the appearance altering mirror was quite strange, since it gave me no menu with sliders like I'd expected, for some reason, but instead just changed my appearance based on my thoughts. I considered completely altering my face for a minute, since it might help me attract less attention, but ultimately decided against it. People did after all refer to me as *Raven-Black*, so it was clear that the cloak was the most obvious thing I'd be recognised by, besides, I could always wear a hood or a mask if I needed to. Not to mention, if I died and lost all my memories, I might forget what I originally looked like...

Yeah... not doing that...

When I'd fixed the glaringly-obvious 'enhancements' to my body, I gave myself another inspection in the mirror. I now looked more-or-less how I remembered myself from the real world, though the decision to wear the guise of the Real Me, when I could look whichever way I liked, was still rather dubious to say the least. Then again, what did I consider ideal beauty? I wasn't really quite sure, so perhaps my choice of not altering my appearance much was a testament to my lack of imagination?

I looked Japanese, which I assumed meant my parents were as well, though I had no clue whether I'd been born in Japan or elsewhere. I couldn't remember how old I was, and, looking at myself, it could be anywhere from late teens to mid-twenties. Additionally, there was the possibility that I'd created my character to look like a younger version of my current self, so, in reality, I might've been even older than I appeared. I had puffy just-above-the-shoulder-long black hair, which right now was an unruly mess. My face was slightly on the long side, with gaunt but prominent cheeks. My eyebrows

were slim as if recently trimmed and my eyes were average-sized with chestnut-brown irises and had a playful look to them, though that might also have been because of the face I was making... I had a small nose and mouth. My skin was a pale tan, the kind of pallor commonly found in those who stay inside all day, living their life as though sunlight was fatal to them. I was thin, but not overly thin, as indicated by quite a few soft edges here and there.¹² My arms and legs were lined with muscle, so I might have done something other than playing games in the real world every day, but I couldn't recall what exactly that was. Perhaps I'd practiced some kind of martial arts in the past, or maybe gymnastics. My stomach had the faintest outline of a six-pack. That was an area I hadn't changed in the mirror, but I couldn't remember if it was true to the Real Me or another one of Past Me's embellishments. Speaking of, I'd returned the size of my hips, breasts, and butt to normal. I knew this was a fantasy and all, but I refused to look like some weirdly disproportionate sex-doll. Though I was sure guys like Kerebor probably loved that type of girl, after all, he'd made himself look like a supermodel, which seemed quite shallow and indicative of his tastes.

Maybe I'm being too judgemental, I chided myself. Most people's first instinct when confronted with the question "Would you like to look like your ideal self?" would no doubt be "Yes." Going by the Players I'd encountered thus far, *that* certainly seemed the case.

I began to seriously wonder what Past Me had been up to. I mean, I could understand if the whole overly-sexualised appearance was a way to manipulate gullible fools, but I wasn't sure if *that* was better than simple vanity. Either way, I subscribed to neither of those ideas. I'd rather just be myself and then damn what everyone else thought.¹³

After wrapping up the Appearance Customisation, another prompt appeared, giving me the ability to change my name. I left it as "Aiko". I had no doubts that this was my real name. It did make me wonder why Kerebor had such a strange name, but then again, according to both him and the young man who'd paid my dinner, names like 'Nova', 'Heiress', and 'Aeran' were some of the most well-known.

Am I actually in the minority with my normal name??

Perhaps it went hand-in-hand with sculpting your appearance to be your ideal self. After all, how often hadn't I played games where people had the most absurd names possible, but this was different, wasn't it? Or maybe not?

The prospect that people considered this world like less of a real place and more like a game had some sinister implications associated with it. I had wondered at first why anyone would think it was okay to kill other people, but if no one considered the consequences of their actions very important, it would make sense that greed and debauchery flourished, irrelevant to the suffering of others, since it might be perceived as simply artificial and meaningless in the face of what was ostensible eternal life, with the *minor*¹⁴ caveat of losing all your memories upon being revived.

I decided to find my way back to the marketplace and left my room wearing just my shabby starter outfit.

¹² No, not my boobs...

¹³ Also, you know, the whole terrifying concept of losing the memory of what my real face looks like if I died.

¹⁴ Please note the sarcasm here.

At first, I thought that it was simply due to the lack of people around this early, but after entering the marketplace with its thronging customers and shouting vendors, I realised that not a single person here recognised me. I couldn't decide if I should be offended or not that the people who had hounded me yesterday had no idea what my face looked like, but the alternative was elbowing my way through the crowds that would immediately mob me, so I wasn't too upset.

In the corner of the marketplace, I found an Armourer's shop, after immediately decided against buying from the shouting vendors who, as I'd noted yesterday, were too expensive and their wares lacklustre. The shop looked empty despite the crowds just beyond its doorway, which might've been a bad sign, but I decided to try my luck regardless. It was built from mostly stone, with a few wooden beams here-and-there, and a thick wooden sign dangling outside its door. As I entered, the stench of people and filth from the market was replaced by the heady and overpowering smell of leather, mixed with the thick stench of oil and steel.

With the coins the young man in the tavern had given me the night before, I found that I had more than enough to buy myself a black leather tunic with a protective dull-grey metal cuirass to go over it. I also bought thick black trousers and sturdy black leather boots.¹⁵ I equipped it all on the spot, and gave the blacksmith my flimsy starting clothes as I wouldn't need them anymore. He made an off-hand comment about how he might be able to use them as rags for polishing or something. It didn't matter much to me what he did with them.

After I'd put it all on, I checked my stats and realised that, because my '*Equipment Weight*' had gone up to 6.4 kgs, my '*Stamina*' had gone down from *one-hundred* percent to *eighty-five*, and my '*Movement Speed*' from *very high* to *high*. I had yet to even test out my fighting skill, but still considered it a fair trade-off, as my '*Armour Rating*' had gone from *none* to *modest*. I didn't buy a helmet, which might've been a bad idea, but all the metal helmets on display had visors which would only give me a narrow slit through which I could see the world, and I didn't want to severely limit myself before I really knew what I was capable of.

By my estimate, I had enough coins left for maybe two more meals and an overnight stay at the tavern, so, I decided to find *this* Father Adam, and hopefully through completing whatever task he had in store for me, I could earn enough money to avoid having to live on the street by tomorrow. I didn't really want to think about what would happen to me if things didn't play out like that, so instead I started making my way out of town, pushing my monetary worries aside for now.

I'd drawn quite a few curious glances as I reached the end of the Village, but I couldn't tell if it was because they recognised me from the black clothes or because it was uncommon for people to leave the safety of the town. I checked the map menu and, from what the Alchemist had said, set a course north by following the orientation of the north-pointing finger of a little compass in the map's bottom corner. I'd for some reason expected to find an arrow indicating where I was supposed to be going, but this map had none of that. It was simply a small slice of the world, rendered in a strange 2.5D with a miniature image of me in the centre and a bit of the world around me. Currently, I could see a few blocks of the Village on the bottom part of the map, and, above, green hills and a lonely road.

¹⁵ Yes, it was all black. I know, I know, but I figured it would go well with the cloak. And, if I was to live up to the name *Raven-Black*, I might as well go all the way.

Because I liked the way it looked, I equipped my ‘*Raven-Black Cloak*’, though I was already covered in quite a few layers, so, really, it was quite unnecessary. In the real world, I would’ve been cooked to death in the sweltering sun, but thankfully the elements of this World were a bit more forgiving. To my satisfaction, a few players nearby gasped when they saw me, and started talking loudly to each other, while pointing in my direction.¹⁶

I stepped beyond the border of the Safe Zone, as indicated by a quick-flash of a prompt, and let the wind billow my cape behind me dramatically. It was a good thing it wasn’t a backdraft, otherwise I would’ve looked ridiculous.

As I headed out, I put a hand on the scabbard by my waist. It was a comforting burden, I thought.

Seven-or-eight minutes later, I reached a fork in the road. The Forgotten Village was already quite far in the distance behind me, and I could see the peak of a tower over one of the hills to my right. I consulted my map again and could tell that I was still heading in the right direction. From the image on the screen, I could now see the entire church ahead of me, as well as all the hills in the area, and also the strange top-down view of myself from behind. It wasn’t possible to manipulate the map by zooming in-and-out, nor by moving it, but it now had a useful little arrow pointing back towards the Village, denoted by the tag ‘*Safe Zone*’. It was good to know that I wouldn’t easily get lost in the endless hills with the arrow and compass as references.

While continuing north, I wondered if it would point to every Safe Zone I discovered or if there was some kind of range or limit to it.

The church was a ruined mess, to put it mildly. Its tall mosaic glass windows were shattered into a million pieces; its statues atop the door and around the length of its roof had all been defaced or completely destroyed; and several holes had been punched into the side of the building, exposing half of the interior to the open elements, which had not been kind to it. Moss, weeds, grass, and insects, as well as small miscellaneous critters, infested the entire west-facing side of the building. Before its massive doors, a courtyard had once been present, but was now almost entirely swallowed up by the earth, with naught but a few stone benches and lone columns poking out of the tallgrass.

Astride, yes, *astride* one of such partially earth-swallowed benches sat a long-haired old man, wearing a faded-brown monk’s robe with a thick rope coiled around his waist. As I neared, I could study his appearance in more detail. His brow, mouth, and neck were lined with creases of age, his hair was dark-grey with scattered white stripes in it, and his eyes were glossed over and creamy-white. I had no doubt that this was the man I was looking for, though I couldn’t say exactly why.

Father Adam lifted his head at the sound of my boots grazing against the side of a tilted slab of stone. “Who’s there? Did the Alchemist send you?” His voice was like crumbling dry paper and the scrape of chalk. That was the only way to really describe it.

“He did,” I replied.

“Come closer, let me see you.”

¹⁶ If I was to be famous, I could at least wallow in the flattering attention, so long as it didn’t pose an immediate threat to my life: i.e., death by trampling.

I carefully approached him, and he twisted across the bench to sit normally before me. I wasn't really sure how he was planning to *see* me, as it was quite obvious that he saw nothing at all. The answer to this came when he reached up and clasped my face in his old, veiny, liver-spotted hands.

"Yes. Yes," he repeated to himself. "You'll do just fine. Come sit."

I politely obliged the old man and sat down next to him on the bench. It was quite an awkward thing to sit on, as it sloped downwards, and I ended up having to use my feet to brace myself or risk sliding off.

"I have a quest for one such as you," Father Adam said, his dry, raspy voice making every word sound pained. "Once, this church was used as an archive of our Kingdom's knowledge, but, as you can tell, it has fallen to ruin. Last month, one of my most prized possessions was stolen: '*The Map of the Forbidden Catacombs*'. The man who stole it goes by the name of *Red Rian*, and leads the *Red Runner Bandits*, who often terrorise the villages nearby. I wish to see my possession returned, and will reward you handsomely for your efforts."

"Alright, I'll retrieve this map of yours."

"Seek out the *Quartermaster* in the *Soldiers' Camp*, he'll know Red Rian's whereabouts." The mention of the Quartermaster registered on my memory, and I recalled Kerebor's advice to use the guy to practice my fighting skills.

"Where do I find this camp?"

"Travel northwest from here until you see the smoke from the camp's fires."

I pulled out my map and studied the compass for a moment. Northwest from the Old Church would take me back the way I'd come, which meant retracing my steps. Even from the fork in the road I hadn't been able to spot any smoke in the distance, which meant it would be quite a trek to make it to the camp. Another option was checking to see if it was possible to find any transportation in town, but that would likely take up just as much time as walking there, or perhaps even longer, so I decided just to walk.

I left the old priest behind and went back the way I'd come. Up-and-over hills, again-and-again, until my legs were sore and I was gasping for air like an asthmatic. Thankfully, I reached the dirt road soon enough, and after having walked northwest for a while, I stopped in the shade of a single tree that stood proudly off the side of the road.

It was quite strange that with how many people I'd seen in the Forgotten Village, I'd yet to spot any other Players along the road or even in the distance. Had everyone in the Village simply resigned themselves to their fate of cheering on those at the Frontier, like the generous young man from the tavern? It seemed like quite a waste, but I suppose not everyone was interested in taking part in this sadistic Trial where your life was literally on the line, or at least your memory of it. While the concept did scare the hell out of me, I also couldn't just sit on my hands until someone else defeated this twisted Trial on my behalf. That wasn't who I was, and from what I guessed, Past Me had been the same way. Perhaps that was the one part of my personality that hadn't ever changed.

When I felt fully rested, I left the comforting shade behind and continued my march towards the camp.

An hour later I finally saw smoke on the horizon. It looked like grey clouds billowing out of the earth. I realised that, despite wandering through such expansive grasslands, I had yet to spot any grazing animals, and though I could hear the melody of a solitary flute accompanied by birdsong, I still had yet to find its source. For some unexplainable reason, I'd just assumed that the background music was a part of this World and not considered it odd that its volume remained constant wherever I went.

I came over a hill, and the peaceful soundtrack was replaced by the sound of war drums. The sudden rhythm made my heart beat faster in expectation of what was to come. Before me lay the camp, surrounded by evenly-spaced thick and sharpened wooden stakes that made up its walls. The loud voices of the soldiers sounded from within, as though they were busily preparing for war.

A banner appeared in the air before me and stated: "*Now entering Stage 'Soldiers' Camp'.*"

The landscape sloped down towards the camp, and the grass had been ploughed away all around and inside it, leaving the raw dark-brown earth exposed to the eroding sun.

A tall guard approached me as I drew near. He was wearing a barbute with a T-shaped opening, showing only his eyes and part of his mouth. He also wore a light-grey tabard over chainmail and wielded a spear taller than himself, planted in the ground next to him. Curiously, the tabard held no insignia or coat of arms.

"State your purpose, *Traveller.*"

"I'm here to see the Quartermaster," I said. I did my best to sound confident, but I had yet to be in a real fight, and, in terms of intimidation, this guy was winning.

"So, you wish to join the Army, do you?" I hadn't said anything of the sort, but I guessed he just assumed that was why I'd sought them out.

"I guess," I replied unenthusiastically.

"Well, I doubt you have what it takes," the guard responded and laughed. His deep voice echoed within his helm.

"Can I en—"

"The Quartermaster will test your mettle," he interrupted, "and then we'll see if *someone like you* has a future with the Army."

What a rude bastard...

It wasn't even like I wanted to join their stupid army anyway, I just had a quest to fulfil. But, shoving my annoyance with the guard aside, I made my way into the wooden fortification.

The Soldiers' Camp was a maze of palisade walls, but it held most of the things I'd expect a medieval army camp to contain, such as an area for soldiers to sleep, a place to eat, a place wide enough to be considered a courtyard, and, of course, a training area, which in this case doubled as an armoury for some reason.

A bald and burly man, clad in chainmail that seemed on the verge of its links snapping from the pressure of his heavy frame, leaned on a shield that was jabbed into the dark soil. Beneath the chainmail was a layer of cloth, though not enough to provide any serious addition to his defence. Before him stood two recruits, or at least that was what they looked like to me, who were receiving some instructions from him.

When the large man noticed me, he waved the two away and started stroking his black beard with his thick fingers.

"I haven't seen you before. Are you here to join the Army?"

“Not really,” I replied. “I’ve come on the behalf of Father Adam.”

“Is it about the Red Runners?”

“That’s right.”

“I’ve already told him we can’t just send soldiers chasing after his lost possessions: we neither have the men to spare nor the desire to indulge every little request.”

What do you do then? I wanted to ask, but didn’t.

“He said you would know where Red Rian is holed up.”

The big man thumbed his nose, then looked me up and down, before smirking. “Aye, I know where *that* bastard is hiding, but what’s a pipsqueak like you going to do with that information?”

“I’m going to get the Father’s map back,” I replied matter-of-factly.

He laughed, then said, “You really think yourself capable of that?”

“Oh, I *know* I am,” I lied confidently. *I don’t know shit about what I’m capable of...*

“Tell you what, *Pipsqueak*. If you can beat me in a duel, I’ll give you the information. If not, then you’re better off not knowing. That bastard has killed more than enough people as is, and I don’t want some foolhardy Adventurer’s death on my conscience.”

“Bring it on.”

The large man laughed again, before moving over to where dozens of soldiers were trading blows with dull swords and worn-down shields as they practiced bog-standard moves of defending and attacking. They looked woefully underprepared for actual combat. With a few curt commands, he cleared the area, and, soon after, the recruits were ringed around us, creating an arena of about eight metres in diameter.

The Quartermaster pointed to a long wooden table, upon which lay every weapon at the army’s disposal. These were not the dull ones that the recruits used, but actual weapons. “Pick one,” he told me.

I took a moment to look over the weapons. There were spears of varying length; arming swords; longswords; rapiers; maces; a few claymores; knives, both thick-and-short and long-and-skinny; recurve and longbows; throwing javelins; and shields in every imaginable size, from parrying shields that’d pair well with rapiers to door-sized tower shields. None of the options seemed better than what I had though, especially considering the state they were in, some with very obvious signs of damage.

“I think I’ll stick with *this*,” I said and put my hand on my scabbard.

“Fair enough,” the man replied, picking a short spear for himself, as well as a kite shield.

After he created some space between us, he looked down at me and said, “We’ll go by *First Blood* rules: whoever first receives a wound from the other, is deemed the loser.”

“Got it. I’ll try not to kill you,” I promised.

He grinned, “Let’s see what you’re worth, ey?”

The Quartermaster lifted the shield, so that it obscured his chest and every bit of his face below his eyes. I found it curious that he didn’t wear a helmet, but then again, neither did I...

As he approached, keeping a careful distance for the moment, I drew my obsidian blade from its sheath. The sunlight gleamed off of its mirror-like surface. I held it before me with both hands on its handle, the tip angled slightly towards him.

Remember, don’t try to block him, I warned myself, recalling the ‘*Brittle*’ trait of my sword.

With a sudden burst of speed, the Quartermaster loped forward, keeping his guard in place as he jabbed his spear around the side of the shield, aiming for my shoulder.

I moved my body out of the way with ease and kicked the shield back into the towering man, eliciting a grunt from him as his arm slammed into the chainmail covering his wide belly.

He quickly responded with another jab of his spear, but I saw it coming and chopped my blade down just below its spearhead, cleaving the wooden staff and rendering his weapon useless. But before I could seize the opportunity, the Quartermaster flung his shield outwards, forcing me back.

He quickly returned to the long table stacked with weapons and drew an arming sword, before I could catch up to him. It was strange how quickly he was moving despite his large frame and heavy chainmail, although his fighting style seemed to leave a lot to be desired, as every move was *telegraphed* for long enough to be easily avoided.

I lifted my katana above my head and slammed it down into his shield, cutting partway through the top of it, though it held long enough for the Quartermaster to fling it wide, forcing me to go along with him, as I struggled to wrench free my blade. As I moved with him, he slashed his blade at my stomach, where the cuirass deftly dulled its blow. The strike was weak enough to not even leave a scratch on my newly-acquired armour.

With an explosion of wood and metal bracings, the shield was reduced to one-third its original size, when I rammed my sword downward and pushed the keen edge further into its frame, rather than trying to extract my blade from its grip. The razor-sharp edge barely missed his hand, but it didn't matter, because, I quickly snaked around his riposte with the short sword and opened up his upper arm in a shower of severed chain links. I had to stop myself from following up the strike with another slash to his exposed throat.

It was quite a frightening experience that fighting had come so easily to me, and that I had to actively fight against my instinct to deal a finishing blow to what was ostensibly a friendly duel.

Why on earth does it feel like I've been practicing this for years? Am I not supposed to have forgotten everything?

Blood gushed forth from the Quartermaster as he tumbled backwards, landing on his knee and dropping the arming sword in one move. One of the recruits quickly came running with bandages, but I knew from the length and depth of the wound I'd created that merely wrapping it in soft linen wouldn't help much.

Unconcerned with the copious amounts of blood escaping his body, the Quartermaster excitedly said, "That's first time someone has defeated me in over ten years! Pray tell, *Traveller*, what's your name?"

I considered this for a moment, though I already knew what I'd respond. "You can call me *Raven-Black*."

"Are you sure I can't persuade you to join our army?" he asked, while another recruit came to the first one's aid, in order to bind the bandage tight enough that it might stem the bleeding.

"I'm good." I didn't see the merit in joining an army where *this* guy was teaching people how to fight. I mean, I'd defeated him, and just a day prior was the first time¹⁷ I'd held a sword. Also, aside

¹⁷ In living memory.

from weapons in terrible shape and some low-quality armour, I didn't know what I really stood to gain.

"I see. Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find us."

"You said you'd tell me about Red Rian's whereabouts," I reminded him.

"That's right, you've earned it after all." As more of his blood pissed out his ruined arm and now four recruits were panickingly wrapping layer-after-layer of instantly-soaked-through fabric around it, he stroked his beard with his free hand as though he wasn't going to bleed to death in a couple of minutes. "We sent some scouts east a few days ago, but they have not returned like the rest that we sent elsewhere."

"So, he's to the east?"

"That would be my best bet. The scouts were sent to a small farming community that we suspected might have been infiltrated by the Red Runners some time ago. I assume you've already been to the Old Church, so it should be easy enough to find if you simply follow the east-going road until it splits and snakes north through the low hills in that area."

"Gotcha..." I replied. I was a bit annoyed that I'd have to backtrack to get there, but at least I knew where I was going now.

If I'd explored more, could I have bypassed this Stage? I wondered.

"Oh, and if you do manage to kill the bastard, bring his head to Captain Tabian in the Forgotten Village and he'll reward you handsomely. We've all lost someone we know to those Red Runners, but I doubt none have lost as much as Tabian."

"Thank you," I said, then eyed his arm that I'd ruined. "...You should probably get that fixed by someone who knows what they're doing," I commented, as now a fifth recruit had joined the impromptu first-aid team, who were all looking very desperate and muttering about having to amputate.

Some minutes later, I departed from the camp, ignoring the derisive words of the guard out front as I passed him.

After leaving the area, the music returned to the birdsong-and-flute and a soft *ping* began sounding in my inner ear every minute-or-so, growing more insistent with every repetition. When I couldn't take it anymore, I pulled out my menu to try and find its source.

An exclamation mark hovered next to the progression menu, just like it had when I first equipped the sword. On the weapon levelling screen, I found the Katana progression tree, where the glowing dot had moved to 'Level 2' and the incessant pinging sound apparently served to inform me that I had to pick either of the two available abilities: 'Guard' or 'Quick Draw'. Each ability had a short description when I clicked on them. The first explained: "*Use the katana to guard against incoming attacks*", and the second: "*Quickly draw the katana from its scabbard, performing a powerful slash.*" I immediately picked the latter, since I clearly wouldn't have a use for the ability to guard, when it contradicted my weapon's 'Brittle' trait.

As soon as I'd chosen the new ability, I felt the understanding of how it worked flush into my mind, as though injecting itself directly into my memories and muscles. I swiped the menu away, and, looking at the tallgrass around me on the side of the road where I'd stopped, bent my body slightly, spread out my legs for balance, placed one hand on my scabbard, and the other on the handle. Then,

as if lightning shot through my veins, I pulled the sword out in a Quick Draw, the blade tracing a half-moon in front of me with the motion of my arm. The grass in a wide cone before me was cleaved neatly in half and snatched away with a gust of wind that soon followed.

My arms trembled as I returned the blade to the scabbard, but I couldn't stop smiling. *This* was what power felt like.

"I knew you would pick *that* skill," someone commented nearby.

From looking around prior to testing out my skill, I was certain that nobody was nearby, and yet, on the road just at the top of the hill leading to the Soldier's Camp stood someone I recognised. Someone I hadn't expected to see again.

"Did you follow me here??"

The threat in my voice was obvious, not to mention, I was still holding on to my scabbard and hilt.

Kerebor laughed. His voice was hollow from the bucket-shaped helmet on his head. The two narrow slits for his eyes in the blank-faced mask made him seem a lot more intimidating than what I remembered, but perhaps it was also the fact that I felt like he'd ambushed me here.

"I knew you would eventually come here, so I've just been waiting."

I hadn't seen him when I'd arrived, and it wasn't like he could hide in the open hilly landscape, at least not well enough for me not to spot him. Or could he? I actually wasn't sure, since I didn't know what people were capable of the further they progressed...

Sensing my confusion, he quickly explained, "Most of this World is *phased* to Players prior to them completing the first Stage, except for the area near the *Starting Zone* and the Safe Zones. I was *here* when you came by, you just couldn't see me, or well, I couldn't see you, or... well, both."

"Like parallel dimensions?" I asked.

"Pretty much."

"So? What do you want??" I was still standing in the grass off to the side of the road, my hands glued to my weapon.

"You're about to go to the *Hideout* Stage, right? I want to come with you. I can protect you."

"You know that's not very convincing, since the reason I died was because you *couldn't* protect me, nor anyone else on our team, apparently..."

"I know. It's my fault you died. But I want to make it up to you, and help you progress."

"I don't need you to hold my hand."

"But I—"

"No. I want to do this myself. How am I supposed to learn anything if you do all the work for me??"

I wondered what kind of face he was making beneath the helmet, but realised I didn't care. What little goodwill he'd built between us was quickly eroding.

He then seemed to make up his mind, and nodded slowly. "Alright, I understand."

I quickly started jogging through the grass, until I was far enough away from him that I felt comfortable stepping back onto the road. For the next several minutes, I looked over my shoulder every few steps, praying that I wouldn't see him come running. Thankfully, I knew I was a lot faster than him, so, if it came to it, I could outrun him.

After walking down the road for a while, I realised that, if he knew where the Camp was, he'd obviously know where the next Stage would be, and if he decided to ambush me like *this* again, he might be less chivalrous about it next time...

Great, just what I needed to worry about right now...

I saw the first body on the road long before the farmstead was even visible in the distance. It was a man who'd been stripped of his armour, and his dignity, before being impaled on crossed spikes through his legs, into the torso under his ribs and out through his shoulders, before ending in his splayed-out hands. Whoever had done this, had worked very meticulously to send a message and it worked even better than any "*Keep off my property*" sign. Without knowing how, I was absolutely sure this was one of the scouts the army had sent this way.

It was disturbing how, despite the gruesome nature of the sight, I felt utterly unfazed by it. After all, my first sight of a dead body should've had a strong impact, and yet I didn't feel fear or apprehension, only a bubbling hatred seeping through my blood. These Red Runners were due some righteous punishment.

I continued down the road as it moved around many tall hills that, with every ten-or-so metres, became increasingly more deflated, until finally the landscape was nearly flat and I could see several large buildings dotting the area ahead of me. Most of the buildings were farmhouses and barns, but there were a few normal buildings too, which reminded me of the small houses in the Village.

As I came to what was ostensibly the 'entrance' to the farmstead, demarcated by a simple wooden gate and a ramshackle waist-high fence that was missing most of its horizontal planks, the music changed to the hard, penetrating tune of a violin, which sang a sorrowful melody that reverberated endlessly through the air.

Following immediately off the heels of this new sound in the air, came the Stage banner: "*Now entering Stage 'Red Runner Hideout'.*"

Two naked men with stakes skewering them in an X sat on either side of the simple gate, as though mock statues, and, as I made to push open the gate, one of the bodies twitched at the sound of my feet on the crunchy gravel.

The man, despite his entire body perforated by the two stakes and his days' old blood crusted on the grass underneath him, tried to gargle some warning to me. It was a noble thought, that even in the face of death, his mind was first on his duty.

He was still trying to formulate the words as I drew my sword from its sheath. When his mangled ears caught the sound of the blade, he stopped. A sigh left his lips, and I knew he had hoped for this mercy to come, his pain likely unbearable, though he endured it without a single cry. In a fluid motion, quick and soundless, I stabbed my blade through his heart and pulled it back out. Without being able to explain why, I performed a flourish before returning my sword to its scabbard, casting the blood from my blade and onto the earth.

I knew I should've felt something then, having just performed my first kill, but my feelings seemed very far away in that moment. Detached almost.

With my sword back in its sheath and my left hand resting on its pommel, I pushed aside the gate, which immediately broke off its rusted hinges. Some metres ahead of the entrance, a group of four men were laughing with bottles in their hands, a kneeling and bleeding figure in front of them.

They didn't notice my approach on the grass, too occupied with their victim, whose right hand had lost every finger and whose left was already missing the thumb and index. The strangled whimper of this tortured soul triggered something in me, some animalistic impulse, and, just as their victim noticed me, the four men turned around at the sound of my furious yell. I speared the nearest man through his stomach, the one who'd seemingly been the one in charge of lopping off the poor man's fingers, ramming my blade up to the hilt and wrenching it out sideways, immediately sealing his fate. I whirled to deflect a short dagger stabbed my way, before casually dragging my blade down its wielder. The third and fourth were too slow to grab their own weapons and I carved into their turned backs without a second thought.

As the blood of the four Red Runners¹⁸ spilled to the grass and earth, I helped the mostly-fingerless man dislodge the cloth stuffed into his mouth and cut the rope that'd been wrapped around his legs and torso with enough force to burn into his skin.

I patted the mewling scout on his shoulder as the collective torture of the last few days finally broke him, the unexpected relief of being saved releasing the tide of emotions he'd no doubt kept guarded to not appear weak before his torturers.

"How many of you came here? You're one of the scouts the army sent, right?"

"Yes... we... we were four..."

Shit.

"Alright listen, follow the road back to the Village and try to get in contact with the army there or seek out Captain Tabian, he sounds like someone who'd help."

The guy nodded meekly, tears and snot streaming down his bruised-and-bloody face.

"What about you?" he asked after getting up and stretching his rope-burnt legs.

"I'm going to do a bit of clean-up."

After watching the tortured scout slowly make his way out of the gate, I turned my attention back to the nearby buildings. The farmhouse next to me was empty and had been the victim of a vicious blaze. A family of charred bones lay scattered within. I highly doubted any original citizens of the farmstead remained alive, but, if they did, a swift stab through their hearts would no doubt be a mercy.

I walked towards a barn from within which came sounds of raptured merry and laughter, to such an exaggerated extent that it brought to mind cackling demons. The barn door opened when I was only a few metres away, one of the few sober bandits going out on patrol. I quickly moved to silence him, but despite lodging my blade in his Adam's apple, it did little to quell his surprised shout and it wasn't until I cleft his head from his shoulders that he fell silent, but, of course, at that point it was too late to matter.

As the people within the barn emerged, I distantly remarked on the ease with which I could slay these people. Because, even if they were just fabricated Husks made to resemble people, they were as real as any person in this realm and looked as human as anyone else.

Perhaps I was simply bred to kill? Or is it a by-product of this twisted place?

¹⁸ Marked as such by their various odd bits of blood-soaked clothing, such as handkerchief, wrist bandage, or bandana.

The melancholic violin quickly changed its pace and became a frenetic melody of some unseen soloist going at it, each stroke of their bow rippling through the air with a potent force that washed over me and really set the mood for what was about to happen.

Eight bandits surged from the barn through the large doors, bringing with them a waft of warm, putrid air. As I took them in, I saw that a few of them were physically distinct, due to their slate-grey skin and blackish-purple veins crisscrossing their skin, not to mention their bulging muscles. Additionally, these few individuals had an entirely different atmosphere to them and their eyes were wild and hungry.

I took a step back as one of these slate-grey bandits leapt for me with two steak knives held aloft like raptor claws. He missed and landed before me, but didn't spare a second for me to exploit this opening as he surged towards me again. His second leap was met with a well-placed Quick Draw that, combined with his momentum, sent him flying apart in two separate chunks, spilling his foul black blood all over the place.

The murder of their comrade seemed to only entice the others more, and they came forward in a pack of three this time, forcing me to backpedal under an onslaught of shortswords, knives, and daggers. Eventually, another of the slate-grey corrupted ones pushed the three aside and swung a chipped-and-rusted sword at me. He managed to clip my cuirass, creating a tiny scar in its otherwise flawless surface.¹⁹ On his second swing, I sent a Quick Draw through his sword and into his lower jaw, severing both in the process. I dragged the sword, and the corrupted bandit attached to it, into one of the three from before, killing them simultaneously.

With a downwards chop that pushed aside the ill-fated guard of a short dagger and drove my obsidian edge into his neck and through his upper torso, I killed another, before kicking the dead body off my blade and leaping at one of the people hanging back, jabbing my blade downward through his clavicle and into his lungs and heart.

Just as it seemed I was about the rout the remaining four, five more figures emerged from within the barn. Four of them flanked a central figure, and each of them had that grey skin and those disturbing black veins. The figure in front was unlike any of the others though, despite his similar complexion, since he had a wild mane of red hair and a nasty infected scar pinching the skin below his ruined left eye and upper lip together, giving him a disturbing lopsided grin.

As he spoke, black treacle-thick blood oozed from the scar that was possibly quite old but which had never healed properly: "Wot a feisty one we 'ave 'ere." The laugh that followed was hollow and deep, as though belonging to some entity living in his stomach and not originating from his own vocal cords. Normally, his cockney accent would've been charming, but here it was just adding to the creepy psycho factor.²⁰

"I'll finish the prey and you boys clean the bones!"

I instinctively knew that this was Red Rian, since this realm seemed to obey the sort of contrived logic that only really made important characters visually distinct.

Just like the first of the slate-grey monsters, he leapt for me with his two weapons aloft, but, instead of the pitiful steak knives I'd seen on the first of the corrupted bandits, these were hefty

¹⁹ Granted, it was spattered with blood and bits of errant flesh, but *underneath* that it was flawless. Probably...

²⁰ I might add that it didn't help that his teeth seemed to have been given a treatment with a pencil sharpener and that bloody drool clung to his chin like a liquid crimson beard.

butcher's-knife-looking daggers that were already coated in a layer of blood, presumably from whatever they'd been doing inside the barn.

I moved around his downward dual jabs and made to slash him across his stomach, where only the leather of his armless jacket protected his skin. But he was quicker than his fellows, and spun around my slash, while jabbing his right-handed weapon at my face and the other at my flank. As though we were performing a dance together, I moved away from his strikes and he dutifully followed, performing a cross-slash of his daggers that I evaded and responded to with a Quick Draw at his neck.

He stepped just out of reach, a finger's breadth being all that separated my obsidian edge from his windpipe, then surged forward with a diagonal slash of his right dagger, which I caught in a clumsy deflection of my sword that nearly cost me the fingers on my dominant hand. In that instant however, I completely neglected the other dagger.

I gasped, suddenly bereft of air. A burning, yet chilling, flame entered me, as his dagger bit into my side. My blood fell on the grass and exposed earth, and I stumbled back, suddenly only a metre-or-two from the partially-open barn door, while uselessly clutching my wound with my left hand. Blood spilled eagerly between my fingers though I put as much pressure on it as I could. The pain, although dulled from the adrenaline coursing through me, brought stinging tears to my eyes.

Wouldn't it be a shitty way to go... like this? I thought to myself. *Dead and reset on the first challenging fight I faced. Perhaps Kerebor was right.*

Time seemed to slow, or maybe my thought process sped up due to the sudden life-threatening situation, and a tranquillity overcame me, as I figured out what to do.

I knew that if I didn't quickly heal myself, I would die. This fact sat in the forefront of my mind, as the first tendrils of darkness made a questing foray into the corners of my vision.

I took up a proper stance and breathed in carefully, though it was a shuddering breath that left my lips. Breathing was already becoming difficult, and the tendrils turned to long fingers, as the darkness spread with every pulse of my blood escaping my body.

Shit.

I'd wanted to save the potion Kerebor had given me, but what was the point of reserving it if I was going to die anyway?

Another glob of blood pulsed out of my body, and I immediately felt a disturbing sensation in my mind as the darkness spread further, now occupying nearly twenty percent of my vision. The sensation was like a zap of electricity, followed by a nauseatingly-sharp pain akin to that of a papercut and a tendon snapping combined into one.

I'd just lost part of myself: a memory of *something*. Of course, since I'd forgotten, I had no clue what I'd lost. But now was not the time to probe my mind to figure that out.

Time seemed to return to its normal pace again, and Red Rian was preparing to leap for me once more. My hand left my side and fell onto my scabbard, gripping it as hard as I could, while my blood ran down my newly-purchased armour. I gritted my teeth and sheathed my blade, my hand never leaving its hilt. I let my remaining power flood into me, and let the tension rise in my muscles, like a spring ready to explode.

Red Rian leapt.

"Fuck you!" I shouted at him.

The sword left the scabbard, with the sound of the metal within scraping the obsidian glass, and my blade cleaved the air in a beautiful arc where his upper torso and arm were. I sidestepped his dismembered body which fell towards me, and he hammered against the debris behind where I'd stood. He groaned in pain, but didn't cry out. I turned towards him, aware that I was leaving myself open to the bandits at my back. Then I raised my sword with both hands, the edge trembling at the strain of my grievous wound.

"What are you waiting for!? Kill the bitch!" Red Rian suddenly yelled, clutching the stump his left arm had become, the remains lying limply next to him.

An arrow hammered into my back, square in the middle of my metal cuirass, somehow not damaging my cape, but making me stumble sideways. I hadn't seen any bow-wielding bandits, but as I quickly took in my surroundings, I saw that several more of the Red Runners had come to the aid of their leader, presumably from the other buildings. There were less of the slate-grey bastards amongst the newcomers I noted.

I immediately slipped into the barn, slamming the door behind me, and, in a movement, which I felt was not my own, one-handedly pulled open my inventory and clicked 'Use' on my only potion. The '*Potent Healing Potion*' appeared in my hand, as I felt the impact of arrows slamming into the barn's façade and heard the bandits outside run for the door that I held shut with my back.

Knowing I wouldn't be able to hold the door for long, I quickly backed away, downing the contents of the flask after pulling free the cork stopper. I'd just emptied the flask, when I slipped over something on the floor of the dark barn. Light fell from holes in the roof and the windows at each end of the building, and, when I looked down, I saw that I'd fallen over the body of a young woman who'd been torn apart, as if she'd been attacked by rabid wolves.

As the barn door was wrenched open, the new influx of light revealed the interior in full, showing me that the young woman was just one amongst a dozen people who'd been brutalised by the bandit leader and his slate-grey monstrosities. Even without the many teeth marks, it didn't take a genius to see that they'd been eating the corpses, possibly while they were still alive, based on the gut-wrenching expressions of horror and agony that remained fixed on them.

The first of several bandits emerged into the barn and I threw the empty flask at an incoming bandit, shattering it against his face. The glass went everywhere and some even imbedded itself in his forehead and eyes.

My grievous injury was all but a memory now, though the phantom of its pain still clung to where the potion had perfectly knitted shut the wound. The healing effect had been instantaneous and the aftertaste of dirt-flavoured soup clung to back of my throat. The black faded from the corners of my eyes, just in time for me to flourish my blade through the air, cleanly cutting through the throat of the bandit with glass all over this face. I turned the movement into another, spun, and cleaved a guy from shoulder to hip, his body falling cleanly in two. I pushed on, determined to reach Red Rian outside.

Two went for me at once, and I one-handed my blade, stabbing it into the right-most one, while using my left hand to grab the other's wrist, twisting it and using his own knife to pierce him through the eye, the blade hammering itself through his skull when he collapsed face-first. I returned my blade to the sheath swiftly, and let another Quick Draw fly, cleaving across four more bandits, sending

blood and gore everywhere. The smell of death that built up around me was repulsive, but my nose was already numb to it from before I even entered the barn.

Soon I saw none of the attackers, as my vision was focused only on the bandit leader outside who was hurrying away, a make-shift bandage already around his stump. My body worked on its own from then on, going through steps it felt like I'd done a thousand times before. I couldn't remember anything from my past lives, but it seemed that my muscles did. It was as if the memory wipe following every death of mine had failed to erase the knowledge trapped within my body. As this stored-up knowledge escaped, it allowed me to execute moves I hadn't even thought of, with such efficiency that it slowed the drain of my stamina to a bare trickle, allowing me to continue without pausing for air.

I was the sickle and they were the wheat, patiently waiting for harvest. I left such a devastation behind me that soon those bandits fortunate enough to be at the back of the pushing mob, decided to turn tail and run. Those stubborn enough to stay behind met their end on my black edge, which was an unstoppable force that neither armour, flesh, nor bone could withstand. The blade cut with every pass, severed with each flourish, and existed solely as an extension of me, created only for this purpose: my *Dance of Death*.

When all was silent and what remained around me were nothing but severed limbs, still bodies, and blood gushing across the earth and grass, that was when I stopped and took in what I'd done.

I'd like to pretend that I simply turned around and left, all cool and calm, but I didn't. I looked on in horror at the destruction I'd wrought, and with shuddering convulsions emptied my stomach again-and-again, until only mucus and bile came out.

Stumbling like a weakling, I made my way outside the barn full of corpses, and saw several white wisps floating above the dead, one even hovering near the severed limb of Red Rian. As I instinctively passed my hand through the one nearest to me, a tooltip appeared and said, '*Red Runner Baldric*', it further stated that it was a leather chestpiece, but I already liked what I had, besides, it hadn't done much to help the man whose body I looted it from. I picked it up nonetheless, figuring I could sell it later. Besides the baldric, I also found a short-bow, and a worn iron dagger, which I picked up as well.

I went over to the wisp above Red Rian's severed arm, which lay near the barn door, and when I stuck my hand through it, a different, more elaborate tooltip appeared:

'Red Rian's Fang'
-Melee Weapon-
Dagger > Dual-Wielded

"A wolf has its claws, Red Rian has his Fangs. The blade of this dagger is permanently stained from all the blood it has drunk in the possession of the Bandit Lord."

Trait(s):
'Bloodrinker'

Equip

Discard

Weight: 0.8 kilos

‘*Red Rian’s Fang*’ it said. It was specifically stated as a weapon of the type, ‘*Dual-Wielded Dagger*’, which likely meant it could only be used dual-wielded with another blade, just like how Red Rian had used it. Its weight was less than my ‘*Passing Breeze*’, but not by much. The item art featured a plain, large-bladed dagger, with a worn wooden hilt, and no crossguard. It was a weapon for cutting and stabbing, nothing else.

The blade was a dull iron-grey, but had a disturbing red hue, as if it had consumed enough blood to permanently stain it. Unlikely my katana, the dagger had just one trait, likely because it was one of the first special items in this World. ‘*Bloodrinker*’ it was called. I clicked on the description of the trait, and it read: “*Inflicts heavy bleed damage.*”²¹

After reading its flavour text, I frowned at the word use. There was nothing lordly about a murderer like that. Well, at least I could probably sell his weapon and the other items I’d picked up, and hopefully solve my current money problem. The thought of having to rely on a stranger again didn’t sit well with me.

I looked around, seeing no living soul within the area, and knew that Red Rian had made good on his escape. I had no idea where to go from here, but figured that maybe Captain Tabian, whom the army Quartermaster had mentioned, might be worth paying a visit.

As I headed for the exit to the farmstead, denoted by the ruined gate, it felt as if my feet were dragging slightly, and I instinctively consulted my ‘*Statistics*’ screen. Sure enough, all of the items I’d picked up had increased my ‘*Equipment Weight*’ to 9.5 kg and as a result my ‘*Stamina*’ was now at *seventy* percent, with my ‘*Movement Speed*’ lowered to *modest*. I realised that I had to be careful with how much stuff I looted, since I had no way of knowing whether I might be attacked on the road, and having an increased inventory weight carried with it too many demerits for my careless fighting style.

I left the blood-soaked community behind, along with the corpses at its gate. I hoped that when the army made it here, they would give these people the burial they deserved. Husks of people they may be, but that was no excuse to abandon your humanity and treat them as less than people.

I decided to return to the Village, as I doubted Father Adam had much to tell me, since I’d yet to retrieve his map. Without having searched the Red Runner Hideout, I instinctively knew it to be in the personal possession of Red Rian himself.²² I would seek out this Captain Tabian and hopefully he could provide me with clues to other potential hideouts of Red Rian.

After passing the first corpse of the scout on the road back into the hills, I heard a familiar rustle of metal-on-metal, and saw Kerebor up ahead, just before a bend in the road.

Goddamnit...

He quickly came up to me.

²¹ That certainly explained why after just one hit I’d become a human fountain...

²² Don’t ask me why... Though let’s just say I hoped my intuition was right, since otherwise I’d have to make the long trek back there again, and I really had no desire to revisit the scene I’d left behind.

“Aiko, please!” he started, no doubt noticing my irritated expression that I didn’t try to hide in the slightest.

Aiko? I thought, confused as hell. *Why is he calling me that??*

I almost said, “My name is Raven-Black, not ‘Aiko’,” but before I opened my mouth, I had a sudden realisation.

Holy shit... the memory I lost was of my real name...

I rubbed the bridge of my nose in exasperation. If this fool hadn’t been here, who knows when I’d remembered. How little attachment did I have to my real name that it was the first memory to go?? It was so absurd that I momentarily forgot how annoyed I was with Kerebor showing up after I explicitly told him to stay away.

“...What do you want?” I finally asked, addressing him.

“You’ve seen what this world has to offer: the challenge involved. Let me join you! I can help you!”

“I didn’t need your help,” I told him. After all, aside from the near-death experience, I had been fine. Okay... maybe he had a point, but I’d rather slash my own hamstrings and run a marathon before I admitted that to him.

He took a step towards me, so that only two metres of gravel separated us. I pulled my katana out and levelled its tip at its throat.

“Don’t come any closer. I’m warning you. Stay away from me.”

“You don’t wanna do *that*,” he replied. There was an uncomfortable amount weight to his voice. I knew he could back it up, after all, he’d seen so much more of this realm than me and he’d lived a lot longer. I was two days old, while he might have been alive for years since his last death. Basically: I probably didn’t stand a chance if we were actually going to fight.

Regardless, my katana remained.

After what felt like five minutes, he took a step back, lifting his arms in mock surrender.

I looked him in his eyes, or well, in the eye-slits of his bucket helm. “Don’t go looking for me again. I don’t know what kind of relationship we had before I died, but I’m telling you, I’m not that person anymore, and I will never be. So please, stop following me.”

He seemed to deflate at my words, and I knew I’d struck a nerve with him. His arms fell to his side and he stepped back off the road, letting me pass uncontested.

Just like after the camp Stage, he didn’t try to immediately follow me, though that was little assurance that he wouldn’t try to find me again later. *If it comes to that, I might have to actually fight him...*

When I wasn’t too far from the Forgotten Village, I checked my progression with the katana. It showed the dot halfway to ‘Level 3’, and I looked at the next obtainable skills. One called ‘*Riposte*’ was blacked-out as it had the prerequisite of unlocking ‘*Guard*’. The two other skills were, ‘*Quick Draw Follow-Up*’ and ‘*Lacerate*’. I either had the choice to focus on Quick Draw or gain a new skill, which, by the looks of it, could be upgraded at ‘Level 4’. I wasn’t a fan of this type of system, since it left so many possibilities inaccessible, but at least it meant that each player had a setup that was completely tailored to their style. As to which skill I would choose, that was something I’d decide when I actually reached the next level.

After a while of walking, I'd regained most of the stamina I'd spent fighting, and thought it was a good idea to try and run back, since otherwise the sun would set fully by the time I came back to the village. The possibility of Kerebor catching up with me might also have had something to do with it...

Red.Rian

The sky was mostly dark, with some pink and orange near the horizon, as I reached the familiar tavern that a sign in front of it named as, “*The Ornerly Pig*”. I had no idea what to make of the name, but I was sure there was a story behind it.

My encounter with the Captain had been less than helpful, to say the least. He had very curtly informed me that if he knew such a thing as Red Rian’s whereabouts he’d have killed the *something-something-buggerer* himself, but then immediately followed it up by promising me the vast sum of ten gold coins if I brought back his head. I showed him the unique dagger Red Rian had left behind with his severed arm, but the Captain said he’d rather see the tool of Red Rian’s destruction buried and forgotten than kept around like some trophy. The Captain had likely known many of the people whose blood now stained its blade, so I didn’t press my luck. Fortunately, a Rare Items Vendor in the market had no qualms about buying it from me, and, though it was probably worth more, I sold it for one gold and seventy-five silver. I sold the baldric, bow, and iron dagger to another vendor for a measly eighteen silver, which made it clear to me that they hadn’t been worth carrying back and that I should instead focus only on selling rare items that would sell at a higher value. Currently, my coins had no weight, but I wondered if amassing too many would begin to weigh me down, it would be a weird problem to have, to say the least. For now, I was just happy to be back to my usual ‘*Equipment Weight*’.

Anyway, now I hadn’t a clue on where to look for the “Bandit Lord”, so my only option was to seek out experienced players in the town the next day, but who knew how long that could take? Plus, I ran the risk of being recognised by those of my creepy, stalker-ish fans who knew what my face looked like. I hadn’t actually unequipped my cloak when I entered the Safe Zone, but because of the lateness of the day, very few players had been around, and those who did loiter around didn’t notice me. This, however, all changed when I entered the tavern, clad as if I was ready to start a fight.

Immediately, five people got up from their seats, one going so far as to yell my name. Okay, well, he didn’t exactly use my real name, but he exclaimed, “Oh em gee, it’s Raven-Black!”²³

I somehow made it to the counter, where I quickly asked to be given a room and an accompanying dinner, but then I had to push the clingy fans away, which, let me tell you, might have required a degree of force that honestly shouldn’t be allowed in a ‘Safe’ Zone.

Two broken noses and one aching groin later, and I was finally allowed to follow the charming serving girl upstairs. The weirdest part of it all, was that the violence only made the thirst in their eyes stronger. I wondered if Past Me had acted the same way around fans, and, if so, I’d most likely just given them what they’d wanted.²⁴

At the top of the landing, I spotted the young effeminate man from the day before, who had lent me the vast sum of money that’d bought me the armour I now wore. He was poking his head out of his room at the end of the upstairs hall, likely attracted by the commotion downstairs.

²³ Yeah, I didn’t know people spoke like that either...

²⁴ I mean, I won’t judge them if it’s their fetish to be throttled by their idols, but I wished they would leave me in peace and go find another way to enjoy their depraved desires.

“Oh. Hello.” His voice was soft and gentle to listen to. Despite his manner, I could tell from his gleaming eyes that he wanted very much to come closer and look at me, just like the people now piled on top of one another in various states of consciousness at the foot of the stairs below.

“Hi,” I replied and entered my room, as the tavern girl returned downstairs to serve the other customers.

Before I could close my door, he was there, standing outside the room, partly hidden by its wooden frame.

“Are you going to bed now?” he asked eagerly.

Gods.

I’d had high hopes for him, but he’d turned out to be just another creep... I sighed loudly in irritation, but he quickly waved a hand as if to dismiss my assumptions. “No, no, no, I didn’t mean it like *that*. It’s just that... well... you went to the Hideout today, didn’t you?”

Before I could ask how he knew, I realised that I was absolutely caked in blood and tiny bits of flesh and bone. The metal of my cuirass was smudged with the imprints of death and if my nose hadn’t been completely blocked, I’d probably have retched at the stench I gave off.

I shuddered in disgust. The thought of being covered in the remains of the people I’d killed made me feel vile and awful. I needed a bath immediately, and then to find some way to clean off my armour and rinse my blade.

“Why do you want to know?” I ended up replying.

“Well, I fought them yesterday, and I think two other players did as well, which means tonight...” He trailed off at the end, noticing the blank look in my eyes. “You have no idea what’s going to happen, do you?”

“Considering I was just reset two days ago, and you are one of the only players I have talked to: no.”

“Well, then I won’t spoil it for you. Hope to see you out there!”

Then he was gone.

What the hell was that about? Something had apparently been triggered by enough people going through the Hideout Stage, and, whatever it was, it would happen tonight. I wondered how he knew, but before I could contemplate too much, his face was back between the door and the wall.

“My name’s *Jakob*, by the way.”

“Is that your real name?”

He gave me a warm smile in response. “No,” he replied cheerfully. Of course it wasn’t... It seemed I was amongst the rare few that went by their real name. I wondered if he had some hang-ups about his birthname. Though, to be fair, I might possibly have been the same way, considering how I’d lost the memory of my real name during the fight with Red Rian and his gang. Or maybe it was random what memories were lost? I didn’t really want to test out that hypothesis though.

“Well, ‘Jakob’, you can call me Aiko. Now get out so I can clean myself up.”

Jakob laughed and disappeared again. This time I shut the door and turned the lock before letting myself fall back into contemplation. I’d likely have to find another place to stay, since this one had been compromised, which, honestly, had been entirely my own fault. I wondered if Past Me had ever set foot in the Forgotten Village after clearing it the first time, and, if so, how had I dealt with my stalkers back then? Just the thought of having people who knew all about me was extremely upsetting.

I mean, I couldn't even remember anything I'd done in the past, and here were all these people revering me for the person I'd once been. It made me feel like being an imposter. At the same time, I also felt very constricted by all their expectations. When I eventually completed this World, I doubted I'd ever return, unless I should happen to die before completing the Trials, which, everything considered, was likely to happen.

What a fresh hell this pleasant place has turned out to be...

I'd assumed from Jakob's speech yesterday that he was amongst the players who had given up trying to progress, but if he had cleared the Hideout Stage, and knew that we'd somehow see each other again in whatever event occurred tonight, then he clearly wasn't one to just sit around. It was comforting to know that not everyone had given up yet. Those who just sat idly by and hoped for some resolution to manifest itself were the true losers of this world. I was sure that I'd never reach *that* point, no matter how many times I died, nor how much of my personality vanished alongside my memories of my past, but maybe that was just wishful thinking. Truth be told, as much as I wanted to return to the real world, I was also terrified of dying and losing my memories again. Eventually, with enough deaths, I'd just be a hollow shell, devoid of humanity, trapped in a world beyond my comprehension, with less personality than the fabricated Husks.

Part of me also wondered if perhaps the people who weren't progressing did so because they actually liked it here. After all, if you subtracted the horrific people like the cannibalistic Red Runners, then this World was almost pleasant. Almost.

While looking in the mirror, I undid the clasps on the back of my cuirass,²⁵ and it fell to the floor with a *thud*. It was the heaviest of my possessions, and, so far, hadn't done much to protect me. I would have to do my best to guard my flanks, as I'd learnt from today's injury. After stripping off the leather tunic, and inspecting my naked skin, I found that, besides the stains of dried blood, some mine own and the rest from the bandits, there wasn't even a scar left behind from the nasty wound Red Rian had gifted me with. These healing potions were no joke, and if I could craft such items through alchemy, then it truly made me want to locate Father Adam's map.

I eyed my reflection in the mirror for a while, but no matter how much I tried to bring up the shape-changing menu from the day before, all that stared back at me was my mirrored self. *It seems I'm locked out of altering my appearance...* I noted, somewhat regretfully, realising that I was now stuck looking like myself. Any thoughts of altering my appearance to escape attention were now meaningless.

The boots were kind of a pain to get off my feet, as my sweat had created a perfect seal to keep them welded onto my skin, but that still wasn't anything compared to when I tried to pull the tight trousers off. As I lay on the floor, my legs tangled within the stubborn pants, I considered using my sword to cut them along the seam and just buy a new pair the following day, however, as I'd discarded my starting outfit, that would require me to walk half-naked to the marketplace... so I persevered.

After five minutes of continuous struggling, I got the trousers off and quickly slipped into the warm bath that awaited me in the corner of the room. As I lay in the water, I realised my own stupidity. I could easily have unequipped my clothes through the inventory menu...

²⁵ Which was a finicky process, let me tell you...

I really need to learn to properly utilise the powers given to me by this fantastical place...

A frothy jug of beer had been set careless on top of my bed, and next to it a bowl of stew teetered dangerously on the edge. It was a simple and effective dinner that I looked forward to devouring, so long as it didn't tip off the side and spill onto the floor. A side-effect of all the fighting was that I was absolutely starving, and I'd probably have to find a way to bring food with me, so I didn't end up keeling over on the road back to the city.

Something I hadn't considered until now, was how strange it was to feel hunger and being able to sate that hunger in this fabricated world. After all, if any mortal wound could be healed in an instant, surely hunger could be done away with.

I hadn't experienced the need to go to the toilet yet, so I doubted it was part of this world's design, which, to be honest, was something I was glad I didn't need to deal with. But the exclusion seemed peculiar when everything else mimicked the real world to such an obsessive degree. Perhaps this Watcher God wasn't a fan of spying on his Guinea Pigs relieving themselves all over his creation?

I leaned back in the tub and sighed pleasantly. It made me wonder what other pleasures you could feel in this world.²⁶ Granted, I didn't really feel like seeking out a stranger to test the limits of this realm with, but maybe, if I met the right person, it'd be different?

When I'd scrubbed myself clean, I used the leftover bathwater to rinse my cuirass, though I didn't wash the tunic, trousers, or boots, as I would likely need them for whatever was happening tonight, and there was no way they'd dry in time.

Wait. Why am I applying logic to this?

I dunked the rest of my equipment in there and, after I pulled them out, they dried within minutes. It was kind of scary how easily I kept forgetting that this world wasn't like Earth, as it looked and felt almost identical, with only a few signs that it wasn't.

Exhausted and sore, I lay down on my bed, lightly draping the blanket over myself like a loose second skin. The fabric against my naked body felt just like it should. This Twisted Deity who had brought us here had at least accomplished *that* much. It was a shame that it was overshadowed by the perverse design that served as a perpetual limbo, torturing real people for its Creator's sick entertainment.

Something that then struck me was that, if every person in this realm had been brought here from the real world, how had people we'd known responded? Surely the disappearance of hundreds, thousands, or however many real people existed in this place, would've created a distinguishable pattern that could be detected. Did this Watcher God simply not care if it disturbed the fabric of reality by mass transporting people away from Earth, or did it have some sort of solution to keep people from noticing? Like, had all of us who'd been brought here been replaced with identical replicas, like some cosmic horror type situation? Or maybe, given its proclivity to mess with memories, had the Watcher erased our existence from Earth, by selectively removing any-and-all proof of our existence, going so far as to make our own families and friends forget us?

Of course, all of these theories were simply conjecture based on nothing, and I doubted the Twisted God who held our fate in its hands would be very forthcoming with answers, even if it deigned to return to us some of the memories it had stolen.

²⁶ Don't you dare judge me!

Even with such disturbing thoughts floating around in my head, I still managed to fall asleep. In my dreams there was nothing but darkness.

The town bell sounded over-and-over. I awoke with a shock and bolted upright in my bed. I couldn't have slept for more than a few hours at most.

A glow, bright orange with red mixed in, fell across the floor from the window in the wall. The sky outside was pitch-black, but the distant parts of the Village were clad in a deeper kind of darkness: black smoke. The orange light came from the fires in that same area, and already a heavy beat of drums started building in the air.

I put on my armour, which had been discarded by the foot of the bed and near the bathtub. I would need to find looser pants after this fight, as it wouldn't do to spend five minutes putting on everything, especially not whenever I was in a hurry.²⁷ I even equipped the cloak, which was the only thing I'd actually stored in my inventory. Right now, getting recognised really didn't matter.

Because it seemed like the heroic thing to do, I flung open the window and leapt from the sill onto the roof of a nearby one-story building.

Once outside, a banner flashed before me, "*Now entering Stage 'Raid on the Forgotten Village'.*"

From the rooftop, I ran across the uneven tiles towards the opposite end of the city where fires roared and screams rang out across the night sky. Though I was still far from fires, I could taste the burnt wood in my mouth with every rapid breath and smell the fragrance of immolation on the wind.

When I neared the marketplace, I jumped from the roof of a flower shop and landed on the hard cobblestones, my legs absorbing the impact easily.

A little beyond the marketplace, fire had engulfed several buildings, and the familiar Red Runner Bandits, whose brethren I'd slaughtered the day before, were fighting the locals in the streets and the market, their bloodthirsty faces lit up by the crimson glow. There were a lot of the slate-grey and black-veined monstrosities amongst them.

Up ahead, I saw Captain Tabian fending off two attackers at once. He was wearing rugged plate armour, but no helm. A unique, stained, yellow sash was tied around his waist and he looked like a mixture between a knight and a mercenary, though it wasn't a bad look. He wielded nothing but a shortsword, but with such an aura of confidence that it was hard not to be impressed. Three more bandits came at him and I decided to intervene, felling two in a single slash, and with the remaining three trapped between myself and the Captain they were soon disposed of as well.

"Thanks for the help, Traveller. You really saved me there," the Captain acknowledged. "I've heard from my men that Red Rian is seeking the one who cut off his arm further up, amidst the flames."

"Got it," I replied briefly, and left the Captain behind to guard the marketplace.

After rounding a corner and then another, I was at the mouth of a long street with burning houses on either side of me. A high-pitch voice hailed me from a nearby ruined house, "*Raven! Over here!*"

Is that Jakob?

As I neared, I barely recognised him in his full soldier's uniform of a white tabard over chainmail. Though I knew it was him, since he went helmless like the Captain. Aside from his height and lack of helmet, he looked almost identical to the annoying guard outside the Soldiers' Camp. I wondered

²⁷ Or I could do the smart thing and simply store my things in my inventory next time...

if he had acquired his armour from the Quartermaster by actually joining the army. His brown curls and gaunt face looked completely different in the light of the fires, as if he'd become another person by putting on his battle-gear.

“Jakob, I have to ask you something.” There was something I needed to know, if we were going to take down Red Rian together.

“What is it?” He looked at me as if I was the only thing in his world. It was putting me off slightly, mostly because I wasn't used to that kind of attention. I got the feeling that before coming here, back in the real world, I'd been very shy or introverted.

“When you fought Red Rian at the Hideout did you also cut off his arm?”

“I never fought him. He fled after I killed half the bandits in stealth.”

“Hmm,” I hummed in response. I hadn't considered using stealth... “Do you think we'll each see a different version of him?”

“This is supposed to be *instanced* to just the four of us who recently cleared the Hideout, and I guess it might use the latest *clear* of the Hideout as the determining factor for how this fight will turn out, which means we should all see the Red Rian you saw.”

“What do you mean by *instanced*?”

“It means that we are in the same city as before, but only those of us meeting the specific requirements see this version, and everyone who have yet to clear this Stage just see the original version. It's meant to be a forced-group Stage.” That explained why the streets were mostly deserted, with the exception of the few Husks I'd seen, such as Captain Tabian and the locals in the market. This was the parallel dimension thing that Kerebor had mentioned and which I hadn't really understood at the time.

“Incoming!” Jakob suddenly warned.

I immediately had my sword in hand, while he was hurriedly fitting his shield back onto his left arm. He pulled his straight sword out of its sheath and charged towards the incoming Red Runners. I followed closely behind, letting his shield and armour act as a bulwark against the two archers in the rear of the seven dagger-and-or-sword-wielding bandits. The first arrow tip broke against Jakob's reinforced kite shield, splinters shooting every which direction. The second arrow whiffed completely, and before they could restring more arrows, we'd reached the bandits at the fore of their group. Aside from the archers, all of the Bandits were the slate-grey monstrous kind.

The bowmen in the back retreated deeper into the blazing street, no longer confident enough in their skill to avoid their mates, but still seeming ready to pelt us with arrows if we came into their line-of-sight.

Like a spectre, I shot out from behind Jakob's chainmail visage and scythed my blade through the three attackers in front, spilling open their guts and vile blood, and even cutting one cleanly in half. The sharpness of my blade left the cuts clean and straight as if performed by a surgeon's scalpel.²⁸ I spun, returning my blade to its scabbard just before letting it loose again, the Quick Draw slicing apart the two Red Runners unlucky enough to be next in line.

I fell back, and Jakob followed me up so perfectly that one might think we'd practiced this move together. With his shield he broke the nose of one, likely shattering a few teeth as well, and used the

²⁸ Except, you know, bigger.

blade in his other hand to first deflect a rabid swing and then stab the other, before returning to the broken-faced bandit with a deadly jab up under his ribcage.

With panicked haste, the two archers ran even further into the long alleyway and we quickly gave chase. Further down the street, one tripped over a broken wooden pillar and I ended him with a clean stab through the back before he had a chance to recover.

We made it deeper-and-deeper into the furnace of burning buildings as we chased down the last archer, who by now had cast aside his bow and gone into full sprint. A wispy orb glowed above where the bow fell to the ground, but I didn't pick it up.

The Red Runners seemed quite easy to rout, except for the corrupted ones, who were just ravenous and too single-minded in their bloodthirst to consider retreat. But what did I expect? Bandits were hardly paragons of courage and bravery.

At some point, the fires started calming, the houses around us reduced to smouldering, charred husks. The end of the street was blocked by something trapped in the narrow street between the buildings. It could have been a wagon, but it too had been reduced to blackened sticks and warped metal. The Bowman who'd escaped us was busy climbing up the side of a house that'd collapsed and become a makeshift ramp. I almost followed him up and over, but then a voice rumbled from behind the rooftops, its cadence eerily familiar.

"To catch dangerous prey, a hunter needs his *bait*, and he needs his *trap*." Backlit by fires further beyond, Red Rian came to the top of the house-turned-ramp, and the rooftops of all the charred buildings now had two archers each, all with their arrows trained on us. We had entered what could only be described as death trench. It was a formidable trap to be sure, and proof of its effectiveness lay near the burnt-out wagon. I hadn't noticed them at first, as they too had become fire-blackened ash, but in each of them were a good dozen arrows. Two over-eager players who had underestimated what they were jumping into, now dead and returned to the green rolling hills, their lives here forgotten. Near each hovered a wisp, but I didn't let them draw my attention.

"Well, now we know where the two others went," I said. I didn't feel anything in that moment, since I knew we might very well share their fate the second Red Rian let the arrows fly.

"This is all wrong," Jakob mumbled. He was terrified. "You did something, Raven. It was supposed to just be Rian by himself, none of *this*. Players never die to the Bandits here. Never."

"An alternate boss fight: isn't that what you'd call this?" Clearly the way I'd completed the Hideout had triggered this. But I mean, any man who loses an arm, and lives, is bound to have a score to settle.

He swallowed hard. "Yeah, that's right."

"Fuck. Let's kill this bastard. We're not dying here."

Jakob nodded nervously. I didn't blame him. The odds were bad, and unless we found a way to deal with this, we'd end up charred pincushions like the couple by the wagon. "I'll guard your back, you guard mine."

"Let's do it."

"Aww, I prefer it when they run," Red Rian said, with mock sadness in his voice. "Kill 'em boys!" Surprisingly obedient for a gang of killers, the archers all at once let loose their strings, sharpened ends racing to be the first to settle themselves in our tender, fleshy bits. I distantly noted that all the

archers were uncorrupted, as though those overtaken by that vile blood were not trusted to hold a bow steady.

More by instinct and learnt muscle memory, I let a Quick Draw fly, and the half-moon I drew in the air cut the shafts of several arrows in two, the rest flying wide or landing too short to do any damage. Behind me, I heard Jakob yelp as one arrow pierced his thigh, and another skidded off his shield at such an angle that it nicked him across the side of the head. The rest however, firmly planted themselves in his shield.

“Go!” I yelled with a nod of my head, and he immediately understood what I meant. I ran up the ramp, where archers were frantically trying to readjust their aim and draw new arrows. My blade met Red Rian’s dagger, chipping a bit off its edge, while my obsidian glass remained true and strong. I kicked him in the chest, which sent him sprawling into the street beyond, where houses still burned. I made short work of the archers on the adjacent rooftops, as the fools had put all their faith in the bows, which at close range left them defenceless.

In the street behind me, Jakob had picked up the discarded bow, and was now laying into the bowmen on the rooftops opposite me with deadly precision. In a past life, he had likely been good with a bow, as I saw no nervousness in his eyes, only the practiced calm of a killer. I was sure I looked exactly the same when I fought, but it was still disturbing to watch, so I turned my attention back to Red Rian, who was struggling to get to his feet in the street beyond. It was clear that in the day since I’d taken his arm, he had yet to adjust to the upset balance and learnt how to compensate, as he rolled on his back like a turtle on its shell. I had no qualms about killing him in this disabled state, since he’d do the same to me in a heartbeat, although he was designed to behave this way, whereas I’d been trained into it.

“There is no honour in fighting. Only the winner is righteous. The dead are just dead.” Like some mantra these thoughts crossed my mind. Where had I heard them before?

I leapt from the perch, my boots producing a *thump* as I landed before him, my katana eagerly waiting in its sheath.

In one fluid movement he suddenly sprang to his feet and, in the next, hammered his blade, his *Fang*, into his stomach. Vile black-purple blood vomited forth in thick waves. From the stump I’d given him the day before, blood also started dripping, as though the Bloodrinker trait on his dagger had reignited the barely-healed wound. Then, moments later, his jittery-and-dancing shadow, cast by the multitude fires surrounding us, surged into his feet and ran up along the length of his body.

Sensing he was about to empower himself somehow, I moved forward like a predator bird seizing a vulnerable prey, but just as he came within my katana’s reach, darkness exploded from him and I was punched back.

With the sound of cracking bones and unfolding flesh, the shadow on his body moved onto the shoulder of his clipped arm, before surging into his body and emerging from the stump end in a long, disturbing arm of pure darkness. The hand at its end easily touched the ground, its length nearly double that of his other one, and upon its hand were seven long, taloned fingers. Though I’d severed his arm just below the elbow, another elbow had been added to his shadowy limb, giving it a disturbing range of motion, akin to the limbs seen on some insects. The sight gave me pause. I hadn’t expected something of this nature from this World, but clearly there was a twisted sort of magic at play here.

Consumed by his own bloodlust and grievous wound, the humanity, whatever tiny shreds had remained, disappeared from Red Rian. He was still tightly gripping the dagger in his healthy hand, but when he leapt for me, it was this new shadowy limb that guided him.

I fell back as the talons dug into the cobblestones, carving grooves in them with disturbing ease. Immediately seeing my new position, the double-jointed arm pivoted and spun, and I caught two boots to my chest, sending me tumbling backwards.

Heat surged into me, as a house-turned-pyre stood at my back, only a couple metres from where I'd fallen. I immediately got back up and moved forward with my hands settled on my katana and its scabbard.

My Quick Draw carved through the black taloned claw as though it was but smoke, momentarily turning half of the limb into two disjointed flaps that quickly melded back into one before I even finished the move. The momentum carried me past Rian, but before I could turn to face him and take in what damage I'd wrought, the claw grasped the back of my head painfully and flung me away.

This time I didn't land before the burning house. Instead, I went straight through its burning façade, shattered the burnt-black and brittle furniture that I collided with, before having half the ceiling collapse on top of me. I managed to escape the burning building before the rest of the walls fell in on me, but not without sustaining several serious burns to my scalp and hands, though fortunately my jacket underneath the cuirass fared well against the fire.²⁹

As I leapt from the building, aiming for Red Rian who'd lost sight of me, I trailed a cloud of grey-and-black ash. I scored a vicious rend down the front of his torso, before he swung his shadowy claw for me again.

This time I managed to duck under it, and, as I came up behind him, I rammed my blade into the back of his ribcage and through one of his lungs, burying my weapon all the way to the hilt. I drew it out sideways, scarring and severing several of his bones, and partially cutting through the tissue of his spine.

I flourished my blade, spattering rotten and foul blood on the ground, believing my quarry to be defeated. But then Red Rian turned towards me, and the shadowy limb became thinner as the some of it moved to cover the mortal wounds I'd inflicted, somehow keeping him alive.

Just as I was about to swing my blade to meet his claw, a feathered shaft appeared in his neck and he froze, turning his head back to the perch that I'd jumped from. I looked as well, just in time to see Jakob fire a second arrow that this time buried itself in the left eye of Rian.

I knew what he was trying to tell me, so I quickly composed myself, and two-handed my katana, hammering it sideways at Red Rian's neck, before he had a chance to dispel this momentary daze. The obsidian edge of my Passing Breeze cleft his neck in two, instantly releasing the shadowy magic that controlled him, as his head left his body behind and sailed over the cobblestones, landing next to the burnt-down husk of a stall some metres away. Then the rest of his body simple fell to the ground, every last drop of the purple-black blood within oozing from it as though trying to find a new host. It didn't make it far however and quickly dried out from the heat of the nearby fires.

There's definitely something cursed within their blood, I thought to myself.

²⁹ It was odd that in that moment I was more worried about my equipment than my body, but then again, the adrenaline of the moment was obscuring the pain of the burns.

Jakob jumped from the rooftop, with his bow still trained on the dead 'Bandit Lord'. The fires started subsiding, as villagers rushed in with buckets of water or they burnt out on their own. The pounding rhythm in the background faded too, and shortly thereafter Captain Tabian came around the distant corner of the street with a couple of men trailing behind him. All of them were covered in blood and soot.

Jakob breathed heavily beside me. "We did it. Well... you did most of the work, but I helped."

"You did plenty," I commended him.

I stuck my hand into the wisp floating above Red Rian's corpse, and, as expected, the other '*Red Rian's Fang*' popped up, alongside Father Adam's '*Map of the Forbidden Catacombs*'.

'Map of the Forbidden Catacombs'

-Quest Item-

"Stolen from Father Adam who lives in the Old Church outside of the Forgotten Village."

Weight: N/A

The item art just showed a generic image of a map and the tag named it a '*Quest Item*'. Looking over the tooltip, I realised I didn't have the ability to discard it, which was probably to ensure I didn't lose it on accident or tried to give it to other people. Fortunately, it also had no weight, so it would just take up a slot in my inventory and nothing else.

A third item also sat within, but it seemed unrelated to my quest.

'Heart of Shadow'

-Consumable-

-Ingredient-

"A heart borne by those who gorge on darkness."

Use

Discard

Weight: 0.2 kilos

Another edible heart? Is this simply a coincidence or perhaps an indicator of the proclivities of the Watcher God?

"Do you want his dagger?" I asked Jakob, knowing it was no good to me and would otherwise just be sold.

He looked at it for a moment, inspecting the trait, weight, and likely everything else. "No, you can keep it. It won't be of any use to me. I'd probably just sell it." *Fair enough. Though I'd do the same.*

“I will take the Heart though, if that’s okay with you.”

“Go for it. What’s it for though?”

“It can be used as a reagent in a rare potion made with Alchemy, but there are recipes for Cooking that use it too. It also has some uses as an ink for Scribing and *Summoning*, but it is especially sought-after by those who have *Scrying* as a crafting skill.”

I’d seen Scribing and Cooking on the crafting list, but hadn’t noticed Summoning nor Scrying on there. Granted, I’d only given it a cursory look and the list was like several pages long...

“You’re probably wondering why Summoning and Scrying aren’t on the crafting list,” Jakob then commented.

“Oh, so I hadn’t just missed them.”

“Yeah. They’re pretty difficult to unlock, and technically aren’t crafting skills. You can learn how to make things with them, but they have no associated levels or menus. Everything about them is tied to books and scrolls. Pretty analogue, right?” He suddenly held out a scroll. “*This* is something a friend bought for me. I need the ‘*Heart of Shadow*’ for it, but then it’ll let me create a coin-sized mirror that I can connect to someone else’s eyes and use to spy what they see.”

“That’s pretty creepy,” I commented. “Don’t use it on me.”

He laughed, but didn’t say he wouldn’t...

Before I could force him to promise he wouldn’t use it on me, Captain Tabian’s party finally reached us. “Well done, Travellers!” he exclaimed proudly, as soon as he had taken a look at the deceased Bandit Lord. “Come see me tomorrow once the damage to the village has been assessed and dealt with. As promised, you will receive a prize for finally bringing this bastard to justice.”

Jakob and I nodded in response and together headed back to the Ornerly Pig tavern, leaving the guardsmen behind.

On the way back, when the still-glowing fires were several streets behind us, I looked at Jakob. He had taken a few hits dealing with the remaining archers, but had managed to fix the arrow wound to his thigh with a bandage wrap. I realised I hadn’t been hit a single time, and all the blood that covered my armour and blade were from those I’d killed. Though I had sustained quite serious second-degree burns that were starting to become very painful.

“Take this,” Jakob suddenly said, as though sensing my pain.

‘*Weak Healing Potion*’

-Consumable-

Drink > Potion

“A weak healing concoction, which once imbibed grants instantaneous healing of superficial wounds, but very slow healing of more serious wounds and is unable to regenerate lost limbs.”

Use

Discard

Weight: 0.15 kilos

I immediately drank it and felt the comforting warmth spread throughout my body, before concentrating itself on my scalp and hands. Compared to the Potent one that I'd used in the Hideout Stage, the Weak one felt diluted and cheap, but it did its job nonetheless.³⁰ Soon the scalding pain subsided and was replaced by a soreness that was easy to ignore.

"You said something just before our fight, like you knew what was supposed to happen," I started. It was something that had made me very curious.

"After I beat the Hideout, I paid another player for information about this Stage. The info was for the normal version of the fight, but somehow you triggered an alternate version when you beat the Hideout. It was supposed to have been a very easy and predictable fight, but when I watched you fight Red Rian, it was completely different from normal."

"I had no idea that other players would be selling information about Stages they'd already beaten. I sort of expected them to be unable to be in the same place as those who had yet to beat the same Stages or something." This was another potential avenue for making money at least, especially since I had no plans to take the slow, patient route like Jakob had with the Errands in town.

"Players can always see each other in the hub city, but those who have beaten a Stage cannot do it again, unless they are invited by players who haven't, but it rarely happens, since it's one of the ways PKers operate, so everyone's wary of people who actively try to join their group."

Oh, that's right, Kerebor did mention the same thing. I really should pay more attention...

"I'm assuming this was different, since it seemed like we had no choice but to group up."

"Mhmm. This Stage is supposed to be a Grouping tutorial, but players also often kill each other here... However, the Bandits never usually manage to kill people..."

"Pretty punishing for something that's supposed to teach you."

Jakob laughed. "That's how this place is. At least that's what everyone says." To be fair, it seemed pretty in line with everything else I'd seen so far. I mean, even the training boss had been eager to hurt me, and if I hadn't had Kerebor to explain everything for me I would've had to learn it all by myself. My belief that the Watcher God was a twisted and disturbed creator only grew stronger the more I experienced of his realm. Less of a voyeur and more of a sadist, it would seem.

A soft *ping* sounded in my ear. "Oh, I can advance my katana skill tree." I'd have to figure out which skill to go with when I made it back to my room.

"I think I'll focus on using *this* bow instead of my sword and shield. It seems that I'm quite good with it, I might have used the bow a lot before I died."

"Two weapons? Won't that be heavy to carry around?" I hadn't actually considered using more than one weapon, but maybe that was just intentionally limiting my possibilities?

"A little bit, but I think the versatility will be a benefit, as long as I can stay within my weight class at least. My fighting style isn't very mobile anyway." He already knew himself well enough to know something like that. It made me kind of envious. For all I knew, there could be a better weapon for me out there, but I'd just been handed this one without any say in the matter.

³⁰ The flavour was the same, in case you're wondering: dirt soup.

When we entered the tavern, the chairs were stacked on the tables downstairs and all the lights had been blown out. Since we were the only two players in this dimension of the city, there was no risk of being harassed by people who recognised my cloak, so I was able to go up the stairs uncontested. I said goodnight to Jakob before going into my own room, and passing out on my bed, fully-clad and covered in Gods-knew-what.

Corrupted.by.Shadow

The next day I awoke to birdsong and discovered the mess I'd made of the bed. I spent the next hour cleaning my armour and then my body. The blood had somehow seeped through my tunic and dried onto my skin, and some had even gotten into my hair and crusted it into disgusting clumps. The sheet had become like Velcro and it was an arduous process of peeling it off my cuirass where it had bonded to the metal.

Having to clean myself up after every Stage was a serious pain in the ass to deal with, though perhaps it was also a way to force us Players to rest and have time to think, instead of encouraging over-eagerness, which could easily lead to carelessness, especially when planning and preparing was such an integral part.³¹

Speaking of which, I needed to visit Father Adam, so I could finally learn alchemy from the Alchemist.

Then a *ping* reminded me that I'd forgotten something. I pulled up my Katana progression tree and was faced with the choice of '*Quick Draw Follow-Up*' or '*Lacerate*'. I liked the Quick Draw skill, but variety was important too. After a minute or two of debating it with myself, I chose Lacerate. It was, according to its description, a fast, double slash attack, though I had no idea about its strength. The understanding of how to operate this new skill entered my mind just like it had with Quick Draw. It was a strange feeling, like I suddenly remembered something I'd never known. I wondered if this newfound skill would stay with me if I eventually made it back to Earth. If so, the moment we were all released from here, Earth would no doubt see a steep rise in medieval-weapon-related crimes and murders. As this realisation hit me, I suddenly felt very sure that there was no way we'd get to keep the knowledge and skills we'd gained. Would the memory of the Watcher and his Realm even remain with us? I doubted it.

I equipped my armour, but left the cloak in my inventory, and, for a moment, I stared out the window, contemplating if I should leap from it or take the risk and go through the tavern below. I decided on taking the normal way out of the building, since jumping from the window seemed like it would attract more attention than it might avoid.

That was another thing: What if, when I left this realm, I continued having strange impulses to leap from the second-floor windows of buildings? The real-life impact of this twisted reality might be quite fatal... I could already imagine the headlines: "*Woman jumps to her death after escaping Twisted God's torture limbo!*" or "*Cape-wearing psycho wielding broom lands in traffic after jumping from balcony!*"

Unmolested, I left the tavern, which, this early in the morning, only had a few sleepy patrons in it, most of whom seemed to be Husks. I passed by the market, where I bought a grilled sausage and a mug of beer from a food stand.

When I'd filled my belly, I sold Red Rian's dagger to the same vendor who had bought the first. Since she still had the first one on display, I managed to barter for a higher price, by arguing they

³¹ No that I'd made much use of it thus far...

would sell for more as a set, and, as a result, I ended up selling the second Fang for twice that of the first. I suddenly realised that I wasn't actually sure if the vendor was a real person or not.

Would it be rude to ask? I wondered, as I walked away.

Afterwards, I located Captain Tabian in a building that had once been a library, but now served as a jail, as well as a barracks for the few guards in the town. The coin purse he handed me was heavy, despite only holding ten coins. I wondered if the shiny coins were actually pure gold. Suddenly, I was flush with money, having nearly fifteen-and-a-half gold in my inventory.³²

Satisfied, I left the building. Outside, I spotted a bounty board with an elaborate flyer attached to it. It read, "*Test your mettle in the Tournament of Champions!*"

No doubt about it, this had to be either the next or an upcoming Stage, since this was the first I'd heard of any tournament. Though there was the not-insignificant chance that I had simply been daft and not noticed the mention of it until now...

Below the title was information on where to sign up, a town to the east called *Gothershall*, as well as things such as entry fee and the possibility of finding a sponsor. It would cost a whopping twenty-five gold to enter, but the winner would earn back twice that amount, as well as special prizes, so not a bad deal.

However, I was still ten gold short. I guessed that the point of setting the entrance fee to such an exorbitant amount was to give people the chance to truly prepare. Locating a sponsor was probably my best chance of entering, unless I wanted to waste my time with trivial Errands for the locals in town. I really couldn't imagine myself carrying apples to the market, finding lost pets, or whatever else such side-activities involved.

The short trek from the village to the Old Church was as lonely as usual. I didn't mind it too much, since being around all the people in the town made me paranoid and anxious for some reason. What a terrible thing. Even with the amnesia and being in this fantasy world, real world problems still had a way of sticking with you. Of course, if I died enough times even *that* would go away, unfortunately it also meant losing what shreds of my former personality still remained, so it was a double-edged sword. The thought of having no memories of the past was the scariest thing I could imagine right now.

I wondered if I had to fight other players in the tournament, and, if so, would I be matched up against Jakob? I hoped not. Maybe I could find someone who dealt with information trading, although I wasn't sure if I could afford such an expenditure right now.

As I came over the top of the hill, the church popped into view, its swallowed-up courtyard just like I remembered, though Father Adam wasn't astride any benches today.

Since the large doors to the church were shut tight, I crawled up a piece of broken wall and entered through the gaping hole in the side of the dilapidated ruin.

The interior of the church wasn't what I'd expected at all. In place of long rows of benches before an altar, the inside hall was filled to the ceiling with monstrous bookcases carved from the same stone that the church itself was made of, dark-grey and menacing. Those of the bookcases that were nearest

³² By "nearly", I meant to say I had 15 gold and 45 silver coins, or, said in another way: 1,545 silver coins; or said in yet another, more annoying, way: 154,500 copper coins.

the hole were entirely empty of books, scrolls or any sort of parchment, and a few empty birds' nests sat abandoned in the rows nearest the ceiling. Plants sprouted up through the stone floor, weeds grew from the side of the walls, and vines hung thickly between the solid stone bookcases. It was like Mother Nature was rapidly reclaiming what had once been stolen from Her.

Delving further into the pitch darkness of the interior, where the light of day could not reach, I found rows lined with old, dusty books, some so thick and unwieldy that I doubted my ability to even lift them. I walked out of the darkness and up towards where the altar would have been, but instead found many worm-eaten tables and chairs, perhaps once occupied by the scholars who no longer thronged the church's halls. The windows here were tall, however, all but one had had its mosaic brilliance smashed to bits by either nature or the restless hands of vandals. The one remaining mosaic depicted a Monarch, surrounded by his closest friends and family. For some reason, a shining halo surrounded his finger upon which sat a royal ring. I wondered how long it had been since it'd been made.

What happened to the Royal family that once ruled over this region?

"Astounding craftsmanship, is it not?" inquired a strained, raspy voice.

"I found your missing map," I replied, and turned to face the old Father. A few deft gestures later and I had the map in my hand.

A veiny, liver-spotted hand carefully grabbed the creased parchment paper by its edges and looked it over a few times. "I take it you dealt with the thief?" The care with which Father Adam held the map, suggested that it was very dear to him.

"His thieving days are over," I said nonchalantly.³³

"Good, good," the old man replied absentmindedly. Then he turned and was about head back into the darkness from which he'd come.

"About the Alchemist..." I started.

"He'll know that you've helped me." *Good.* I needed to get started on learning alchemy, so I didn't have to worry about suddenly bleeding out or something, if, Gods forbid it, I was ever badly hurt again.

Instead of leaving, Father Adam just stood there with his back turned to me for a while. Suddenly he turned to me again, his glossed-over milky eyes staring straight into mine. It kind of freaked me out a little bit, but that might also have been because of the yellow-and-brown-toothed smile he was flashing me.

"You wouldn't happen to be interested in helping me with something else, would you? I'll make it worth your while."

"You haven't even paid me for returning your map yet," I said impatiently. I kind of felt like he was trying to pull a fast one on me...

"I'll double your reward!" he suddenly exclaimed desperately. It almost sounded like some of the rasp in his voice was fading, and I could have sworn that for a moment his creamy-white eyes had a hint of blue to them.

³³ Cliché, I know, but what can I say...

I sighed. Hopefully he'd not try to exploit my kindness and yell something like, "*I'll triple your reward!*" next time I returned from whatever errand he now had in mind. I mean, I didn't even know what it was he was doubling. For all I knew he might pay me two coppers for my trouble.

"Fine, I'll do it," I then said despite my apprehensions.

"Excellent! There's a key that I'm looking for." He pulled a book out from within his robe. Its pages were damp from his body heat and sweat.

Gross...

I grabbed it between two fingers as if it could hurt me, and quickly stashed it in my inventory.

'Father Adam's Book of Sermons'

-Quest Item-

"Given to you by Father Adam to be used as collateral in a bet against Alexander Tobias for his special key. Should you happen to lose, it is unlikely the Father will ever forgive you."

Weight: N/A

"You'll need that," he explained. "In the town of *Gothershall*, seek out *Alexander Tobias*, he is the owner of the key. A collector, you see. Tell him you wish to make a bet against his tournament champion, *The Tower Guard*, for the key. Show him that book as collateral. The tournament is in a few days, so you still have time to get there before the festivities start."

Somehow, I wasn't surprised that his new quest now involved the tournament, but I was sure that sticking to it might be worth my while in the end. I would just have to find this *Alexander Tobias* first.³⁴

"What happens if I lose against his champion?" I asked hypothetically. The Father went white as a sheet. Clearly, he hadn't even considered that.

"Don't lose," he then replied. *Great. No pressure. None what-so-ever...*

After consulting my map pointlessly, and then asking him how far it was to *Gothershall*, some five-and-half hours of straight walking from the Church, I decided to return to the Village and see if I couldn't procure some means of transportation, or, worst case scenario, supplies for the long haul.

I had only just triggered the banner for the Safe Zone, when a soldier approached me quickly. I recognised him too: it was the asshole guard from the camp...

"What do you want?" I said, before he had a chance to speak.

"We just received word from the scouts we sent to the south and, seeing how well you fared against Red Rian, we need your help. It's the Red Runners again. We believe we've found their actual hideout!"

³⁴ But I would have to be careful, because you know what they say: never trust someone with two first names.

Is this a Main Quest or an Errand? I wondered. *And the farmstead wasn't their real hideout? But then, why was Red Rian there??*

As though reading my thoughts, he said, "No one is safe on the roads leading out of the Village until this threat is dealt with."

Main Quest it is, I realised.

"So, if you know where they are, why don't you do something about it? I will remind you that I did your work for you in the farmstead, and again here in the Village... If you want me to be your mercenary who cleans up all the stuff you can't be bothered with, then I'd like to see some actual recompense for my work..."

The soldier suddenly bristled at my words and found his snarky attitude from the first day I'd met him, when he was guarding the camp.³⁵ "I assure you we could handle them, but we have bigger problems right now. The *Knights* are on the move again. The Red Runner scum are nothing compared to them."

"Are you sure about that? I just saw their leader manifest a new arm out of shadow yesterday," I replied sceptically. *Also, what Knights are he referring to?*

The soldier ignored me. "The people of this Village depend on you, so you should hurry south to the village of *Silt*. It's just next to the tributary lake of the *Riven*."

Before I could correct him and say that technically the army and soldiers like him were who the villagers depended on, he was gone.

I let out a sigh. I had hoped I was done with the Red Runners...

I stopped by the decrepit, worm-eaten alchemy shop. Hopefully, the Alchemist would teach me what he knew so I could have an advantage in the coming fights, which would no doubt increase in difficulty as I progressed. I was sure that having the ability to heal myself in a fight would soon become a necessity, unless I could somehow go through every Stage without taking a single hit, which was a dubious strategy to say the least. While I'd gone through the Village Raid mostly unscathed, I couldn't say the same for the Hideout.

Just like last time, I had to use both hands and pull as hard as I could to open the door to the shop. The whole thing creaked and cracked as if the rusty metal handle was about to pull free from the rotten wood, but just before I thought it would snap off, the door pulled open wide enough for me to squeeze through. I hadn't made it a single step inside before someone pushed past me. I only caught a glimpse of the person beneath the bandages and hooded faded-brown cloak, but I could have sworn that I saw bright-red fur. The brief glimpse made a chill run down my spine, but part of me also wanted to follow them and find out who, or what, they were. But I didn't, because it'd be creepy. Also, I had things to do...

When the excitement from this brief encounter subsided, I walked up to the counter, behind which the Alchemist was busily mixing the contents of various flasks, swirling them around, studying the changes, and taking notes in an immaculate notebook, which seemed the only nice thing in the entire shop.

"I've helped Father Adam, like you asked. Can you teach me alchemy now?"

³⁵ I.e., yesterday. So much had happened in a short timespan that it felt like days since I'd been at the camp.

The Alchemist stopped abruptly, turned and looked at me, as if he hadn't heard me struggle with the damn door for a full minute. For a moment, I also wanted to ask who the previous customer had been, but I doubted he knew.

"The Father has told me of your deeds."

How? I don't see any phones in here...

"My knowledge of alchemy is yours." The Alchemist gave me a curt nod, and, for a second, I thought *that* was it. I almost asked how exactly he was planning to teach me, but then a rush of thoughts and images entered my mind, implanted there in the same way that knowledge of new skills was, though more extensively. Basically, if learning a weapon skill was like a handful of pictures; learning alchemy was like a collection. Everything from mixing, setting up a distiller, combining plant material and other ingredients into a mortar-and-pestle, experimenting with heat-sources and flasks, and so much more.

I pulled up the progression menu and, in the 'Crafting' tab, found that the previously greyed-out 'Alchemy' was now lit up. Its levelling system consisted of varying degrees of expertise, with my current one, the first on the list, being 'Apprentice', followed by 'Journeyman', 'Artisan', and, lastly, 'Master'. After cross-referencing other crafting skills, I could tell that the same manner of expertise levels was employed throughout, though with varying contents. I quickly realised that in order to craft a healing potion with the same name as the one Kerebor had given me, I needed to reach the 'Artisan' level, since the only healing potion I could craft right now was a 'Weak Healing Potion' like the one Jakob had given me the day before, but, it was still better than nothing. I wasn't sure how I'd go about advancing to the next mastery rank, but I guessed it probably involved making potions and experimenting. Aside from the healing potion, I also had the ability to make poisons, antidotes, a handful of augmentatives, and rare potions.

The poisons listed had various effects, such as paralysis, bleeding, vomiting, confusion, and more. As for antidotes they came in pretty much the exact same variety as the poisons, serving as direct countermeasures, but there was also a general antidote, which it seemed could be adapted to any given poison by mixing it with the player's own blood. Though, as a caveat, a general antidote was less effective than the specific antidotes. The general one seemed more like it was useful for when you were poisoned by something unknown.

The augmentatives were things such as increased stamina regeneration, faster run speed, faster swim speed, heightened awareness, quicker reflexes, and so on. The rare potions listed were all marked '????', and I wasn't really sure how I'd go about unlocking them. For now, I just wanted to focus on making the healing potions, but later I would have to explore the many possibilities alchemy offered.

"What do I need to be able to make these potions?" I asked the Alchemist. He had returned to whatever studies I'd interrupted earlier, and once again looked at me as if it was the first time he'd seen me. It was quite a disturbing thing to be immediately forgotten like that, but I guessed that was the norm with the Husks not associated with specific stories and whose sole purpose was to either act as a vendor or to teach players. The marketplace vendor who had bought both of my rare daggers did seem to remember me though, and was possible to barter with, so perhaps the Alchemist was simply this way because his shop wasn't frequented, as evident by its dreadful state and singular purpose. Then again, I still didn't know if the vendor I'd dealt with was a Husk or a player.

“I sell basic alchemy kits, or you can utilise my setup over in the corner for more advanced formulas. I also sell common ingredients, but rarer ingredients are only sold by certain vendors. If you feel adventurous you can try searching for ingredients in the world yourself.”

“Do you have the ingredients for a healing potion?”

The Alchemist knelt down behind the counter, and I heard him rummage through various cupboards, clinking flasks together and muttering to himself while trying to find something.

When he reappeared, he placed an empty flask, a corked bottle with an oily substance inside, and some thick, sad-looking dark-green leaves with weird saw-like teeth along their edges.

“Eight silvers.”

“Actually, can I have a basic kit as well?”

The Alchemist sighed and knelt down behind the counter again and re-emerged with a wooden box.

Perhaps this shop is such a dump because he actively discourages customers...

He set it down on the counter with a *thump*. “Thirteen silvers.”

It honestly didn't seem that expensive, but I also didn't really have much to compare it with. Although for the price of being able to make a healing potion I could spend two nights with dinner at the tavern. That said, I was also loaded with money right now, which might've had a negative impact on my perception of value.

I laid the coins on the counter and stored all the items in my inventory. The ingredients didn't have a weight, except for the glass flask, which weighed 50 grams, but the basic kit weighed 0.7 kgs and nearly put me at the limit of my weight class, and *that* was something I didn't want to sacrifice for anything, especially considering how my current speed was ideal for my fighting style. As for the potion, I'd worry about actually making that later, as I didn't have the time to experiment right now, since I wanted to find Jakob and have him accompany me to Silt, where the next Stage would take place.

Pushing the heavy and decayed door open with my shoulder, I came out into the fresh air, which felt like silk when inhaled; a stark contrast to the suffocating damp and acrid shop air. Without a second to spare I set off in the direction of the marketplace.

Not even five minutes after entering the market square, I bumped into Jakob near one of the weapon stalls. He was busy inspecting various bows on display, a few of them likely rare items sold by the vendors on behalf of other players or bought-and-sold second-hand like with my daggers. I tapped him twice on the shoulder and he almost jumped out of his skin. I raised a hand and apologised, but he was happy to see me when the shock had subsided.

“Are you preparing for the next Stage?” I asked.

Jakob looked back at the weapons for a bit, then at me. “Yeah. I was hoping you'd...”

“Of course. Let's go together.”

His eyes brightened. It seemed he hadn't expected me to want to group up with him. Then he held out his hand, “I would like to invite you to my group, do you agree to join?” he asked, with a strange sort of robotic cadence, as though reading from a script.

“I agree,” I replied, copying his strangely formal mannerism for some reason and grasping his hand.

“Welcome to the group,” he announced with a nod.

I nodded in return, without knowing why. A strange, yet familiar-sounding, *bu-bu-buuu!* played in my inner ear, and I instinctively opened my menu and saw that there was an icon next to the ‘*Group Functions*’ option. When I clicked on it, a list of three names emerged, with a toggleable button next to each of them saying: ‘*Show on map*’. All of them, except for my own, were set to ‘*On*’.

On the list of names were: ‘*Jakob*’, who had a crown next to his name, probably to indicate that he was the group leader; ‘*Aiko*’, i.e., me; and ‘*Duke Harkenfaarth*’. Besides the names, I could also see what Stages they were on, and both of them, as well as myself, were listed as being on the same Stage: ‘*A Looming Shadow*’. I assumed this was the one that would take place in Silt.

There were also colour-coded buttons next to each player’s name, which, when hovered over with my finger, stated their function: Red indicated ‘*Leave Group*’ if I hovered over my own name, but said ‘*Vote to Kick*’ when I looked at the other names; Blue was ‘*View on Map*’ regardless of whose name I hovered over, and as a test I could tell that ‘*Harkenfaarth*’ was somewhere in the south-eastern part of the Village; and, finally, Green said ‘*Add to Friendlist*’. I wasn’t completely sure what ‘kicking’ someone from a group entailed but guessed that it had to do with removing them, which seemed to require a vote.

“Who the hell is *Duke Harkenfaarth*?”

“Oh, that’s *Patrik*, he’s kind of a braggart, but he’s harmless. He’s the one who gave me the scroll for the Scrying mirror. I don’t think you’ll have any problems with him.

“Speaking of the mirror, I managed to craft it this morning. I had to do it in the darkness, which was weird, and right now it just looks like a blank coin that doesn’t show anything.”

“How do you activate it?”

“I have to hold it in my hand and point it at the person I wish to scry on.”

I gave him a suspicious look.

“I won’t use it on you! I swear!”

I chuckled at the sincerity with which he said it. “Still, what a creepy thing to be able to do...”

“I don’t think you have to worry about it. *Patrik* told me that he managed to get the scroll really cheaply since the player who was selling it had no idea what it was, even after asking several people in the various taverns. He said the seller just thought it was some lore stuff, and those things are a lot cheaper than crafting recipes, which often go for several hundred gold.”

I nearly choked as he said it. “Several hundred??”

“Yep.”

“Are you done looking yet?” the bow vendor asked impatiently. The guy was a scruffy-looking senior with three fingers missing on his right hand.

“I think I’ll take ‘*Barnacle Barney’s Toothpick*’.”

The vendor nodded sagely. “Good choice. That’ll be seventeen gold and fifteen silver.”

“Damn...” I commented, but *Jakob* didn’t seem discouraged by the price tag.

“I’ll give you fifteen.”

The vendor’s eyes narrowed, converging every wrinkle on his aged face so that it created a series of channels in his forehead. “Sixteen.”

“Fifteen-and-a-half and I’ll throw in this bow,” *Jakob* responded, holding aloft the what-I-assumed-to-be-worthless Red Runner bow.

The man sighed, scratching his receding hairline and greying dark crown of curls. “Fine. You’re lucky this week has been slow.”

Jakob flashed me a boyish grin. He was very handsome when he smiled like that.

“Check it out,” he told me, sticking the recurve in my face as we were walking out of the Village to meet up with Jakob’s friend, Patrik, aka Duke *My-Cat-Stepped-All-Over-My-Keyboard-And-Managed-To-Press-Enter-Twice-So-This-Is-The-Name-I-Am-Stuck-With* Harkenfaarth. I wanted to ask Jakob if he had enough money for the Tournament Stage, since it would cost twenty-five gold, but I instinctively knew that he was loaded.

‘Barnacle Barney’s Toothpick’ was a twisted piece of grey driftwood covered in sharp barnacles all along its length and with a fraying string that looked like a repurposed tendon from some large animal.

I almost asked him why he’d bought such a worthless weapon, but then I saw the tooltip:

‘Barnacle Barney’s Toothpick’

-Ranged Weapon-

Bow > Recurve

“Found stuck in the teeth of Barnacle Barney, the scourge of the fishermen of Silt Lake, who have oftentimes lost their catch to his greedy jaws.”

Trait(s):

‘Barnacle Shaft’

‘Parasitic Barnacles’

‘Water-born’

Equip

Discard

Weight: 1.1 kilos

The traits read in order: “*The arrows of this weapon are covered with barnacles which produce jagged and hard-to-heal wounds*”; “*If arrows fired from this bow remained lodged in an opponent’s flesh for a while, they will spread barnacles within their body, causing internal bleeding*”; and “*Can fire normally while underwater*”.

The flavour text was short and raised more questions than it answered.

“Pretty good right?” he asked.

“Bewildering more like. Who the heck is *Barnacle Barney*?”

“He’s a big shark that lives in the lake just next to Silt village. Someone got this bow after managing to hook him on their fishing rod.”

“Don’t sharks need saltwater?”

Jakob just shrugged.

Before I could raise more questions, someone addressed us up ahead, “Took you long enough, J. Did you manage to craft the Scrying Mirror?”

“Hey Patrik. Sorry, I went and bought a new bow as well. But yeah, I have it right here, do you wanna see it?”

Patrik walked up to look at the coin-sized blank mirror in Jakob’s outstretched palm, no doubt reading through its tooltip. He acted as though I wasn’t there, which, for some reason, I didn’t mind, even though most would consider it rude. He was the first person besides Jakob and Kerebor who hadn’t been starstruck the moment they laid eyes on me. Granted, Kerebor was a creep, so he didn’t really count. Also, I wasn’t wearing my cape, so he’d have no way of knowing.

“I’m Aiko,” I said by way of greeting.

Patrik finally looked at me. He had dark-brown hair, bushy eyebrows, and a curled moustache. From his features, I guessed he was thirty-something. He had a strong cleft chin and high plastic-surgery-like cheekbones. I felt pretty certain that his appearance was meant to be some kind of joke, since his ridiculous face exuded ‘Duke Harkenfaarth’ energy.³⁶

“You can call me Patrik,” he replied.

“What’s the story behind the name and face?” I asked.

Jakob looked at me like I’d just called his mother a fat, big-mac-devouring, habitual-milkshake-slurping, trailer-trash dumpster-denizen. Patrik just laughed, then shrugged. “No clue, I’ve forgotten.”

“Why haven’t you changed it?”

“I don’t remember what my real face looks like, so I have no idea what I’d change it to.”

I suddenly felt bad for asking.

“There’s a lot of people like that,” Jakob then commented. “People who have lost their true selves and only know the fabricated bodies they now wear.”

“Well, at least you remember your real name,” I said.

Patrik shrugged again, so I continued, “Most people don’t even know my name, they just call me Raven-Black.”

He smiled as if he hadn’t heard a word I said, then a few seconds passed, and I saw his furry eyebrows twitch as his brain caught up with his ears. Patrik quickly looked to Jakob, who simply smiled. When he looked back my way, I was wearing the cape, its raven feathers puffed up and impressive.

“...now the sword makes sense,” Patrik commented dully. “I was like: *who the fuck uses a katana in World One??*”

Jakob laughed, then said, “Alright, now that introductions are out of the way, let’s get to Silt before the sun starts setting.”

The road to Silt was more of the same rolling green hills and sparse trees that I was used to, but, after about an hour, it started to even out, before eventually it was like we were walking down a gentle incline as we neared the vast body of water in the distance. The lake itself was oval, with a few small rivers and streams leading away from it, and at one end passed the great Riven that, akin to its name, tore through the landscape with its tumultuous waters.

³⁶ It’s quite a nebulous thing to explain, but imagine Lord Farquaad from Shrek. It was the same kind of energy he exuded.

Silt Lake was visible for a while before we noticed its namesake village. Silt blended in with the landscape quite well as it had been constructed entirely of the same grey-brown wood, which made it almost disappear when viewed from afar, thanks to the grey shoreline of the lake. As the village's name indicated, it had been constructed atop the shore, where the ground was porous and the sediment easily shifted, which was evident from the handful of old houses that lay partially swallowed in the gravel and sand. The rest of the village stood upon stilts and great beams that must've been driven ten-metres-or-more into the ground, and the strategy seemed to have mostly worked, although, even with the stilts upon which the houses and walkways stood, parts of the village were sunken to the point that reaching them by the many crisscrossing walkways was impossible, and thus the residents of these unfortunate homes had to rely on rope ladders.

"What a shithole," Patrik commented.

"I think it's quite charming," said Jakob.

As we came near, I noticed that the village was completely abandoned, or at least I couldn't see any people going about. It immediately brought to mind the farmstead, where the Red Runners had killed and tortured all the former residents.

"There's no one here," I said. "If it's a fishing village, there should be people out on the lake and on the piers, right?"

"I actually don't know what to expect here," Jakob replied, as if that wasn't a normal thing. I guessed he was used to relying on the information he bought from other players.

"*Now entering Stage 'A Looming Shadow'.*" Alongside the Stage banner came a melancholic refrain of a violin that sounded very similar to the one that'd been playing during the Farmstead Stage, although more 'haunted'.³⁷

"I'll take vanguard," Patrik announced, stepping onto the tilted walkway that led to the first of the many small houses on stilts. As he walked, decked out in armour just like Jakob's, though with a soldier's Barbutte on his head, the boards of the walkway creaked in unison with the sounds made by his chainmail and shifting leather underneath. He held a kite shield in his left hand, similar to Jakob, but in his right fist he gripped a spiked mace.

Jakob had taken up the rear, his kite shield strapped to his left forearm, but his bow in hand. The shield wouldn't interfere with his aim, but he lost some flexibility and dexterity at the cost of being able to immediately respond to an up-close attack.

"Careful where you step," Patrik warned, as we passed by the first of the many houses. "The floorboards here are rotted through."

The house we passed was very modest, to the point that those of the Forgotten Village were almost luxurious by comparison. It had a thatch roof that smelled strongly of fermentation. It was probably many seasons overdue for a replacement.

As we moved through the village, we walked up-and-down many of the walkways between the stilt platforms upon which singular houses stood, but eventually we reached the heart of Silt, where a bunch of the platforms stood close together, and the houses were bigger.

When we drew close to the biggest of the houses, one that looked like a longhouse or something, we heard sounds of splashing water, like people jumping in puddles, and loud slurping and gorging noises. I tried to imagine what exactly would be making such sounds, but it only brought to mind a pigsty, where hogs would frolic in the mud.

³⁷ Less *aaaah*, more *ooooUuuuOOooo*. You know what I mean?

Patrik slowed as we neared the barn-like door to the longhouse, and, before he opened it, he looked back at us for confirmation. Jakob and I both nodded. Patrik had only just put his weight on the large door, when it smashed opened from within, breaking off its rusted hinges and slamming him backwards.

The violin changed its pace and became a frantic cacophony that sent my heart into a stressed-out flutter.

The creature that landed before us immediately went for Patrik, but I rushed forward and whacked it with the flat of my blade, sending it tumbling away. We all looked at it in horror, while I quickly helped Patrik stand.

Once it might have been a human, but its slate-grey skin and prominent black veins set it apart, add to that its big eyes and outward-jutting teeth that seemed to go back three rows, plus the fact that it moved on all fours, and it was clear that all humanity had left its body. What made it truly horrifying however, was the large shadowy arm growing from its back like a parasitic serpent.

An arrow immediately settled itself in one of its large protruding eyes and foul purple-black blood splattered the floorboards and the shattered barn door. Without skipping a beat, Patrik surged forward and slammed his mace into its head, instantly killing it... or so I thought, but then the long shadowy limb swung for him and he only barely managed to catch the blow on his shield.

As he was pushed back, I moved forward and used my newly-acquired Lacerate. With two lightning-quick slashes, I carved into the flank and back of the crawling figure, scattering more of its foul blood. I dodged around the shadow arm as it tried to gut me with its claws, and, as I watched the crawling and corrupted Red Runner move along with the movements of the supernatural limb, it reminded me of the second fight with Red Rian. Whatever power it was that they were possessed by, it was utterly controlling their bodies and minds.

Another arrow slammed into the ruined leather jacket of the figure, just next to where my Lacerate had torn into its body. A moment later, Patrik moved forward again, landing another crushing blow to the creature's head.

"I think you have to fully sever the head!" Jakob yelled.

Patrik gave him a quick look, as if to say: "What do you think I'm trying to do??" But then again, he was wielding a mace, so severing *anything* was out of the equation.

I ducked under a slash of shadow claws aimed at my head, and then flung my katana upwards, chopping off the head from below. As the ruined head fell away and the neck started sputtering the putrid blood all over the boards of the platform, the shadowy limb seemed to retreat back into the shadow of the creature.

"Shit. There's another two inside..." Patrik commented. I wasn't sure if we could handle two at the same time, especially considering the fact that the one we'd fought hadn't actually been *that* aggressive.

However, we didn't really have an option, so the three of us went through the ruined doorway and entered into a gruesome charnel house. The walls, ceiling, and floor were all utterly drenched in putrid purple-black blood, and in the corners of the rooms were piles of dead bodies, some former Red Runners by the looks of them, and the others no doubt the unfortunate fishermen who'd once called Silt their home. The discarded bodies all had one thing in common: they'd been cannibalised.

The two figures that Patrik had seen were laying on the floor, writhing in pain as their shadows collected and coalesced into shadowy arms. One of them had an arm growing from the back of his elbow, and the other had one clawing its way out from just below his clavicle.

I quickly ran towards the closest one and chopped its head off, killing it before the disturbing evolution could finish. A moment later, Jakob used his sword to decapitate the other.

We both breathed a sigh of relief, and he cast me a quick smile.

“Holy tits,” Patrik profaned.

I turned to look at what he’d found. There, just past the creatures we’d slain, was a taller figure, hung on meat hooks, its arms and legs shredded. I would’ve noticed it before on my cursory glance, if not for the fact that the discolouration of the corpse’s skin, and the buckets’-worth of purple-black blood it was covered in, camouflaged it amongst spatter of gore around it.

“What *is* that?” I asked. The thing looked nothing like the Red Runners. It was almost like the corrupted slate-grey bandits were imitating this figure, since its skin was in an even worse state than theirs, held between death-and-life in some sort of permanent decay. Its head was covered by a close-helm that, judging by the scratch marks on its metal and the neck of the corpse, had been left on it after several failed attempts to pull it off. Most disturbing of all, was the fact that blood continued to slowly drip from its ruined limbs and the many deep gashes in its body, and where it landed, it sounded like rain dripping into puddles. But it wasn’t puddles that the blood was dripping into, rather, it was falling into big troughs that were already filled to near the brim.

“They’re collecting its blood,” Jakob said, realising at the same time I did.

“Is this how the Red Runners are getting their power? By drinking its blood?”

“I think this must be one of the *Forlorn Knights*,” he then said. “They’re possessed by some kind of shadow power. A lot of the information brokers talk about it openly, but I didn’t realise it was tied to the Red Runners and their madness...”

Patrik nodded, “Yeah, you’re right. But how are they organising this? Clearly they’re going mad as soon as they imbibe the blood.”

“Maybe it was different when Red Rian was alive. He seemed like he could control it, somehow,” I noted.

“So, what do we do?” Jakob asked.

“We’ve gotta clear out the remaining Red Runners here. They’re the reason why the roads are blocked.”

“And the corpse?” I asked, looking at the hooked body.

Jakob smiled sadistically. “We could feed it to Barney.”

We spent the next hour killing off the remaining corrupted bandits in Silt, before we even attempting to drag the corpse of the Knight towards the end of the pier. Of the corrupted ones, only one of them put up a real fight, which earned Patrik a nasty gash on his right arm, after the shadowy claw of its disturbing fifth limb sheared through his chainmail with ease. The rest we put down with disappointing ease. In terms of items, we were just rewarded with two more ‘*Hearts of Shadow*’, which Jakob got, and three ‘*Ruined Red Runner Baldrics*’ that Patrik claimed, since he said he could use them for crafting.

Patrik downed another healing potion as Jakob and I started unhooking the corpse. It seemed his wound wasn’t healing very well.

“Don’t drink too many of those,” Jakob warned.

“I know, *mom*,” Patrik responded snidely.

“What happens if you drink too many?” I asked, while struggling to wrench free the hook in the corpse’s shoulder.

Patrik wiped the back of his gloved hand along his mouth, then said, “If you drink four potions within half a day, so twelve hours, you’ll get sick and start bleeding internally.”

“Wait, you’re saying it poisons you??”

“Pretty much.”

I let go of the shoulder after removing the hook, the whole body falling down and wrenching itself free from the last hook that Jakob had been working on. It made a loud *thud* and a disgusting *squelch* as it impacted the wet floorboards. “How the fuck was I supposed to ever discover that??”

Jakob and Patrik both shrugged.

I shook my head, “*Even* the healing potions can hurt you in this place... ridiculous.”

“I think it had to be that way. Otherwise, you could just keep drinking potions and become invulnerable.”

“Listen to you talk as though logic has any role to play in this realm,” Jakob commented.

“Well, it does. After all, this place is mimicking a game, isn’t it?”

“More like a bloodsport for the amusement of some deranged God,” I muttered.

Jakob grunted with effort as he tried to lift the dismembered body of the Knight. “This thing is heavy!”

I grabbed the other shoulder. “Patrik, grab the legs... or well, what’s left of them.”

His brief expression of disgust said that he’d rather not, but it was clear that even between Jakob and I, moving the Knight’s body would be impossible.

It took us maybe forty minutes to move the Knight’s corpse to the edge of the longest pier in Silt. Several times Patrik and I both questioned why on earth we were doing this, but then eventually Jakob told us that there was a potential for the travel between Safe Zones to be blocked again if we just left the body where it was, at least according to something some random guy in a tavern had told him for free. I got the feeling that we were probably just being pranked. Nevertheless, we persevered through the arduous task, afraid we’d have to come back here later, if what Jakob said was true.

As one, we rocked the dismembered body back-and-forth as we stood on the edge of the rickety pier, and then with one last *heave-ho!* we sent it flying into the lake below. It landed with a great *splash* and then slowly cast bubbles to the surface as it sank. A half-minute later, a grey shadow moved through the water and snatched it, before disappearing back into the deeper parts of the lake.

Jakob did a mock salute to the giant lake shark, and then we made our way out of Silt and back to the Village, so that we could find transport to Gothershall where the tournament would take place.

We’d only just left Silt and its melancholic violin behind when someone came walking towards us down the incline of the road back to the Village.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

“What is it? You know ‘em?” Jakob asked.

“Yeah, he’s my stalker...”

I was about to start berating Kerebor for showing up again, after I’d told him to take a hike several times, but then I noticed that he was wielding his mirror-like shield and a longsword that I’d only ever seen secured within the scabbard on his hip.

Maybe I shouldn’t have pointed my sword at him last time... I considered.

“He doesn’t look like he just wants to talk,” Patrik noted.

Jakob was already knocking an arrow on his bow. In the distance, Kerebor had started charging, shield held up.

My friend looked at me, concerned. "Aiko, do we fight him?"

"He's really strong," I started, "but I don't think he's going to give us the option to choose."

"Stay behind me," Patrik said. "If we can't beat him, we'll run back into Silt. *Hopefully* he won't be able to follow us."

I readied my hands on my scabbard and hilt. "Fuck..." I cursed again.

Kerebor was only fifteen metres away.

Patrik moved up, raising his own shield and readying his mace.

What happened next felt like a long moment, but was only an instant: When Patrik drew within eight metres of Kerebor, there came a rush of air, followed by a loud *crunch* of metal and bone. Patrik was suddenly doubled over, with Kerebor's sword pierced through his chest. Before either Jakob or I could do anything, he'd pulled the sword out of Patrik's chest and chopped off his head, perfectly severing his neck between where the chainmail ended and the Barbute helmet started.

Jakob screamed something unintelligible, and the sound of his grief-struck voice made my chest hurt, as though a hand had grasped tight on my heart and constricted its rhythm.

I saw the change in Kerebor's posture and immediately fired off a Quick Draw, just as he surged toward Jakob who was next to me. My sword slammed against something hard and knocked him off his course, sending him tumbling away into the porous sand and gravel. Before I could see what kind of damage I'd inflicted on him, I grabbed Jakob by the arm and ran back towards the stilted houses and walkways of Silt.

We made it to the first of the walkways that connected with the ground, just as Kerebor yelled in the distance.

"Aiko, you whore! You liar! Betrayer! I'll kill you!"

Then suddenly, blissful silence, with naught but lapping water and creaking planks. Not even the violin returned as the zone around Silt enveloped us.

The.Tournament

“Jakob... I’m so sorry.”

He was looking into his hands. “It’s not your fault.”

“It *was* my fault. I should’ve told you that I had a psycho following me.”

“Plenty of those live in this World,” he replied weakly.

“Yeah, but most of them probably aren’t Frontier players...”

His eyes widened, but then he smirked sadly. “Frontier players are no different. In fact, they’re probably even more psychotic than the bottom-feeders in the Village and Gothershall.”

I sat down next to him. “...What do we do?”

Jakob handed me a small coin in response. I almost asked what the hell I would do with a coin, but then I saw the reflection in its surface. It was like a hole in my hand as it lay there, showing Silt from another perspective.

I looked up at him, shaking my head, while smiling at his boldness. “I can’t believe you did *that!*”

He laughed, but then seemed to remember where we were and why, and a cloud fell over him again. “At least he won’t be able to surprise us anymore.”

“You’re right about that,” I said, lifting the little coin-sized Scrying Mirror up to my eye.

As I looked into its surface, I could see the stilt platforms of Silt, but the fishing village looked different than the version we were in. It was livelier.

“His World looks a lot different from ours,” I commented.

“That’s a good thing. It means he’s done something to radically change things, meaning he can’t reach us here. He probably did some kind of *quest-chain* to bring people back to Silt, and, as a result, he cannot find us as long as we remain here. We’ll be unreachable to him forever.”

“But we can’t stay.”

“You’re right. And since Patrik died, that means he’ll be resurrected near the Village tomorrow morning.”

“He might still be alive,” I said optimistically, even though I didn’t believe it. *I saw his head come off. You don’t live through that, no matter how many potions you have...*

“He’s dead,” Jakob said with utter confidence. “Look at the group. He’s no longer in it, and he also vanished from my *Friendlist*.”

I looked at the group menu, and, sure enough, it was just Jakob and I now.

“Shit...”

After six hours, when the air had gotten colder and the sun was gone from the sky, Jakob came and tapped me on my shoulder. I’d been sitting on one of the piers, watching the waters below. Occasionally I’d spotted some fish, but Barnacle Barney remained out of sight. For now.

“He’s gone back to the Village,” Jakob told me. “He might try to attack us tomorrow morning if we go and find Patrik in *the Resurrection Field*. Or he might go to Gothershall. I’m not sure.”

“Can he hurt us in ‘the Resurrection Field’?”

Jakob nodded. "But he won't be able to hurt Patrik."

"Why not?"

"People who have just woken up have the Resurrection Sickness. It makes them weak, but it also protects them until they enter the Forgotten Village, or twelve hours have passed."

"That's comforting to know," I said. "I was worried people could just go seal clubbing on all the 'newborn'."

"From what I heard, that actually used to be an issue. A lot of people forgot everything and became Forsaken because of it, but then, one day, suddenly the Sickness started protecting people."

"Almost like someone corrected an oversight," I commented. *Almost like a hotfix in a game*, I thought, but didn't say.

"Yeah. Anyway, we should head back. Maybe he left Patrik's things behind, but either way, we don't want to be here when night falls."

"Thank god we don't have to go across the lake to avoid him," I replied.

"Don't jinx us."

Though it was pitch-black by the time we reached the Safe Zone banner of The Forgotten Village, we'd made it back in one piece.

Jakob had managed to loot all of Patrik's equipment, but his crafting items, gold, and a few other rare items he'd supposedly had were all gone, looted by Kerebor...

Was everything he told me a lie? I wondered to myself. I wanted to tell Jakob all about Kerebor and how he helped me, but I didn't want him to hate me more than he already did.

Due to the additional weight, we moved a lot slower on the road, but Jakob insisted it was necessary. I didn't argue.

When we got to the Ornerly Pig, Jakob bought us both dinner and rooms from the still-awake serving girl, who greeted us with her unfalteringly-positive attitude and charm. We went to our separate rooms to eat and then sleep, after agreeing to reconvene early the following morning.

I yawned wide enough to nearly dislocate my jaw as we were heading to the Resurrection Field. Jakob had apparently not slept at all, and had spent the time looking through the Scrying Mirror. It seemed Kerebor hadn't slept either, but had instead found a horse he kept in a stable and had headed to Gothershall. I was glad not to have to worry about him, but if Gothershall was where the next Stage would be, I would have to find some way to deal with him.

We walked past a lot of drowsy-looking people in rags as we went to the field where I'd only just recently awoken. It was a sobering reminder of my own mortality to see such a number of people here.

"There's a lot of people who have died lately," I commented.

"It's rare for there to be so many all at once," Jakob replied ominously.

We continued past the hill with the tree where I'd first met Kerebor. The sight made me uncomfortable and I tried not to look at it.

"How long have you been alive?" I asked, trying to focus on the dirt path and not lock eyes with the many 'newborn' people.

"I haven't really been counting the days," he started, "But it has probably been eight months, give or take."

"Wow..." I just said.

“I know. I spent a long time just doing small Errands and whatnot. It’s only recently that I really began progressing through the Main Quest.”

I stepped around someone walking towards us, since he showed no signs of moving out of the way. Then looked to Jakob again. “Why did you wait so long?”

“I was scared, I suppose. Besides, it took me a long time to come to grips with this place and my...”

Jakob stopped on the road, looking at the grass ahead and to the left. I followed his gaze. In the grass next to the dirt road sat a man with a familiar face. He was looking at his hands in amazement.

“They’re all there...” he mumbled incoherently, turning his hands back-and-forth.

“Hey Patrik,” Jakob said.

He simply ignored the greeting.

We stood there for a full minute in silence before Patrik finally noticed us. As he shielded his eyes against the sun to look at us, he asked, “Were you talking to me?”

I pointed a finger to Jakob and then myself, “Do you remember us?”

For a moment I thought that he would, but then he shook his head and looked back at his hands. I wondered why he was so fascinated with them.

“We used to be friends,” Jakob continued, unperturbed by the total lack of response. It was hard for me to watch. For as much as I hated myself for the thought, I could suddenly empathise with Kerebor.

This is awful...

“Did we?” Patrik replied without looking up. “Then why are you calling me *Patrik*? That’s not my name.”

“That’s what you told me.”

“My name is Duke Harkenfaarth.”

I shook my head. “Jakob, this is too much.”

He didn’t acknowledge me, and instead sat down in front of Patrik. “In *this* world that is your name, but not in the real world.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s trying to say that this isn’t the real world,” I interjected. Patrik seemed a lot slower on the uptake than I’d been.

An epiphany seemed to come over him at the answer. “So, *that’s* why I still have all my fingers,” he said.

“What’s he talking about?” I asked Jakob.

He shrugged, still with his back to me.

I let out a deep sigh.

This is gonna take a while...

After two hours of Jakob slowly coaxing Patrik out of his shell and recounting stuff they’d done together, he handed him his old equipment and helped him stand.

The three of us slowly made our way to the Village and then the Ornerly Pig, where Jakob paid for Patrik to get a room and a meal. He then told him to eat and sleep, and that they would talk the following day.

Afterwards, the two of us sat at a table sipping some weak ale. It felt like we had just come from a funeral and at least ten minutes passed without either of us saying anything, but then I eventually broke the silence.

“You’re not coming with me to the tournament, are you?”

Jakob looked into his mug absently. “I have to stay here and help him. I owe him.”

“I understand,” I replied. “I was hoping we could’ve done it together, but I know this is more important to you.”

Jakob looked kind of sad. “I’m sorry,” he replied softly.

I smiled in return. “It’s okay. You’ll just have to catch up later.”

“Are you leaving for Gothershall now?”

“If I can find transport from here, yes. Otherwise, I need to buy some food, since it’ll be a long walk.”

His eyes brightened. “I can help you with transport.”

Jakob took me to the north-eastern part of town. Whoever had named this place “*The Forgotten Village*” clearly didn’t know the difference between a village, a town, and a city. The ‘Village’ was like a large town or lesser city, as was obvious from how expansive it was and how many people and Husks occupied it. Had this place truly been the size of a village, every room of every house, inn, and shop would be filled to the brim with people. And even then, many would’ve had to sleep in the streets.

In this part of the Village there was a completely different kind of market. Still plenty of food stalls and such, but the main merchandise here was animals, with everything from horses, pigs, cows, chickens, and a few exotic animals such as camels, thick-furred horse breeds that I’d never seen before, a couple of elk, and, for some reason, even a bear. I wondered if players could actually buy any of these animals. The thought of someone riding a bear into battle seemed pretty ludicrous³⁸ though, but this was a fantastical realm after all.

Aside from the sale of animals there were also various vendors selling transportation in many forms: some elegant and expensive-looking, like closed carriages with flawless thoroughbreds drawn before them; and others the most basic type of wagon possible, with dodgy-looking planks and wonky wheels, pulled by bored-looking donkeys or old horses teetering on the brink of collapse.

Trailing behind Jakob’s slight figure, I eventually reached a small stall that stank of fermented hay and horse manure. It was crammed-in between a large tavern and a two-storey tenement building. Behind the rundown stall was an old wagon and a feisty-looking thick-furred horse that was definitely not from this part of the World. The mount stared off into space while chewing on some brownish hay that might have gone bad months ago.

A burly man, with thick and dark eyebrows, small suspicious eyes, full beard, a drooping jowl, and bare chest carpeted with curly hairs and smeared in filth, sat watching us from behind the ramshackle stall. Of all the vendors in the market, this was the one Jakob had brought me to. I couldn’t tell if he was messing with me, or if this guy was supposed to be the best rider in the entire realm. Or maybe he was just the most affordable one...

“She’s looking for passage to Gothershall,” Jakob said, speaking on my behalf.

“Gothershall,” the suspicious vendor repeated in a deep, throaty voice. “You fightin’ the tournament?”

³⁸ I believe I meant to say, “freaking badass!”

“She is. Can you take her there?”

“No prolem, fifteen silva.”

I stepped forward then and slammed the coins onto the counter. The wood split down the length from the impact, and only the nails haphazardly hammered into its frame kept it from cleaving in two right there on the spot.

The coachman looked at the cracked counter and back up at me. “Twenny silva.”

I gently placed five more coins on the counter, and he suddenly smiled.

“Pleasya, dealin’ with ya.”

I held on for dear life as the wagon raced down the dirt road to Gothershall. The wagon constantly jumped into the air whenever one of its four dinky wheels clipped a stone, of which there seemed a great abundance on this road, but the thick-furred horse drawn before it never once stopped its relentless galloping. It was a monstrous beast when compared to a normal horse, its frame bulky with muscle, and its dark-grey fur like a knotted, messy carpet. Every exhale from its mouth was like a demon’s and its eyes were wild. I belatedly wondered if the mouldy and fermenting hay it’d been chewing on might’ve fucked with its brain.

The coachman was barely holding onto the reigns and slept soundly in the front, his head tilted to the side at such an angle that he’d have a nasty ache in his neck when he eventually woke up.

Why Jakob had chosen this driver for me, I hadn’t a clue. He had simply smiled and waved as I set off with thunderous speed, though I could’ve sworn I saw the hints of a wicked grin on his face. The little bastard probably thought it was very amusing, meanwhile I held on to the flimsy wooden railing as tightly as I could. I was pretty sure that if I fell off, it would mean a total disintegration of every bone in my body and most certainly death.

If this is payback for getting Patrik killed, then I guess I deserve it...

I watched the rolling landscape whiz by in a blur, with tears burning my eyes, and when I finally had no more strength left in my arms, resigned to fly off the wagon and meet my end, the horse came to an abrupt halt and I tumbled forwards into the back of the hairy and, unfortunately, shirtless coachman.

He awoke with a shock, looked around confused, then realised where he was and in his throaty voice announced, “Welcome to Gothershall!”

With what little stamina I had left I climbed over the railing and walked a few wobbly steps before falling to my knees and hurling my insides out onto the side of the road. The driver laughed in the background and I could’ve sworn even that demonic horse was chuckling.

When I got back to the Village, I’d make sure Jakob got a thrashing for this little joke. At least getting here had only taken a little under half an hour, which meant I still had plenty of day left to spare.

After fully recovering from the ride, I got to my feet and set off into the city. Immediately on entry, a banner appeared, “*Now entering Safe Zone ‘Gothershall’.*” Alongside it came a new melody, with loads of instruments and a very upbeat tune, a bit like the tavern melody of the Village, but slightly more refined. It was the kind of music you might imagine hearing at a medieval fair, and that same atmosphere prevailed throughout Gothershall as well. Banners, flags, food stalls, shouting announcers,

jugglers, dancers, sword swallowers, and much more, filled the main road of the city. It seemed a lot of people had travelled here to watch the tournament, as I was pushed around in the busy mob that moved from one attraction to another. There were also loads of players, distinct in their ridiculously-dyed finery and odd getups. I was glad not to have worn my cape, since being mobbed here seemed far more dangerous than what I'd encountered in the Village.

The city itself was vast and had an enormous wall circling it, with many guards at its gate, though they seemed to let anyone enter. I spotted the underside of a black iron portcullis when I passed through the gate, as well as archer slits in the gate walls. Perhaps the guards were actually more vigilant than they let on? It certainly seemed unlikely that a bandit attack could happen here.

The houses too were bigger and better built than those of the Village, and the Husks who wandered the streets and flocked to the stalls and performers were better dressed. It was almost jarring to see a place where people weren't living in fear and poverty, and the entire city felt like a bright beckon for the last bastion of humanity in this forlorn Kingdom.

At some point I managed to break free from the masses, and found a city guard, whom I asked for directions. He pointed me in the direction of a richer part of the city, where, after a few minutes of walking, I found a street with large stone villas lining each side. I located the most elaborate and ornate of the buildings, which had two full-plate-armoured guards out front.

"Halt," one of them ordered.

"I'm here to see Alexander Tobias," I announced.

"State your business."

"I wish to bargain with him. Tell him that I have Father Adam's '*Book of Sermons*' with me."

The one who had stopped me looked at his friend, who nodded and went through the perimeter gate and into the three-story villa.

A couple minutes passed, wherein the remaining guard scrutinized every inch of my body. I felt positively violated, but I was here for a reason, and thrashing the wealthy Collector's lecherous guard might ruin my chances of being given an audience.³⁹

The other guard returned, looked me up and down, assessing me and the weapon on my hip. "The Master will see you," he then said.

Surprisingly, I wasn't asked to leave my weapons behind, which I'd obviously have refused, though one of the armoured guards dogged my steps as I entered the villa and was guided through its interior. I went up one staircase, then through a large room decorated with trophies, display cases, and many objects of interest, though I didn't stop to inspect any of them and continued on, climbing another staircase, before finally stopping in front of a door on the third floor. The guard stopped as well, and gestured for me to enter.

Inside was a smaller version of the trophy room downstairs, and in the back wall a large window showed a magnificent view of the western part of the city, with a great structure in the most distant part that was likely the arena. The trophy collection here ranged from ludicrously-decadent to ancient, and also included some downright-disturbing objects. One part of the room had a wide bookcase with dusty tomes of many different sizes. Opposite were several display cases: some holding golden weapons, others holding twinkling trinkets, and a few holding what would probably be considered

³⁹ Though it would be worth it.

artefacts, such as dried fingers and other ‘fun’ desiccated body parts. Above the display cases hung various mounted heads of what I suspected were rare beasts, but one in particular stood apart from the rest. The head of the beast looked a bit like a wolf, though completely distorted and far larger than any wolf had the right to be, and its fur was a sandy-brown. Its face was frozen in a very human expression of defiance, by way of a menacing grin showing every elongated fang in its mouth. Worst of the entire collection was an assortment of jars filled with ‘specimens’, one with a bunch of rats fused together, another with a deformed three-eyed baby, and a lot that I just simply couldn’t describe, but which made me sick to look at.

In one of the few chairs that stood before window sat a bloated man. His dark hair was short, the nape of his neck had several rolls in it, and the fingers of the one hand I could see from behind looked like fat sausages covered in bejewelled rings that were likely impossible to pull off. With grace unusual for a man of his size, he indicated a chair and I sat down beside him.

His voice had a strange cadence to it, one that seemed wholly foreign on his lips. “So, Adam sent you, did he?”

“That’s correct.”

“I figure he wants the key.” It seemed the Collector and the Father likely knew each other very well.

“He does. He said I should challenge you to a bet. If I beat your champion in the tournament, I would win the key, and if I lose, you would win the book.”

Alexander Tobias laughed. It was a weird noise, somewhere between the cawing of a crow and the sneezing of a rodent.⁴⁰ “Very well, you have yourself a deal.”

He was completely sure the book was already his, I could tell from his smile and how he was trembling from excitement, in that way only obsessed people can.

“Do you know where I can find a sponsor? I’m not able to fund it myself, and Father Adam didn’t give me a dime.”

“I will sponsor you,” he said without flinching.

“Won’t that cause a conflict of interest, considering how I’m to fight your champion.”

Alexander waved his hand dismissively, his body sloshing around with the motion. “It does not matter. Regardless, it is only twenty-five gold, a mere pittance compared to how much that book is worth.”

“I didn’t realise it was that valuable,” I admitted. I suppose it would have to be for a collector like this guy to be interested in it.

He gave me a suspicious look with his small dark-brown eyes, likely considering whether or not I would change my mind if I knew just *how* valuable it was. After realising that I really didn’t care, he said, “The Book of Sermons is not only the last of its kind, it also has the ability to enthrall anyone who listens to the words within. It is said that before our Kingdom fell into the shadows of oblivion, priests would speak the words within their books and thousands would listen with bated breaths. It holds a power that gold itself cannot buy.”

⁴⁰ If you’ve never heard a rodent sneeze, you should look it up, it’s quite adorable. Though his laughter was anything but that, but it also wasn’t a cackle like I’d figured it’d be. The sound could perhaps be described as a wheezy *Tee-Tee-Tee*.

While I hadn't looked through the book, I was fairly certain that it was just a collection of religious teachings, but, of course, in this Godless Kingdom, it offered salvation to the suffering of the masses. A promise of a life beyond to those who followed certain rules. Certainly, a man who had lived in fortune and knew the limits of what money could buy, would find such power exhilarating. I wondered why Father Adam no longer spread his faith and yet still held on to this book. If he'd wanted to, he could've lived a life of luxury after selling it to this greedy collector.

I left the villa behind as the sun was starting its journey towards the horizon. Alexander had assured me that my spot in the tournament was secured, and that I should merely mention his name to gain entrance. The tournament itself was held at noon the following day, so I had a full day to prepare myself, which meant I had time to experiment with my potion-making. I didn't know if the use of potions would be allowed, however, as I still wasn't familiar with the rules of the tournament, and when I'd inquired my sponsor about it, he had said that the specifics would be announced on the day of the event. He likely already knew and just kept it from me, so that his champion would have an advantage.

I wandered the less frequented parts of Gothershall for a few hours until I located an inn that was secluded and offered the quiet that I would need to practice my alchemy.⁴¹ I had constantly looked over my shoulders, watching for anyone following me. Jakob had told me just before I boarded the death-trap demon-horse-drawn wagon that Kerebor was staying at a tavern right next to arena. Fortunately, he would only be able to watch the tournament and not interact with me, since the Stage itself was instanced to me and inaccessible to other players not in my group. Apparently, I wouldn't be able to see him in the spectator stands though, which kind of freaked me out.

The inn was a frigid place, covered in shadow even during the day, because of its location in-between two taller buildings and the city wall at its back, but the proprietor's daughter drew me a hot bath in my room and served me warm stew, which stole away the cold.

When I'd bathed and finished my meal, I sat down on the hardwood floor and unpacked my alchemy kit before me. The various pieces of my armour lay scattered around the room, and I wore nothing but my cloak, which I'd curled around myself to ward off the evening chill. I realised then that I had to buy some townwear, since it was cumbersome to move around the Safe Zones wearing my armour at all times. Plus, it would give me something to slip into at night, so I didn't have to continue sleeping naked.

The alchemy kit was comprised of a mortar and pestle, a tiny distillation set, various basic solvents in different colours, and a few tools to use for preparing reagents. Aside from the wooden box the things had come in, I also had the dark-green leaves, flask, and oil. I looked at everything before me and knew the steps I had to take in order to craft a healing potion. In the same way that I couldn't explain how I was able to pull off my sword moves, I also didn't really understand why I knew how to perform alchemy, besides from the simple fact that I just *knew*.

I first mashed the green leaves into a paste using the mortar, then scraped it out into one of the smaller distillation flasks and placed it over a flame on a little metal stand I assembled. I poured in enough of the brownish solvent that the entire dark-green paste was submerged, and swirled it around

⁴¹ ...and to avoid other players, though that should go without saying by now.

until the mass was dissolved. The flame soon brought the green liquid to a rolling boil, which started to evaporate, sending steam up through a glass tube above the flask, causing droplets to collect and reform into liquid, which rolled down the tube and dripped steadily into the bigger flask I'd bought separate from the kit.

When maybe twenty minutes had passed there was only a dry dark-green mass left in the small flask above the flame and the bigger flask was partly filled with murky light-green water. I blew out the flame, then grabbed the flask by its neck and poured the oil into it until it reached the neck, afterwards I thumbed the hole shut and shook the two liquids together. The colourless oil and green water combined and at first turned dark like mud, but then became a vibrant cherry-red. I stopped the flask with a cork from the kit and tossed into my inventory. Though the ingredients had been weightless, the finished '*Weak Healing Potion*' weighed 150 grams, a hundred more than the flask by itself.

I spent the next half hour cleaning the equipment with a special liquid included in the kit, which seemed to get rid of everything efficiently. It actually worked so well that I wondered if I could use it on my armour to get rid of all the bloodstains that the usual wash in the bathtub had been unable to clean.

Instead of gathering everything back into the box I just left it out on the floor and went to bed. I kept the cloak around me like a second cover, as I quickly found that Gothershall was far colder at night than the Village, although it might also have had something to do with the fact that the wind seemed to go straight through the wooden walls of the inn.

When I awoke the following day, I thought I had plenty of time to spare, but, after taking one leisurely look out the window, panic set in. I quickly collected all my scattered pieces of armour and my unpacked alchemy kit and then sprang out the door of the inn, running full sprint towards the arena, where already now the celebratory horns were blowing loudly across the city.

For some reason, I'd slept twice as long as usual, and I had further screwed myself by choosing that specific inn, as it lay in the almost complete opposite end of the city from the arena. So it was that a dark-clad figure⁴² came running down the uneven cobble streets faster than a horse in full gallop, trailing a magnificent coat that once had earned her the nickname, Raven-Black.

In hindsight, it'd been quite a reckless decision to wear my cape, but in my hurry to leave I'd put it on without a second thought.

As I neared the sounds of the triumphant music, the arena slowly rose up over the rooftops. I came closer-and-closer with each powerful stride, my stamina seemingly endless in my panicked desperation. At first, I just saw the top of the arena stands, from which the city's residents and the many visitors would watch the fights, but after turning a corner and then hitting the main road, its full splendour came into view.

Okay, maybe *splendour* was a bit too generous: It was a set of raised wooden stands that stared down at a large oval-shaped arena with a floor of sand. I guessed that the shape of the arena probably originated in its original use for something else, like jousting, since it seemed an odd design for on-foot fighting. I couldn't really imagine what it'd be like to fight on sand. But, one thing was for sure,

⁴² I.e., me.

the sand was bound to get *everywhere*, and a lot of energy would likely be spent just traversing it, compared to fighting on solid ground.

Men in armour of thick cloth draped with colourful tabards, likely those of the Lord of Gothershall, were busily ushering spectators to the stands, while some fighters, a few in the company of their sponsors, were standing off to the side waiting. None of them looked like they were players like me, but instead just part of the 'set'. Though, I also couldn't be completely sure they weren't players. Regardless, they seemed easy pickings.

Most of all, I was glad no one seemed to have recognised me. It wasn't really obvious whether I was still in the same 'dimension' as all the other people in the city, or if I'd already been phased into a parallel one. I hoped the latter was the case. *Perhaps there's some kind of sign of when the switch happens? If so, I should keep my eyes open.*

Without even needing to state who I was, one of the tabard-wearing guards noticed me and approached with quick steps, and, in a scolding voice, said, "Where've you been!? We've been waiting on you!" I was about to begin explaining myself when the attendant immediately cut me off. "We don't have time for that! Just get in there, you're in the first fight!" He actually pushed me from behind until I willingly walked towards the arena floor by myself.

Suddenly a banner popped into existence before my eyes, "*Now entering Stage 'The Tournament'.*"

The crowd roared loudly as the sand crunched beneath my boots, and the music kicked off in a merry cacophony of a dozen or so instruments all vying for control of the melody.

From somewhere among the stands near the middle of the arena came the piercing voice of the announcer. "Froooooom the rolling hills of the Forgotten Village, comes a fighter recently responsible for bringing the notorious Red Rian to justice! The Traveller!" The crowd cheered. "Will she have what it takes to face a fighter accustomed to the sand, and who is known far-and-wide as *The Sword-Dancer of the Dunes!*" On cue, a dark-skinned man entered the arena from the other end. The crowd erupted into excited gasps as though they had never laid eyes on a black man before. He had his entire chest exposed and wore baggy dark-red pants stopped short just below his knees, flimsy slippers made of reed, and over his head a light-brown shawl that covered his hair and most of his face. He carried two long, curved swords on either side of his waist and strode forward in a confident swagger that showed he wasn't messing around.

But I wasn't messing around either, and in a similar swagger closed the distance to the centre of the arena. At one point I almost slipped as my flat-bottomed boot landed awkwardly on the sand and the lack of friction made it slip away immediately. I thought I'd recovered quickly enough that nobody in the audience noticed, but, as I looked up, the mocking sneer barely masked behind my opponent's shawl was evidence of the contrary.

Oh, this guy is gonna get it!

"As always, the rules are simple!" the announcer continued after the brief pause. "The fighter who first draws their opponent's blood wins the bout!"

Hmm, *first-blood*. At least this meant that if I lost, I wouldn't die. I wondered if accidental killings still happened, and, if so, did they disqualify you for it? I wasn't sure I could reign in myself once my blood started pumping.

"Oh, and try not to kill each other!" the announcer then yelled as though he'd read my thoughts.

Try not to he had said... So, it was allowed, but maybe just discouraged, which meant I shouldn't let my guard down by believing it was safe to lose. Just like up until now, I would treat this fight as if my life depended on it.

"Begin!"

The Sword-Dancer pounced on me, crossing the three-or-four metre distance between us in an instant, swords extended and ready to cut me apart. I fell back, my hands still resting on my scabbard and sword handle, waiting for the perfect timing. Immediately following up his pounce with a flurry of his blades, the Dancer came nearer, again forcing me to back off. As I backed away my foot slipped on the sand, and I accidentally let my Quick Draw fly at an awkward angle. It cleaved the air between us, missing him completely. Sensing an opening, he advanced quickly, forcing me back even further. Not once did his blades stop, and I could tell how he'd earned the title of Sword-Dancer, as there was something beautiful about his fluid movements, even if those deadly weapons were directed at me.

I realised that only a few more steps would put me up against the wall of the arena, with no chance to escape the steel tornado that approached fast. A stupid idea came to me and I seized it without a second thought. I turned my back to him and ran towards the wall. Dutifully, he chased after me, no longer as committed to his form as he was to catching me from behind with an easy strike.

As I reached the wall I jumped and, planting a foot solidly a metre-and-a-half up the wooden barricade, I kicked off, flipped once in the air, and landed directly behind him. Without giving him even a second to react, I performed my Lacerate. My katana curved through the air faster than my eyes could follow, cutting a sideways V down the Sword-Dancer's exposed back. Fortunately for him, I'd landed far enough away that my blade had only barely scored two straight lines in his skin with the tip, as opposed to cutting him into three separate chunks.

A single drop of blood fell from my blade and onto the sand, and the music and roaring crowd became silent for a second, before exploding into cheerful celebration. The Sword-Dancer collapsed to his knees and, with his back turned to me, muttered a few words in Arabic.

"I have lost," were the words he said. I didn't question my ability to understand a language I'd never been taught; in fact, I almost took it for granted. This realm had the ability to inject abilities and knowledge into your mind, so why wouldn't languages be part of *that* as well?

"The first victory goes to the Traveller!" the announcer exclaimed loudly. My dark-skinned opponent got to his feet, nodded once in my direction and left by the entrance I'd entered from only minutes before.

It was strange for a fight to be over that quickly, and, in reality, the wound I'd inflicted was more akin to a papercut than a killing blow. In a real battle, it would have been far from over.

I barely had the chance to guess at who my next opponent would be, when an armoured knight entered at the opposite end of the arena.

So much for the chance to rest and prepare myself...

Something about the colour of the yellow cloth tied around the waist of his armour, as well as his height, was familiar somehow, as if this was a person I'd met before.

The answer to my speculation came when the announcer spoke next. "The Traveller may have bested the Sword-Dancer, but will she fare as well against one of our own fighters!?" The crowd ooded at the mention of a local fighter. "Keeping the Forgotten Village safe from bandits day-and-night, comes the one and only, Captain Tabian!"

Well, there was a plot twist for the ages! Who would've thought that I'd be fighting the very same person I'd only just a few nights ago defended the Village with? It was weirdly timed to be sure, but I might also have been a bit too quick to advance from the Raid to the Tournament Stage. It was the kind of plot development you could expect from a soap opera or something, but nevertheless it had the desired effect. I was quite shocked, though not exactly apprehensive about the thought of facing him. After all, I'd beaten Red Rian, not him.⁴³

Just like the night when I'd helped him fight off the bandits, he wielded just a single shortsword, but in his hands it was a weapon to be feared. He wore a helm that covered his entire face and only had a T-slit in the front, providing a very narrow view of his surroundings, which would work to my advantage. The plating on his right shoulder and arm was slightly bulkier than that of his left and I guessed that I probably wouldn't be able to cut through it, even with my black edge.

As he moved towards the centre, his movements were stiff, the armour limiting his movements, but for a fight which was about first blood, armour was a good strategy. By comparison I only had my cuirass that could stop a blade, while my head was uncovered, and my arms, sides, and legs were covered by just a single layer of clothing...

We both reached the centre at the same time, and Tabian performed a friendly nod in my direction. For a second, I saw a flash of his eyes in the narrow slit of his helm. I got the feeling that he was looking forward to this fight. Whereas the Sword-Dancer had been confident in his own ability, Tabian seemed eager to just test his skill. It made the upcoming fight much more exhilarating, honestly.

"Begin!" the announcer roared, his voice immediately drowned out in the chorus of yells from the attentive audience. Tabian was *their* guy, which gave them someone to root for. I wondered if I might be booed out *if* I beat him.

No, that's not right: When I beat him.

This time, I was the initiator and I ran towards him as fast as my legs would carry me across the sand, while charging up my Quick Draw. The Captain took just a single step back, and it seemed more for balance than out of fear of my incoming attack.

I released my blade from its prison. It cleft the air and then, to my surprise, was deflected and ended up missing my target completely. The Captain immediately followed his deflection up with a counter-attack, striking as he took a step towards me. With the momentum I'd put behind my strike I was still moving towards him and only managed to raise my empty sheath before me in the last moment. As his blade struck my scabbard, I was sent stumbling backwards from the force of the impact. Not letting an opportunity go to waste, the Captain advanced with a chopping blow from above, but I'd already regained my composure and attempted a deflection of his blade with my own. I feared my brittle weapon might shatter against his, but it survived the glancing blow, and, using the momentum of that deflection, I moved past him and scored a shallow line across his reinforced shoulder plating.

Situated behind him, it was now my turn to retaliate, but Tabian was far quicker with his defence than his attack, and he easily deflected my strike again. Not falling for the same trap twice, I backed

⁴³ Okay... Jakob helped quite a bit too, but that's beside the point.

off quickly, and we ended up staring each other down for a few seconds, both of us expecting the other to engage.

I was the one who ended up losing patience first, and I came at him with a stab of my sharp tip aimed at his weaker breastplate. The thought of ensuring a non-lethal blow had entirely left my mind. In fights such as these, you win by any means necessary, lest your opponent exploits your mercy and hesitation. As expected, he went for the deflect once more, but my stab was merely a feint and I transitioned the movement into the double strike of my Lacerate. As my blade moved faster than I could see, I heard two distinct sounds of my glasslike edge striking metal.

With two strides back, I quickly disengaged before Tabian could exploit the astonishing double-deflection he had just pulled off. Somehow his reaction speed was quick enough to keep up with my lightning-fast attacks. I realised that my current approach wouldn't work. I'd only tire myself out on his impeccable defence, while he maintained an efficient consumption of his own stamina, so that he could finish me off when I made a mistake or ran out of steam.

I came upon an idea and a plan started to formulate itself in my head. The thing was, he was quick to follow my movements, but he'd still fallen for my obvious feint with the stab, which meant he wasn't taking any chances and would attempt to deflect or block any strike I made, since he had trouble seeing them properly through his narrow visor.

Already, I was starting to feel the heat seep into my body, the pearls of sweat that trailed down my back and tickled my skin, the blood that was pumped through my veins faster-and-faster. It wouldn't be long before I exhausted all my stamina, but I still had enough left for what I planned.

Once more I charged at him. I swung my katana at several vital spots, attempting to score cutting blows, and, as expected, he deflected all of them, one-by-one. But I didn't let up my onslaught, and for a moment it was like we had rehearsed this exchange of blows and parries, but then I feinted right and, as he moved his blade to intercept, I spun around to the left and let a minimally charged Quick Draw fly, which gouged a line through the lower part of the back plate in his armour and sent a dangerous amount of blood spattering onto the sand where it formed with the grains and quickly clumped together.

The crowd that had been cheering every deflection loudly was now stunned silent. They were probably in shock. To anyone watching, it must have seemed a done deal, such was the perfection of his defence against my blade. The irony was that without a helmet he would likely have beaten me, as I currently had no solid answer to his ridiculous ability to parry any attack I used. Perhaps I would later acquire an ability that was impossible to parry or something. I honestly wondered what the mindset had been when this fight was designed. It was still only my fifth Stage and already the difficulty was kind of absurd. Maybe I was supposed to have practiced a lot more beforehand. Also, this time I hadn't really experienced the same weird sense of disappearing into the *Dance of Death* that my muscle memory had induced in me during my fight in the Hideout, perhaps it was because this was not a strictly life-or-death situation and so my brain seemed okay with taking it easy.

"I can't believe it! The Traveller wins again!" Even the announcer was playing favourites it seemed.

Captain Tabian pulled off his helmet as he turned towards me. I was breathing pretty quickly at this point. I'd completely overexerted myself, but it had won me the fight. The only thing was, if I had to fight another opponent immediately afterwards, I was shit-out-of-luck.

The Captain clapped me on the shoulder once with his armoured hand. “I thought I had you there,” he said. “You fought well.”

I nodded. “As did you.”

How is he not writhing in pain on the sand? He should've lost at least half-a-litre of blood by now!

The ability to completely ignore pain was apparently still part of the weirdness of this World's characters, as the Quartermaster had also been talking to me nonchalantly, with his arm torn asunder.

The Captain departed the same way the Sword-Dancer had, and, as I watched him go, the announcer's voice stretched itself across the arena again.

“Next for the Traveller is a scheduled fight with the Tower Guard, the personal guard of Alexander Tobias, who came in second last year!”

Uh oh...

“But first, a brief interval as we watch the Red Swordsman match off against the Sword-Dancer of the Dunes.”

Phew.

I'd lucked out and was given a brief respite. I wondered if I would've had to fight the Red Swordsman, had I not followed Father Adam's quest. That I was also given a break, likely meant that the Tower Guard would be a challenge greater than that of Captain Tabian. That thought didn't sit well with me. But for now, I departed the arena floor and found an open seat in the stands, coincidentally⁴⁴ right next to where the Captain had sat down.

I wondered if Kerebor was sitting nearby and watching, or if he was waiting outside by the arena entrance for when I finished the Stage. I really hoped I wouldn't run into him again, but the knowledge that anyone in the city could observe me fighting in the Tournament made me super uncomfortable. Was there a risk of a huge mob forming just beyond the Stage border, preparing to each tear off a piece of me to keep?

The fight between the katana-wielding Red Swordsman and the Sword-Dancer had lasted a lot longer than my fight against the Dancer, and ultimately the Swordsman won by perfectly timing a strike to pass between the two blades of the Sword-Dancer and slice him along his chest. The slash completely incapacitated the Sword-Dancer, though it hadn't killed him. During their fight, I noticed that something was off about the way the Swordsman's red katana glowed in the light. I was pretty sure I'd dodged a bullet on that one, but I had the feeling that I might encounter the Swordsman sooner or later, as he had been introduced as, “*A skilled fighter from the distant lands of Kakon-shi.*”

My time to return to the arena came shortly thereafter, and, to my dismay, I was fighting a giant-amongst-men. Not only was my opponent covered in ridiculously-thick dark-green plated armour, but he was also more than two metres tall and wielded a long two-handed sword and an accompanying reinforced metal greatshield. The way he was casually holding his enormous sword in one hand and the shield in the other, made me think that he could crush my skull with a single punch. He was the physical embodiment of a tower, from which he no doubt derived his title. If the Captain's defence had been near-perfect, this guy's defence would likely be impenetrable. I assumed that he wasn't

⁴⁴ Or was it by design?

breaking any rules, but how exactly was I supposed to draw blood out of this man, if his fleshy bits were hidden away beneath several-centimetres-thick armour plating? No wonder Alexander had agreed to the bet so easily. I mean, what was that blind old fool even thinking, coming up with such a stupid proposal? He must have known the folly of his plan. Easier to just hire me to steal the key from the collector, but no, it had to be something like this...

The announcer yelled for the fight to start, and the Tower rolled his shoulders easily, the armour plating shifting with the movement. The way he was covered in it made me think of a beetle's carapace or a turtle's shell. There was a difference though. Because, while beetles and turtles did have natural panzer covering most of their body, they also had weaknesses that could be exploited to reach to their softer parts that they tried desperately to protect. This guy seemingly had no flaws in his ultimate defence. The plates overlapped in such a way that there were no seams to poke the tip of a blade through, and the casual way he walked towards me, the armour easily balanced on his strong body, likely meant that even if I did manage to knock him to the ground, he wouldn't be helpless like a turtle on its back.

I resolved myself to a dubious plan and dodged through the first of his heavy swings with the massive two-hander, cleaving along his right leg, hoping to cut a groove through the plates there. I looked back to check the result, but the blade had only scratched the surface. I wouldn't give up that quickly though, and when he turned around to face me again, I tried the same trick. I dodged under his heavy swing that sent sand cascading everywhere as it impacted the ground where I'd been a moment before. This time as I went past his side, I let a charged Quick Draw loose, performing a full spin of my body, hoping to infuse the cleaving strike with more power.⁴⁵ My obsidian edge carved itself along the scratch I'd made before, but didn't dig very deep into the plating, and left only a fine groove. If I wanted this plan to work, I had to do the same spot a few more times. I hoped I had enough stamina to pull it off, but it would definitely be a close thing between exhausting myself and breaching his panzer.

On the third strike, the Tower turned in response to my ineffectual strike faster than before. He had likely caught on to what I was trying to accomplish, which meant it would be harder for me to pull it off, especially if he started anticipating my movements.

Instead of trying for another overhead slam, the giant performed a surprisingly-quick double sweep through the air, which forced me to back away to avoid his blade's ridiculous reach.

As I prepared myself for another attempt to strike his side, I felt his cold stare on me from above. I couldn't even see his eyes through the tiny slit in his thick helmet, but, somehow, I knew he was watching me closely. I didn't have a choice though, so I charged ahead, pouring as much power as I had into the Quick Draw I'd let loose. He tried the double sweep again, but I slid beneath its reach, skating across the sand on my knees and then sprang up once I came near his right leg again. I was just about to let my Quick Draw fly, when something collided with me and I was sent sprawling backwards along the sand, tumbling head-over-heels twice and then collapsing, pathetically out of breath.

⁴⁵ For some reason, this kind of *Anime* logic seemed to make sense in this realm, though I wasn't actually sure spinning around helped...

At first, I wasn't sure what had just happened. My mind was a scattered mess of thoughts that didn't fully form, and my face was on fire with the pain of the impact. Then I realised. His shield. *That* massive thing. He'd spun the opposite way, somehow faster than me, and hammered his greatshield into me. His sluggishness that I'd taken for granted had been a ruse. With how easily he carried his sword and shield, it should have been obvious that he wasn't slowed by his heavy armour, at least not to the extent I'd assumed.

I struggled to stand upright, and I ran a questing hand gently across my face. It hurt. A lot.

I was pretty sure my nose was broken, and from the taste of blood in my mouth, I'd likely also bitten down hard enough on inside of my cheek to break the skin. As much as I wanted to spit the blood and shattered bits of teeth out onto the sand, I couldn't. It would be the same as a forfeit and losing wasn't something I could afford.⁴⁶ Thankfully, my nose was only shattered and not dripping with blood... Yet...

Ahead of me, the towering man approached with heavy steps. He wasn't in a hurry to win, it seemed. Perhaps he enjoyed playing with his food⁴⁷ before he ate it.

I brushed some of the sand from my neck and face, trying not to touch any sore spots. My breathing was ragged and messy, thanks to my mouth swimming with blood and my nose bent out of shape. Both my focus and thoughts were muddled by the pain.

Suddenly, the Tower Guard picked up speed and swung his sword at me. Instead of dodging, I tried to block it for some reason. The impact shattered my beautiful black blade in two and sent me flying across the sand again, clinging to the sad remains of my weapon.

Something about the impact of my head against the sand snapped *something* in me and I felt myself go numb. I distantly recognised the feeling, as my body sort of just took over, while I watched from behind my eyes. It was just like the time I'd snapped in the Hideout and performed my gruesome Dance of Death.

With the last bits of my stamina, I sprang across the sand and lunged at the Tower Guard. I grabbed onto his helm and, while he tried to pull me off, I clawed at the latches that kept his face safe beneath the metal. Before one of his massive hands could grab me, I spun around his head and positioned myself on his back, severely limited his ability to reach me. In my right hand I still clutched my broken sword and I tried to jab it into his neck a few times, but the metal held me at bay as sparks flew from every failed stab.

For maybe a minute or more, I wrestled with his helmet, trying to pull it off, while he tried desperately to stop me. To anyone watching it must have been a weird display and a degradation of the skilful fighting this tournament was meant to represent, but, in that moment, it didn't matter to me. The music had vanished. The audience was silently observing us, though I paid them no heed. The only sounds in the arena were the muffled struggling coming from the giant man who tried to stop me and my furious sounds of exertion.

I broke open the final latch and pulled at the helmet hard enough that my muscles seemed to almost tear, but then, as if time had slowed down, it came loose and flew off his head, landing somewhere in the sand behind him with a heavy *thud*. There was such an expression of horror on his

⁴⁶ Literally.

⁴⁷ The 'food' being me, of course...

sweaty, tan face that I stopped for a second. Then I plunged my broken edge into his neck and carved through his throat and jugulars. Blood erupted from him like fire from a volcano, and I clung to his body as it collapsed onto its knees and then fell face-first into the sand, quickly gushing forth thick crimson waves.

The audience erupted in a brutal roar, as if turned mad by the sight of death. The announcer's voice then followed, proclaiming me victorious. I had a feeling that it was almost a canned response, as he mentioned nothing about the brutal murder I'd just committed.

For a while, I stared dully at the enormous dead body, whose fate I'd wrought. Then I departed, collecting the second half of my *'Passing Breeze'*. Before I left through the gate of the arena, I spat out my shattered teeth and what felt like a litre of blood that I'd stored within my cheeks like some kind of demented chipmunk.

On my way out of the arena, a blonde female attendant in a pure-white robe handed me a cup with a yellow-green viscous liquid in it. I didn't ask what it was and just downed it in one go. The taste was like that of chamomile tea, with a strong honey-sweet aftertaste. A hot sensation rolled through my body, and I recognised the feeling. I gingerly poked my nose, and then my mouth. I examined each of my shattered teeth and then the wound in my cheek. It was all healed. It wasn't as flawless as the healing potion I had used in the Hideout, since I still felt sore, but it did save me from having to use my only potion.

When I turned around to thank the attendant who had brought me the healing tea, she was gone. I wondered for a moment if it had actually been a real person. If it had been a player, then I would have to thank them if I ever saw them again.

Since my next fight, possibly the final fight, would take place after an interlude of two other contestants fighting, I hurried to a nearby weaponsmith, hoping they could fix my blade.

The smith gave me a questioning look as I handed him the two pieces of my obsidian katana. First, he scratched his head, but, after inspecting it for a few minutes, seemed to reach some sort of conclusion.

"I cannae fix et," he said in a thick accent. Seeing my defeated look, he then continued, "But, dinnae worry yerself. I knoo sum one hoo can."⁴⁸ The smith rolled the two broken pieces together in a thick piece of oiled cloth, and then went into the back, wherefrom he emerged a few moments later holding a katana not too unlike mine in shape and size. Handing it to me, he explained, "Ye gonna need this. Repair'll take 'till tomorra."

In hindsight, I should've asked how he'd gotten his hand on a sword not belonging to this World's setting, but I didn't. I just grabbed the katana and inspected it.

'Iron Katana'
-Melee Weapon-
Sword > Two-handed > Katana

⁴⁸ Just imagine a really thick Scottish accent from the most rural parts of the countryside. It's the sort of indecipherable dialect soup that even a native Scot would struggle to understand if not written down, but of course, thanks to the linguistical abilities this realm granted me, I understood it without issue.

*“A katana of modest construction and decent sharpness.
Forged by a smith of the Red Fields.”*

Equip
Discard

Weight: 2.1 kilos

It was simply called ‘*Iron Katana*’. It had no special traits and was more than twice as heavy as my ‘*Passing Breeze*’, which put me above my current weight class, slowing my movement speed to *modest* and reducing my stamina pool to seventy percent. The blade was a lot thicker than my obsidian edge, but it also had a handguard carved to look like a lotus flower. It wouldn’t break as easily as mine had, but it also wouldn’t rend armour, and its additional weight would make each strike consume more stamina. Not to mention, I couldn’t one-hand it with ease. Still, it was better than having no sword at all. But only marginally so...

I paid the smith a ludicrous fee of two gold and ten silvers, putting me just above a total of thirteen gold coins. Then I made my way back to the arena, having many mixed feelings about my upcoming fight, which, for all I knew, might be even harder than the Tower Guard.

Sitting in the stands, I watched the end of the fight between Tabian and the Red Swordsman. Just like during my fight, the audience and announcer were fully on the Captain’s side. However, unlike my fight against him, they weren’t cheering for a victory that looked to be arriving at any moment, but rather they were encouraging him to hang in there.

From where I sat, I saw his posture was starting to slack, his body shuddering with each heavy breath he took, and noticed the way his deflections were starting to falter. Meanwhile, his opponent looked ready to go on for another hour or two, as his attacks were swift and elegant. I wondered if the red katana he wielded was responsible. Again, it had an unnatural glow. For some reason, it reminded me of something I had once heard as a child, one of the few stories I seemed still capable of remembering. It was said that those who took great care of their belongings might see those belongings inhabited by gentle spirits, but it was also said that those that took ill care of their things, saw themselves or their possessions cursed, and, even worse, those items that had gorged on blood or witnessed many gruesome deaths, were possessed by wrathful spirits delighted by cruel things. I was told that, in some cases, Gods may even inhabit an object. In Japan, many stories speak of possessed items, and some of these were weapons.

I once again had to wonder why I remembered such unnecessary things, and not the things immediately associated with normal life, like what I did for work and stuff like that. It was weird that aside from brief glimpses, most of my adult life was entirely gone from my memory, replaced by darkness and uncertainty.

The end to the duel came when Tabian sluggishly missed a deflection and the Red Swordsman’s katana jabbed into his left shoulder, piercing the metal and drawing blood.

As with my win over Tabian, the crowd was stunned, but cheered nonetheless.

With his victory, the Red Swordsman had won the right to fight the reigning champion, who after a short break emerged from the end opposite the Swordsman. I was pleased to discover that the other katana-wielding fighter had to go before me, so I could figure out the best way to deal with the Champion when it became my turn, or, alternatively, if the Red Swordsman won, I'd have an insight into his fighting style.

The Champion had sun-tanned skin, shoulder-length brown hair, and a bronze helmet in the style of those used by ancient Spartan warriors, complete with a black mohawk. It seemed slightly out of place in this setting, but I got the feeling that this fighter was, like his opponent, also not from these parts. His muscular biceps were exposed, but his forearms were covered in bronze vambraces. His chestpiece was similarly made of bronze and formed to have the appearance of a muscular chest and stomach, with large pecs and six abs in total. A short skirt or kilt was attached to the bottom of the chestpiece, and around his lower legs were shin-guards. In one hand he wielded a *Xiphos*⁴⁹ and in the other a round shield with a red Greek *lambda* 'Λ' on it. **He strode across the sand with an easy gait. He had no need for any confident swagger. Everyone here already knew he was the Champion of this arena.**

"The Red Swordsman showed his fearsome skill with the sword in his victory over Captain Tabian, but none are more fearsome in battle than our reigning champion, *Patroclus!*" The stands started shaking as the crowd roared and stomped their feet against the wooden floor in a brutal cheer for the Champion, who raised his *Xiphos* in response, only to receive an even bigger roar and applause.

Then, as if stepping from his shadow, a figure emerged from behind Patroclus. Most of the audience didn't notice him until his weapon, a dark-grey and rusted halberd, pierced through the chest of Patroclus and lifted him into the air with inhuman strength. The Intruder held him there for all to see, seemingly thriving in the terror and fear that had suddenly befallen the spectators, who no less than a second ago had been eagerly cheering for the coming fight. I heard a terrified exclamation from someone a few rows back.

"A *Royal Knight! The Forlorn King* has come for us!"

A large portion of the audience was already fleeing the stands as the Red Swordsman charged in. The cheerful melodic cacophony that'd been playing throughout the other fights suddenly halted, immediately replaced by the sound of war drums, not too unlike the backdrop of the Soldier's Camp, but this time supplemented with a powerful male choir singing drawn-out words in Latin. I continued watching from my seat, taking in the appearance of the newcomer. A *Royal Knight* and *The Forlorn King*. Perhaps this Knight was similar to the one we'd found in Silt, though, obviously, he was alive. I'd spent several days in two major cities of this World, yet this was the first word of *Royalty* I'd yet heard. And, to call a King *forlorn* was likely tantamount to treason, yet by these words had the people described someone who was supposed to rule their Kingdom. I'd already surmised that something was amiss in this country, but had somehow failed to notice the most obvious absence of all: The King.

⁴⁹ A Greek one-handed and double-edged sword used in Classical Antiquity. The blade is often associated with the Spartans.

Then I remembered the mosaic I'd seen in the Old Church. Was *that* mosaic depicting this Forlorn King or one of his ancestors? I decided I would ask Father Adam about it when I returned to the Village.

As my focus returned to the present, I witnessed the Intruder fending off the Red Swordsman easily, unfazed by the unnatural red katana he wielded. The Knight wore a close-helm with a protruding beak in the front. His left shoulder had a large metal pauldron on it and both his arms were covered in various pieces of protective armour, though none looked overly sturdy and were showing signs of rust. His legs had metal greaves on them, but as for the rest of his body, he wore just a faded royal-blue tabard over chainmail that was torn in many places and linen trousers in a similarly-faded royal-blue. In his left hand he held a pointed, sharp-looking, narrow metal shield, the same length as his arm. It was with this shield that he was blocking every single strike the Red Swordsman sent his way. In his right hand he held a more-than-two-and-a-half-metre-long halberd with a mean spike at the end and a head like an axe, currently protruding halfway through the chest of the Champion Patroclus, who was still suspended in the air upon it, his blood dripping down on the Intruder and turning the sand crimson underneath him. He wasn't overly tall or naturally imposing, but there was something very disturbing about the Royal Knight not having moved a centimetre and yet still managing to block every single one of the strikes the Swordsman swung or stabbed at him. It made me honestly terrified of what he would be capable of once he actually used his weapon.

The answer to that came shortly after, when the grotesque display of the former Champion had scared away the vast majority of the people in the stands. Even that damn announcer had fled in a hurry, and not one of the attendants nor guards I'd seen earlier had rushed in to deal with the Intruder. I noted that a handsome man wearing a luxurious outfit and with two scantily-clad women was watching the display with a bored expression, almost as though he knew how it ended already.

With a simple flick of the halberd, which must have required an enormous amount of strength to pull off so casually, the Intruder flung the bloody corpse of Patroclus across the sand, and then swung his axe head horizontally across the sand, catching the Red Swordsman in his hip and flinging him into the arena wall, where his broken body cracked the wooden façade before collapsing onto itself.

I let out a sigh. I knew what was going to happen next. So, I got up from my seat, pausing momentarily to rub my sore bottom, and then walked towards the edge of the stand. I took in the arena ahead before jumping straight down onto the sand, which absorbed my impact easily.

Without even giving me a quick look-over, the Intruder immediately charged towards me, halberd ready to stab or cut me down. He wasn't fast, but his reach and inhuman strength made him a dangerous opponent.

I felt the change in me, as I slowly approached certain death. I found it weird how, only in these situations, did my muscle memory, my self-named 'Dance of Death', take over.

I put a hand on my sheath and my sword handle, and charged towards the Intruder, immediately flinging myself out of the way of his incoming sweep, then jumped over the long handle as he stabbed the pointed end at me, and came further within his reach, the place where my weapon would shine. My breathing was quickly starting to become laboured, thanks to the increased weight of the substitute sword and the exertions of the previous fights, but my body pushed on, already accustomed to the different blade in my hands.

The Intruder slammed his weapon at me, but I let loose a barely-charged Quick Draw, which caught the side of the long metal handle perfectly and flung it out of the way with a metallic percussion, then I stormed under his defences and aimed a jab at his throat, but his shield caught it just in time. I spun around him with the momentum and carved a deep groove up the side of his leg, spattering blood onto the sand. The smell that emerged made me want to gag, and when I took a quick glance at the blood on my blade, after dodging out of reach of his halberd, I saw that it was very dark, almost purple, and let off the putrid stench of rot.

It's the same as that of the Knight's corpse in Silt... I have a bad feeling about this...

Something was off about this opponent, but I lunged back into the fray once more, pushing the unease from my mind. His attack pattern was already repeating itself, and I did a jumping summersault over his first sweep, then used my blade to partially deflect the follow-up swing sent my way. Once more within reach, I moved past his shield and used my Lacerate to cut deeply into his unprotected side, scattering more of the pungent rotten blood onto the sand.

A normal opponent would've died or been mortally injured at this point, but instead the Intruder cast away his shield and gripped his halberd with both hands. An unnatural darkness exploded from his body and sent me sprawling backwards across the sand.

When I got to my feet again, the darkness had inhabited his weapon and covered the parts of his body I'd damaged. It seemed this was the second phase of this fight, triggered by the mortal wound I'd inflicted. Considering I was already dangerously close to completely exhausting myself, I prayed that there wouldn't be a third phase as well.

With the darkness flaring around his body, the Forlorn Intruder took a single step forward and swung his halberd in the air before him. I was well out of reach, and so didn't react until it was too late. From the axe head came a wave of shadow that rushed across the sand with the speed of the wind. It caught me right along the ribs and again sent me sprawling backwards across the sand, until the wall of the arena caught me and broke in half, the top half tilting on top of me.

This time I didn't get up immediately. My body felt heavy. I pivoted the broken wall off of me and tried to stand, but collapsed. I tried again, before collapsing once more and vomiting out bile and transparent liquid. Distantly, I realised I hadn't eaten since yesterday. I felt pathetic. It hurt so bad I wanted to cry.

Halfway across the arena, the Intruder took another step and slammed his halberd into the ground, sending forth a pulsing black wave.

I somehow managed to throw myself out of the way just in time as the black wave raced across the sand and tore the cracked wall in half, continuing on into the stands, shattering the chairs, banners, and ruining its structural integrity to the point that it started leaning dangerously, teetering on collapse.

For a third time, I tried to stand, and this time managed, though only by supporting myself against the broken wall. My legs were shaking like crazy, my muscles felt like jelly, and my breathing was quick and shallow. The edges of my vision were slowly darkening and when I looked at my fingers, I saw that my skin was a light shade of purple. Somehow his attack had corrupted me.

I don't want to lose my memories again! I yelled in my mind, feebly attempting to ward off the darkness in my vision.

Something landed in the sand next to me, and I looked up to see the Captain. He gave me a quick smile, then equipped his helmet, fastened the straps, and charged towards the Intruder. A few seconds

later, the Sword Dancer jumped into the arena as well, not sparing a moment before also setting off towards the shadowy opponent. I wondered if the Tower Guard would also have come to my aid had I not killed him. The thought made me slightly regretful.

They're just fabrications, I thought to myself, but I have to help them. Without me, they'll die. Without them, I'll probably also die...

I pulled up my inventory and thumbed the cork stopper from the healing flask in my hand, before swallowing its contents in a single gulp. A familiar feeling of warmth flowed through my body, soldering my cracked ribs together and returning them to their place. The skin that the sand had scraped off knitted itself shut like little strings in a sweater and the dark edges of my vision were pushed away until they disappeared. I looked at my fingers just in time to see my usual skin colour return.

Pushing myself off the wall, I chased after my newfound allies, who were currently struggling to get in reach to do any damage. The transformed Intruder was proving himself capable of fighting several opponents at once, and even made Captain Tabian's moves look apprehensive. Granted, I couldn't see his face, so for all I knew he might be enjoying the challenge, since that seemed his wont.

Without any communication, we situated ourselves in a triangle pattern around our foe, and when next he swung his halberd, I hit the handle just below the axe head with a moderately-charged Quick Draw, producing a reverberating *clang* of metal-on-metal. For a moment, the halberd was sent into the air, and both Tabian and the Sword Dancer used the opportunity to rush in. Tabian carved through the worn and rusted chainmail, cutting off the bottom of the blue tabard while also severing several chain links and gouging a deep line into the Intruder's chest, while the Sword Dancer jabbed both blades into his neck.

When we all thought him dead, the Intruder exploded with darkness for a second time, which sent the Captain and the Dancer tumbling head-over-backwards through the sand. They both got up almost immediately, but with both his swords still stuck in the Intruder's neck, the Sword Dancer was left defenceless as the halberd cleaved towards him, catching him just below the ribs and cutting him cleanly in half, the rent flesh slowly becoming purple with the strange rot inflicted by the shadowy Knight's unnatural weapon. Without pause, the halberd was then swung my way, forcing me to drop to the sand as a wave of darkness passed overhead. Without a second to spare, I rolled out of the way as the axe head slammed down towards me again.

As I rolled out of the way, I caught a glimpse of the Captain using the momentary distraction to close the distance and jab his blade into the side of the Intruder, burying it up to the hilt. His attention no longer fixed on me, I got up and charged in as well, just in time to see Tabian block the halberd shaft with his hands and hearing the audible crunch of bones, but, despite the broken bones, he held on tight. He was weaker than the corrupted Royal Knight, but better armoured and somehow managed to hold his weapon in a lock, though I doubted he could last long, what with both hands smashed within his gauntlets...

I didn't spare a moment of this opportunity granted to me and hammered my own blade straight through the heart of the Intruder, severing several more links of chainmail in the process. Then I grabbed the two curved swords still protruding from his neck and pulled them past each other, like a scissor snapping shut, chopping off his head and casting his lifeless body into the sand, the shadows on him fading away, and the vile blood once again oozing freely from his many deep wounds.

With a grunt of effort, I pulled my own sword free from the dead Intruder's chest, and then Tabian's. As I handed it to him, he grabbed it awkwardly, most of his fingers clearly broken or bent backwards within his twisted metal gauntlets. He looked at his hands for a moment and then laughed. I laughed too.

What a disturbing sight it must have been.

After consuming a healing potion of his own, Tabian pulled off his helm and dropped it in the sand. We were both breathing heavily, the sweat pouring off of us, soaking our clothes and dripping steadily into the sand.

I realised my body was incredibly itchy, and most of all I just wanted to take a bath, but first I needed answers.

"Do you know who... what, he was?" I asked. I wasn't sure you could call this a 'person' anymore. Simply judging from the state of decay his body was in, it seemed likely he hadn't even been alive during our fight, but instead just an undead puppet controlled by strings unseen.

"I don't know his name, but anyone in these lands knows his armour. It belongs to the Royal Guard. They were supposed to have died along with the King over fifty years ago, but occasionally one of these *Forlorn* appear in our cities, and usually don't leave until most of the population is dead. This is the first time it has happened in Gothershall, but many of the other cities to the west have been completely wiped out because of it. The army has been trying to deal with them, but their losses are very high." This finally explained what the army was for, as it was clear that mere bandits didn't warrant that much attention.

"So, what are these 'Forlorn'?"

"The Forlorn are those supposed to be dead, but who still walk the earth. They're driven by an unknown purpose to kill all living beings, and they possess unnatural control over the darkness. I've heard that they cannot die but will always rise again after being defeated."

I felt certain then that we'd done the right thing when we'd dumped the dismembered Knight's corpse into Silt Lake the day before.

"What should we do with his body?"

"Burn it. Bury it. I don't know. But we have to get it out of the city. Don't worry though, I'll deal with it. You have to seek out Father Adam at the Old Church outside the Forgotten Village. Tell him I said to go ahead with his reckless plan."

If I hadn't already sought out Father Adam, I wondered if this would've been my first introduction to him. I was fairly sure I was following an alternate path through the Main Quest and the bet I'd won by defeating the Tower Guard was likely part of it.

"What plan is this?" I asked, although I didn't really expect an honest answer, considering how secretive the old Father was about it.

"He can tell you that himself, but just know that should it succeed, all who still remain in this Kingdom would be eternally grateful to you." *I knew it... no answers, just more questions.*

I didn't reply, but when I was about to leave the Captain turned to me and said, "You should take this," and handed me the halberd.

I looked at the tooltip that popped up as he held it there before me.

‘Forlorn Halberd’
-Melee Weapon-
Polearm > Halberd

“The Royal Guard once longed for peace in the warring Kingdom, but as the Shadow fell across the hills their longing waned until naught but hunger remained.”

Trait(s):
‘Defiled’
‘Stalwart’

Equip
Discard

Weight: 3.9 kilos

Its item art was as plain as the weapon looked right now, having none of the shadowy effects on it that it’d had in the hands of the Intruder. The descriptions of the traits were: *“The wielder has significantly reduced mobility”* and *“The wielder cannot be knocked down”*. I wondered if it would also have a special ‘Familiarity Level’ to unlock a unique ability similar to what the Forlorn Intruder had used. As I read through the flavour text, I pondered the reference to *the Shadow* for a moment. It likely had some significance to what had turned these former knights ‘Forlorn’.

“Do you want it?” Tabian asked, breaking my train of thought. I wondered how long he’d been holding it there while I stared at the tooltip.

“No thanks. You can keep it,” I replied.

“It will be buried alongside his body then.”

I wanted to reply that it was probably a bad idea to leave the weapon with the body if these Forlorn supposedly came back to life, but I very much doubted a headless man would return to life, so I didn’t say anything and just left.

As I walked back across the sand towards the entrance of the arena, a white-robed blonde woman was waiting for me. She looked similar to the one who had handed me the healing drink, but she was slightly taller, though identical in appearance otherwise.

“Lord Iberius would like to talk to you.”

I almost declined, thinking it was some random side quest, but then two guards in full-plate armour standing a head taller than me came up from behind her.

“Follow me,” she told me. I didn’t have to ask to know that I didn’t have a choice.

We came to a halt outside of a large red tent just a short walk from the arena. The attendant left, but the two guards remained.

“Enter,” a voice called from within.

As I pushed aside the tent flap, I was greeted with the intoxicating and overpowering smell of hashish, or something akin to it. The source of the smoke that wafted about the room was a pipe in the hand of the handsome man I'd seen in the stands just before my fight with the Forlorn Intruder.

“Hello, Aiko. I'm Iberius, this World's *Architect*.”

The.World.Architect

“The what-now??”

Iberius smiled weakly. His features were stark and imposing, thanks to his colourless cold eyes and perpetual scowl. His silver-blond hair was set in an impossible sort of alluring curl only ever seen in movies and fashion magazines. He had a prominent chin with a strong jaw, and his face was very angular, being basically all corners and protruding bits.⁵⁰ His frame was slender and long, but held a faint whisper of muscle along his arms, legs, and stomach. On his right hand his nails were short and manicured, but on his left they were left long and looked sharp enough to draw blood with a single swipe.

With an elegant movement he snatched a fancy cake from a tray next to him, where several other small cakes sat, as well as cookies, biscuits, fruits, and a pitcher filled to the brim with dark-red wine.

“You see this *Fragilité* cake? It was my favourite in the real world, but, despite the fact that I created this World and all that it contains, I could not make it for myself. I had to create a baker and give him a backstory, a family, a store, and all *that*, just so I could have him make this cake.”

With a sudden flick of his wrist he flung the flaky treat my way, but, before it hit me, it simply turned to smoke mid-air.

“Peculiar, isn’t it? I’m all-powerful in this World, thanks to the good graces of our Watcher God, but, even with *all this* power, there are so many *rules* I must follow. For example, I would’ve liked to do more with this World, but because I was chosen to make the first of the Worlds, I had to include so many tutorial Stages and whatnot. I tell you, it’s quite dreary to be an *Observer* in this World. Most people don’t even try to fight through my creations. It’s as if they have no drive. They’re unlike you in that regard.”

I finally found my voice, and then boldly asked, “Is that why you created the tournament? Because you were bored?”

Iberius’ faint smile widened. “That’s right! You get it, Aiko. That’s exactly why I made the tournament!”

“Ridiculous.”

His eyes narrowed. “Is it? You see, we World Architects were given a choice upon the completion of our Worlds: we could stay as Observers of our Worlds or we could have our memories wiped and take part in the *Trial*. Given that becoming an Observer is the only choice that makes any sense, what else am I to do in order to find entertainment throughout these many dull uneventful years?”

“Trial? You mean the progression through the Worlds is some kind of trial?”

“What else would it be? Though some may claim it, my World, and those that come after, are no paradises nor utopias. They were crafted with a meticulous focus on achieving just the right amount of suffering and strife within the little *pawns* who struggle across the playing field.”

“And what about the people who already live in the Realm?”

⁵⁰ What I’m struggling to say is that he was very handsome, but in *that* impossible way most players in this realm were. However, this guy clearly wasn’t just any odd player like me or Jakob.

“What about them? They are Husks, like you players nicknamed them. Hollow beings forced to repeat the same cycle in perpetuity. Hardly any of them live what can be described as meaningful lives. Some have cycles so short they lack much in the way of individuality.”

“Like the alchemist in the Village,” I replied.

“That one is a particularly bad case. It has fallen into decay,” he remarked. I didn’t like the way he referred to the alchemist as simply ‘it’: a personless automaton. “It happens when they do not engage with people for long periods of time. After all, it’s a rare few who take up alchemy in the first World, only you and—” he stopped, a look of annoyance on his face.

“What?”

“I’m not allowed to tell you that,” he replied.

“Why not?”

“It seems to be against the rules. Don’t ask me further.”

I didn’t want to lose the chance to get more information out of him, so I grudgingly complied, though it felt as if I’d been robbed of a great insight.

“Why do the Husks decay? Did you not create them? Should they not retain their functions by virtue of repeating the same life over and over?”

“You might think so, but no. I am no puppet master. The things I create are given life according to my whims, but once born they are on their own, severed from my interference. Those that interact often with players can become quite indistinguishable from them, such as the main characters like Tabian, but most just barely retain their functions. In truth, the Quests and Errands of this world are as much about maintaining the Husks as it is about fleshing out the narrative I’ve designed.”

“Can they ever go rogue?”

“Of course not. They, like me, are constrained by the Watcher’s rules. Only players are given free reign of their functions.”

“You aren’t free?”

“I’m talking to you about what is essentially my vocation, and it is the most engaging thing to have happened to me in over a month. What do you think?”

“Watching players fail or thrive, fight and love, play and scheme, all of it becomes so very dull once you’ve seen it a million times. Only the few like you and the occasional murderers give me any flicker of entertainment.”

“That sounds pretty sad.”

“And yet, I wouldn’t return to the real world if given the chance. Boredom is a fair trade for Godhood.”

“Godhood?”

Iberius waved his hand dismissively, suddenly annoyed with me. “Enough! I didn’t bring you here for a Q&A.”

“Then why *did* you bring me here?” I asked.

“Because, as you said: I’m bored. And you are always fascinating to watch when you’re here.”

“I’m not your plaything,” I spat.

“Oh, I know. I know *all* about you, Aiko. Proud *Raven-Black*. Strongest of all the players in this silly game of our Watcher God.

“You know, He whispers to me every time you enter my World. I cannot tell if He wants you to succeed or if He’s fond of watching you struggle, but He keeps many of His eyes trained on you.”

I felt a shiver run down my spine. *This is far worse than the thought of someone Scrying on me with a magic mirror*, I thought. *Even the twisted God of this place watches me closely...*

“I want you to fight a creation of mine,” Iberius continued, drawing my gaze back to his colourless cold eyes.

He grinned with self-indulgent glee as he noted my surprise. “Oh, I think you’ll enjoy fighting *this one*.”

“What’s in it for me? I’m not gonna risk my life just to amuse you.”

Iberius let out an annoyed sigh. “Of course, of course.” Then he held up two fingers. “If you win, I’ll let you bypass the Stage that normally supervenes the Tournament. It’s called *the Hamlet*. I am quite fond of its design, but many players find it bothersome and dull.” He put down one of his fingers, leaving just his index raised.

“Are you allowed to do that? Letting me bypass a Stage?”

“As long as I follow the rules, I can do whatever I want. This is *my* World after all.

“Anyway,” he put down his index finger, “I’ll also give you a reward of your choosing. Money, a weapon, a favour, whatever.”

“Why should I trust you?”

“You *always* ask that...”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t the first time I’ve given you this offer,” Iberius explained, playing with a curl of his silver-blond hair absentmindedly. “Normally you end up taking the offer, but there has been a couple of times you declined, though you always regretted it later.”

“How many times have we had this talk?”

“Well, I missed you the first time around, but since then? I don’t know. I don’t really keep a tally on these things. Oh, but don’t go thinking you’re the only one who I have my eye on! You may be unique, but there are plenty of more interesting people who take part in this Trial. Granted, most of them don’t die as often as you, so I see you here in my World far more often. You’re quite a reckless one, but that’s also what is entertaining to watch.”

He speared a baby-blue treat, which looked like a *Macaroon*, with the long nail of his index finger and dropped it into his mouth. He swallowed it immediately, then licked his lips before continuing:

“*Everybody* and their mothers use a sword-and-shield in my World. Not a single one ever picks the claymores or the rapiers. Sure, a few go with daggers or spears, but rarely do they survive past the Hideout...”

He sighed annoyed, but then flicked his gaze back to me. “That’s why you’re fun. You always fight with *that* sword. Never anything else. At least not in this World. It gives me such a thrill to watch you perform your glorious sword dance.”

Most don’t die as often as me... great...

The fact that Iberius probably couldn’t count our interactions on two hands was quite a terrifying revelation. *How many times have I died in this Realm? How long have I been trapped here in this mad game??*

“So? What say you?”

I sighed. I hadn't really given it a lot of thought, but if past me usually agreed with to his challenge, then there must've been some merit to it. Granted, it was quite possible Iberius was lying to me about everything, but for some reason I believed him. Probably it was due to the fact that he seemed like a bored toddler just pulling the wings off of flies because he had nothing better to do. To him I was just a fleeting distraction from his perpetual role as an uninvolved 'Observer'.

“Fine, I accept your challenge.”

Maybe I can get him to reward me a better weapon or something. Perhaps the reason why I always come back here is my overreliance on the Katana... Maybe I should find something else? Something less likely to get me killed...

Iberius grinned, then suddenly the tent unfurled itself. His body fell away into the shadow of his seat and the table with sweetmeats, treats, and wine, vanished, along with the carpet on the floor, the chair he'd been sitting in, and everything else. Even the red tent was gone moments later as well as the two guards who'd stood out front.

I now found myself standing within a village, no, a hamlet, with eight houses around me, scattered at near random it seemed, as well as a ruined tower ten metres ahead of me, its top half seemingly crumbled away.

Iberius lounged on one of the rooftops, belonging to a house with six massive spear-looking bolts lodged through it, no door, and a collection of ruined corpses belonging to both Gothershall guards and Red Runner Bandits in front of it. He was additionally flanked by three white-robed attendants, the blonde woman who'd given me the healing tea standing amongst them. Like a true Lord of Indulgence, one of the attendants was waving a large fan to keep him cool, while another was refilling his cup with wine.

“What about my sword?” I yelled.

He waved a hand in front of himself lazily and my '*Passing Breeze*' materialised in the air before me. The '*Iron Katana*' on my hip evaporated as I grabbed hold of my weapon, probably returning to the Blacksmith's inventory.

As I equipped my trusty weapon, my total weight returned to what I was used to, and I regained fifteen percent of my stamina as it shot back up to a total of eighty-five percent. My movement speed also went back up to high.

“Now entering Stage 'Encore!'.”

A strange kind of waltz duet of a cello and violin rolled across the Hamlet, and from where I stood, my hand on my katana hilt, I saw Iberius waving his arms around to the melody as he sat on the roof observing me.

Aside from his small retinue, there were no one else.⁵¹This was purely for the amusement of the eccentric World Architect.

The sound of hard shoes on stone caught my attention, and I turned to see a silhouette standing atop the broken tower, his features hidden in the glare of the sunlight. Somehow, without being able to see the figure whatsoever, I felt him exude a regal and haughty authority as he stared down at me from high above.

⁵¹ Unless you counted the corpses.

Though he did not raise his voice, I heard Iberius easily, as he explained. “This creation is one I call a *Forlorn Aristocrat*. I’m quite proud of it, but unfortunately there was no Stage for me to use him in. However, I have repurposed the ‘Hamlet’ Stage setting for this fight, lest you miss out on seeing my creation. I hope you can give me a spectacle worthy of my time. You now have my undivided attention,” he finished by saying. Because of the way he phrased his words, it made me wonder if he had the ability to see many different scenes in his World simultaneously, because, if so, it gave me an idea of what kind of reward I could ask of him.

I let out a long exhale, as the Aristocrat walked over the edge of the tower’s wall and fell quickly to the hard-packed earth many metres below. I took in my opponent as he raised himself from his straight-legged landing.

The Aristocrat was dressed far better than the Intruder, but it offered quite a lot less protection, since what he wore was a fancy Buff Coat⁵² that emphasised appearance over protection. His head was left unprotected and his purple-skinned face with shadow-covered, recessed eyes were on full display. His hair was partially gone, but the bits that clung resiliently to his scalp was a red-tinted grey. The jaw on his face was sown shut with black string, which I found peculiar, but then again, I had no idea what the supposed origins of this creature should’ve been, and considering Iberius mentioned it wasn’t included in any of the Stages, I would probably never find out.

There every step of the Aristocrat’s black dress shoes on compacted earth sounded hollow and loud, as though I was listening to the sound of someone walking down a palace ball room. I looked at his pants and noticed they couldn’t even be considered ‘armour’, since they were made from something akin to tweed. I also noted that the metal buttons, pocket-watch chain, and jewellery on his fingers were all rusted. Further, I considered the jarring discontinuity in terms of design, since the Aristocrat was about five-hundred years too early for this World.

I didn’t have more time to mentally berate Iberius’ terrible World design, because the Aristocrat suddenly plucked an Estoc from a scabbard on his belt which I hadn’t noticed. The sword had a simple T-shaped hilt and crossguard, with a slender blade that seemed capable of puncturing metal, not to mention, it glowed... with shadow...⁵³

With a powerful kick off the ground, the Aristocrat leapt forward, extending his arm to its full length and managing to stab the tip of his blade into my left shoulder, just where the cuirass cut off. With ease it slipped through the jacket and punctured my skin.

I stepped back while drawing my sword to knock away his blade, but before my edge could touch his, his estoc whirled around and sliced shallowly across my upper right leg.

This guy is a lot faster than anyone I’ve fought before.

I drew in a quick breath from the pain and stepped back a few more steps, but the Aristocrat easily kept up the distance between us, holding his blade pointed at me with his right hand on its hilt in a strange palm-to-the-sky kind of style and two fingers on the centre of the crossguard.

Then the estoc jabbed forward and I flung my katana out to meet it, sending out a ringing glass-on-metal *cling* that seemed to hang in the air for a moment. I felt the wind at my back as I surged forward with a diagonal cut aimed at his neck, but he danced backwards in a duet of hollow-sounding

⁵² A leather coat worn by European cavalry in the 17th century. Most of them were a light tan, but the one worn by the Aristocrat was black, owing to some kind of dye, and it had the motif of a serpent in red.

⁵³ Not technically something that’s possible, but I’m just reporting on what I saw...

steps, keeping his sword close and vertical to his body, its tip aiming at the sky, before jabbing it forth just as I finished my swing, lancing me through the exact same spot he'd already wounded me in my left shoulder.

“Argh fuck!”

I moved forward again with a rapid, albeit disorderly, flurry of swings, but he continued to dance out of reach, always conscious of the surrounding buildings and tower, ensuring he repositioned himself so that I could not corner him.

As I finished the last of the random slashes, he was on me again, lancing his blade-tip at my shoulder for a third time, but I deftly avoided it with a roll of my body, managing to get close enough to him to land a solid knee to his stomach.

Instead of flinching or momentarily pausing, the Aristocrat just danced away again with that persistent hollow *tap* of his ridiculously-out-of-place dress shoes.

“Fuck this guy!” I yelled in frustration.

“I’m glad you are enjoying yourself,” Iberius commented. Even without looking I could hear the smile in his voice.

I let the Aristocrat push me again, keeping myself in the very centre of the hamlet. Even with my speed I couldn’t catch him if I tried, so it seemed more prudent to let him come to me. Besides, I was starting to feel the pearls of sweat forming on my forehead and neck, tickling my skin as they rolled down my body. The adrenaline was such that I didn’t actually feel the shoulder wound, though it must’ve been quite deep, considering the sticky mess that glued my skin to the inside of my jacket.

Hopefully I don’t die from blood-loss, I prayed. After all, I didn’t have any more potions on me...

After a bit of mucking about, he finally went for me with one of those leaps that seemed to imbue his reach with an extra metre-and-a-half. Instead of piercing straight through my shoulder however, it skirted along the face of my cuirass as I rolled my body out of the way, leaving just a faint line in its wake.

As I made it within reach of the Aristocrat for the second time, I grabbed the neck of his Buff Coat with my left hand and hammered my katana straight through his stomach, easily penetrating his leather protection. While he struggled to release himself from my grip, I released a Lacerate within his flesh, drawing bucketfuls’ of blood.

The Aristocrat danced away again, but this time he trailed blood in his wake. And, of course, given that he was a Forlorn, it was the foul and putrid kind. In the waning daylight, the purple-black liquid looked less like blood and more like oil.

Unperturbed, he stopped moving when he was a few metres out of my reach, then with his free left hand he curled a fist and from his palm emerged a blooming shadow that soon coated the entire hand and then his body. It happened so quickly that I didn’t have time to exploit the momentary opening, as the abyss-black shadow went from covering just his hand to covering his entire body, hair and all, before I even realised what was happening.

With his coat of shadow, his figure seemed to grow taller and his estoc longer. When he moved towards me this time, there came no hollow out-of-place *tap-tap-tap* of his dress shoes. In fact there came no sound from him at all, apart from a static hum the shadow seemed imbued with.

I narrowly avoided the cleaving edge of his shadow-empowered sword, and it was a good thing I did, because it left a deep cleft in the door of a nearby building, as it passed through it without pause.

However, I was less lucky on his second slash, as it opened up my left shin, carving through the bone partially.

Though I must've looked quite mad then, what with a blood-smearred shoulder and two damaged legs, I dodged under his third sweeping cut and came up past his guard with a Quick Draw to his abdomen.

Unlike my knee to his stomach, this slash had the desired effect, as it doubled him over. I moved around him, and, in a move I unfortunately recognised as the one Kerebor had used to kill poor Patrik, I drove my edge down on the nape of the Aristocrat's exposed neck, severing his head from his shoulders.

As the Aristocrat's body collapsed to the ground, his body melted through it as it became vapour and shadow. Then I blinked and found myself back inside the red tent, with Iberius lying sideways in the chair, dangling a cinnamon roll above his open mouth.

I fell to my ass on the carpet, feeling the pain in my body flare up, and then—

Then the pain was gone. Erased. As though it had never happened. As though the fight had just been a lucid daydream.

Iberius let out a satisfied puff of air as he swallowed his treat, then sat back up in the chair, looking down at me on the ground.

"I don't like *that* sword," he simply said. I guessed that I wasn't supposed to have been able to cleave through the shadowy coat of the Aristocrat, at least not with such ease.

"Name your price."

I let out a deep sigh. Then considered what kind of reward I wanted. Iberius had said he could do anything as long as he abided by the rules, which probably meant that any weapon he awarded me would have to be within the appropriate theme and strength of this World, which I guessed meant it would have to be on par with the Intruder's Halberd.

"I want a favour," I then answered.

"With the little *lovebird*?" he asked, no doubt already intimately familiar with how Kerebor had been stalking me.

"Yes. Can you get me something like a restraining order?"

He chuckled, though there was no humour in it. "I can do anything to him, as long as it isn't outright murder. Of course, I could get him put in a situation where that would be a likely outcome, but, owing to these blasted rules, it needs to be possible for him to overcome."

That last comment caught me off-guard. *One of the Watcher's rules is to keep things fair??*

"You can be creative. I don't care. Just keep him away from me. I'm sure he's waiting outside the Tournament area or something."

"Your *loverboy* is not as dedicated as you might think," Iberius commented. His eyes glazed over as he focused on something I couldn't see. "He's currently eating a steak at the tavern where he is lodging. He left the tournament stands over an hour ago, before you had even fought the Intruder."

"I don't care what he is doing."

Still staring off into space, Iberius asked, "You're sure that you just want him out of your way? Even after *what* he did?"

I thought it over for a moment. Maybe Kerebor deserved a worse punishment. After all, he'd killed Patrik's friend and ruined my party with Jakob. "Actually, I just thought of something."

Iberius grinned from ear-to-ear as I told him my idea.
“Now you’re speaking a language I can understand.”

I returned to the tavern on the other side of the city, after having purchased a soft, baggy, white shirt with a high neck, and a black skirt that stopped just below my knees. I also bought undergarments, since wearing nothing but a skirt was just inviting trouble. Strangely enough, the clothes had no weight, but also didn’t have any stats, and when I looked at my ‘Equipment’ screen, the pieces went into their own separate category called ‘*Town Clothes*’.

The thought of Iberius actually being able to carry out my plan for getting rid of Kerebor was darkly amusing, but whether he decided to go through with it or not, it seemed I was momentarily rid of my stalker, as I had seen neither hide nor hair of him when I passed by the ruined tournament grounds. Granted, I had made sure to take off my cloak, so I would’ve been hard to spot in the masses, since my choice of armour wasn’t particularly unique.

I put on my new clothes while I cleaned my armour in the tub. Then, after rinsing the tub and having it refilled, I scrubbed myself clean and submerged my body in the water’s warm embrace. I soaked in the water until my fingers were wrinkled and soft, then crawled out and rolled myself up in the bedsheet and fell asleep.

The following morning, I visited the collector, Alexander Tobias, who dutifully handed me ‘*The Key to the Forbidden Catacombs*’. He even went so far as to thank me for killing the Forlorn Intruder, but also explained that it would not be possible for me to obtain the tournament reward money, as I had not actually won the tournament. I imagined this bit of news would have stung quite a bit more, had it actually been my own money that were spent paying the entrance fee, but since Alexander had sponsored me, I didn’t really care. I still had most of the coins from the bounty on Red Rian’s head and the subsequent sale of his two daggers.

I saw no sign of any quest-givers for the Stage that I’d skipped thanks to Iberius. ‘*The Hamlet*’ he’d called it. I assumed that normally it would have popped up after the Tournament, but seeing as I didn’t have to complete it, I assumed that my next step was to return to Father Adam.

So, hedging my bets on this, I went to the city gate, where the merriment of street entertainers had returned to normal despite the sudden appearance of the Forlorn Knight, and found a carriage heading through the Forgotten Village.⁵⁴ Though it was a bit more expensive than my ride to Gothershall, it didn’t make me fear for my life, as the driver set a leisurely pace that saw us reach the town just after sundown.

I reached the Ornery Pig tavern as darkness fell across the town and was fortunate enough to run into Jakob there. Patrik wasn’t with him.

We had our dinner brought to my room, so we could talk without being eavesdropped on⁵⁵, and I told him about the Tournament, trying to describe each fight as best I could, knowing that he’d eventually have to fight those same fights. I even told him about my side-quest involving Father

⁵⁴ The only words I had to go by were Tabian’s. He’d said to seek out Father Adam. That was it. I just hoped I hadn’t missed something important...

⁵⁵ Not that there were any people in the tavern other than us, but you never know.

Adam, as well as the bet with Alexander Tobias. When I got to the finale he said, “Poor Patroclus.” It surprised me a bit that he knew the name, as I’d just referred to him as ‘the Champion’, but he then went on to explain: “Patroclus is kind of a famous character. A lot of people talk about how it’s funny that a character with so much detail and hype would be killed off immediately.”

“So, there’s no way to actually fight him?”

“Not as far as I know. You know, there’s actually a group at the Frontier that calls themselves *The Widows of Patroclus*. They are all female characters as well, which makes it all the more hilarious. I think Winged Heiress is part of that group.” Another mention of this ‘Winged Heiress’ person, I wondered who they were, though, clearly, she was quite famous.

“I’m sure half of them are guys,” I commented.

Jakob smiled at bit awkwardly in response.

“What?” I asked, I wasn’t sure if I had offended him or not.

“I’m actually pretending as well,” he said.

“You’re what?” I asked as if I hadn’t heard him right. You know, one of those things where you hear something, and you aren’t sure whether or not it’s just your mind inserting the words you want to hear.

“My real name’s *Alisé*.”

I’d toyed with the idea of Jakob being a woman in the real world when I first saw him, but despite that it was still a shock to realise I’d been right. I wasn’t sure why, but I was fairly sure women becoming men in this realm was less common than the reverse. I wondered if it was to avoid being harassed by guys, but I got the feeling that probably wasn’t it.

Alisé continued, “I don’t remember much from my life before *this*, but the one thing that always comes back to me, is my desire to be a... to be a man.”

“I won’t lie to you and say I understand how you feel, but I get it. It’s important to be true to yourself.”

Jakob, err... Alisé, smiled. He looked fragile like that. I guess anyone who opens up themselves would look that way. We are all at our most vulnerable when we expose our true selves.

“I know this realm is cruel to the ones who live in it, and that it drives players to madness once they’ve died enough, but I can’t find it in myself to hate it. After all, here I can be my true self without being judged.”

While I wasn’t sure if Alisé’s desire was a common one, I was sure that many people shared the same bittersweet sentiment. It is hard to hate a world that lets you be the person you’ve always desired to become. Had memories of my real life prior to this ‘Trial’ still been within my mind, I was sure I’d find in them my own reasons for liking this world. Again, the thought of my forgotten family occupied my thoughts. Perhaps I couldn’t remember them because they hadn’t been important to me... or maybe the most important memories went first? The latter seemed quite likely, considering how sadistic this realm was.

I got up from the hard floor we were sitting on and shuffled towards the window, watching the dark rooftops of the town through it. I sighed. There was something magical about this place, and yet, beneath the pretty cloth, death and sorrow and madness lay hidden.

“How was the Hamlet? Was it as nerve-wracking as I’ve heard?” Alisé asked, returning to our original talk.

“I skipped it.”

“Oh, that’s... wait, you what!?”

“I met the World Architect and because I fought his ‘pet’ instead, I got to skip the Hamlet.”

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. I’ve never heard anything about this before.”

“Probably he isn’t well-known. It seems he only interacts with a few players. Apparently, he likes watching me.”

“What a creep,” Jakob replied ironically.

“*Totally*,” I responded with a laugh. “He’s called Iberius, by the way. Maybe you can find out stuff about him if you mention him to other players. He hangs out in Gothershall, and it seems he just made the Tournament so that he’d have something to watch. I guess he can’t really interact much with this World after creating it. I did get him to do something about Kerebor though.”

“So *that’s* how you did it!” Jakob exclaimed excitedly, suddenly holding up the coin-sized Scrying Mirror.

I took it and put it against my right eye. Through the mirror I saw out of Kerebor’s right eye. It was pitch-black around him, but I could tell that he was using his hands to paddle a floating platform he was on. While I watched, he suddenly jumped back from the edge of his raft, as a black shadow of something enormous moved underneath.

Iberius actually did it!

I’d told him to put Kerebor out onto Silt Lake with some kind of vessel that had no oars, so that he’d have to paddle with his hands to get back to shore. Given the size of the Lake, it’d take hours, possible even a full day. And of course, Barnacle Barney would be circling below the entire time.

“It was my idea,” I told Jakob proudly.

“You’re wicked, Aiko,” he laughed.

I thumbed my nose, slightly embarrassed, but also glad to have Jakob back in good spirits.

“Are you going to the Forlorn Castle next?” he asked.

“I don’t know. Is that the next Stage?”

“Yea.”

“You sure know a lot,” I replied, impressed.

“Too bad I can’t even act on all this information.”

“You can,” I replied. “Come with me.”

“Patrik needs my help. Besides, I’m two Stages behind you.”

“Sorry. I’m stupid for asking something like that of you. You’ve known him way longer than me.”

“It’s okay. I understand why you’d ask. And you’re not stupid, Aiko. You’re courageous, beautiful, and deadly with a sword. There’s a reason why you’re one of the most renowned Frontier players. People look up to you.”

I scoffed, kind of like a, “Pfff.”

“I’m serious.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

“You don’t like it?”

“It’s weird,” I said. “All these people I don’t know have this image of me in their heads. It’s like they worship me.”

“They *do* worship you.”

“Right, exactly. It’s weird. Like, I don’t even know why, but everyone seems to know of my ‘exploits’.”

“You can thank *The Storyteller* for that.”

“The what?”

“Nova, the Storyteller. He’s always recounting the stories of the Frontier players. He apparently writes it all down. I think you might even be able to find the book he wrote about you, if you look in the market. Actually, there may be several books, now that I think about it.”

“So, he just tells stories?”

“Basically. But he also shares strategies sometimes, and warns people to avoid certain player-killers, or holds eulogies for Frontier fighters who reset. They get kind of awkward, since those players usually attend their own ‘funerals’.”

“So *that’s* how everyone knows about me...” It seemed I had a bone to pick with this ‘Nova’ guy.

“Yea. He visits the Village about once every thirty days. When I met you the first time, he had just been here a few days earlier.”

Great... For a second, I contemplated staying a bit longer in the Village, so I could witness this ‘Storyteller’. Maybe I’d try to catch him next time, though I wasn’t gonna wait around for him to show up, but I could at least try to find his book about me, or *books* rather. Maybe I could learn a thing or two about myself. *What a weird thought.*

“By the way. Does Patrik know about your situation?”

Jakob looked at me, confused.

“That you were a... girl before you came here, I mean.”

“Oh... He used to, before he died.”

“Sorry.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t mean to bring up a bad memory.”

“It’s okay. It’s not the first time I’ve lost a friend. It’s par for the course in this realm, so you better get used to it.” Though his words sounded brave and stoic, his expression seemed unsure and distraught.

“How is he, Patrik?”

“I don’t know. He keeps going on about how he has all his fingers again.”

“Think he lost them in the real world?”

“That would be my guess,” Alisé, erm, Jakob, replied. “But he’s so different from when I first met him. These last two days he’s just been using the money I gave him to drink himself into a debilitating stupor. He’s been really mean, actually.”

I felt incredibly guilty all of a sudden. But I didn’t know what to say or do.

“If you need someone to talk to, I’m here.”

“With how fast you’re going through the Stages, you won’t be here much longer though.”

“I can stay a few days more,” I assured him. “After all it was my fault this happened.”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to.”

“But I want to.”

Jakob smiled at that. Then he got up from the floor and said, “Well, I won’t bother you any further. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” I replied.

Instead of leaving though, he just stood there for a moment.

“Promise me you’ll be careful, okay?”

“You know me,” I said and smiled. It was true, he probably knew me better than I knew myself.

“No one has cleared the Forlorn King’s Stage in a while, but no one knows why. Those who’ve unlocked the Stage recently have all been reset for some reason.”

“I’ll stay alert.”

Alisé smiled one last time and then left my room. I stared at the closed door for a while before I took a bath. Then I blew out the candlelight and went to bed.

The.Flame.and.the.Shadow

The following morning, I visited the worm-eaten alchemy shop, where I distilled two ‘*Weak Healing Potions*’ using the Alchemist’s own setup.

The Alchemist stared at me throughout the entire procedure, silently judging my technique, though he never said a word, which I took as a sign that I hadn’t screwed up anything. I made sure to buy a couple more glass flasks and healing plants in case I needed to make additional potions later. The finished potions and the two empty flasks put me right at 7.3 kg, which was just below the next weight class thankfully. After experiencing what it was like to have less stamina and movement speed, I knew I wanted to stay below that line for as long as possible, though it seemed an inevitable thing, given how I kept slow accruing items that I didn’t discard, like my starter alchemy set, just to name one.

Once I become more proficient, do I need to carry around a whole setup like what the Alchemist has?

I spent the next hour browsing the various bookstands in the marketplace, though I didn’t actually find any of the books about myself, but one book did catch my eye. It was called, ‘*The Immortal and The Lightless City*.’” No doubt it was about the immortal named *Ceilameed*, whom Kerebor had referred to. Granted, that bit of information now seemed more like a trap than a head’s up. Though I would’ve bought the book, it cost more than eight gold pieces, which was a tad bit too much for me to splurge on simple reading material. Since I’d discovered that repair fees for my obsidian blade were astronomical, I had to be frugal with how much I spent, so I wouldn’t end up unable to pay to have it fixed, should I happen to break the damn thing again.

When it was clear I wasn’t going to buy the book I was skimming through, the vendor rudely shooed me off, yelling, “This isn’t a library!”

I did notice one thing as I put the book down and that was its tooltip:

‘*The Immortal and The Lightless City*’

-Book-

“Discover the story of the Lightless City’s most well-known figure and learn about his role within the city, as well as how he became one of the Frontier’s earliest Immortals.”

Written by: “Nova”

Weight: 0.5 kilos

I need to find this Nova guy.

As I reached the edge of town, I equipped my armour and raven-feather cloak. I placed a hand on my scabbard, comforted by its familiar feel, and then set off towards the Old Church.

Since I wasn't sure how long I'd be out of town, I'd bought a waterskin, though I'd replaced the water with beer since that was more filling. I'd also brought two sausages and a loaf of brown bread with me.

I was afraid that the food would put me over the weight limit, but for some reason it didn't have any weight whatsoever, though it seemed to depend on how much I carried, as carrying ten or more sausages would make each of them weight 200 grams.⁵⁶ It was a strange, but ultimately useful, system that ensured players wouldn't be starving because they couldn't carry enough food for a day or two. Given that this Realm had physics-defying powers and items that crossed the border into the absurd, such as healing potions, it was likely that starvation wasn't possible, though I still felt a stomach-ache when I'd gone too long without food.

When the top of the church came into view over the hills, it was shrouded in dark plumes of smoke from a fire recently lit. Fearing the worst, I upped my pace, eventually breaking into a full sprint as I went up-and-down the many hills.

“Now entering Emergent Stage ‘The Burning Church’.”

Emergent? What the hell does that mean? I wondered.

Half-exhausted already, I came sliding down the hill in front of the earth-swallowed church courtyard. Flames enveloped half the stone edifice and roared white-hot as they consumed the interior with untamed voracity. As I watched, slowly approaching the blazing furnace, a tall metal-clad figure burst through the large wooden door and, in a single motion, tossed the lifeless body of Father Adam across the courtyard, his tumbling body only stopping once it collided with one of the partially-swallowed stone benches.

The Knight was coated in a layer of shadow, similar to what I'd seen on the Forlorn Aristocrat, and his armour was untarnished by the flames. I sped up, and, when I got close, leapt at him, letting loose my Quick Draw against the side of his helm before he himself could draw his weapons. The Knight stumbled for a second, but then regained his balance. The dent I had put in his helmet would've been enough to knock him unconscious had he not been one of them... the Forlorn. As I stood between him and the unconscious Father, *that* distinct stench of rot filled my nose, while the melody of the roaring flames burned in the background.

The Forlorn Knight had a beaked close-helm similar to the Forlorn Intruder I'd fought the day before, but his armour was in far better shape and covered his entire body. Around his neck was a royal-blue scarf, fluttering in the wind the roaring fire produced, its edges singed black by the flames. The Knight pulled his blade from its scabbard and withdrew a shield from his back. The armour, longsword, and shield all glowed unnaturally with the darkness I'd seen on the Intruder's Halberd and the Aristocrat. I realised that the shadowy powers that Red Rian and his corrupted cohort had

⁵⁶ I may or may not have found this out the hard way... Let's just say that the guy at food stall got kind of mad when I wanted to immediately refund eight of the ten sausages that he'd made for me.

used were just a poor imitation of the real thing, but then again, they'd been feasting on the corpse of a Forlorn, so perhaps that's why their control of the shadows was so poor and incomplete.

With a single step forward and his sword slamming against his shield, the Knight sent forth a shockwave that rattled the earth and made me lose my balance. Then, he immediately followed up this attack by charging straight at me, his mobility far greater than that of the Intruder.

I ducked under his strike and speared him through the chest with my katana, feeling a satisfying give of his metal cuirass when my blade cut through it. I continued moving past him, letting his own momentum tear free the blade, almost slicing him in half.

The Knight seemed unconcerned with this mortal wound however, and didn't even stop, instead just ploughing onwards, aiming for the Father. Meanwhile, the veil of shadow on his body hastily covered up the wound, keeping his body from wrenching itself apart. I turned on the heel of my boot and chased him down, until I managed to catch up to him and, using my Lacerate, sever the tendons of his left leg, causing his armoured body to collapse face first upon the earth, only a few metres from the unconscious priest.

He was trying to push himself up with his right arm, which held the shield, but I stepped on top of him before he could get up and jabbed my blade through his armour, into the nape of his neck. As my blade rested in his putrid flesh, I performed my Lacerate once again, rending the flesh and fully decapitating him. Unlike when I'd slain the Intruder, the shadow still clung to the Knight's body, and I didn't spare a second to see if the supposed reanimation would follow shortly after his apparent death. Instead, I ran to the Father, hoisted him on my shoulders and took off.

After a hard climb up the hill, the breath burning in my lungs and my vision going blurry, I looked back towards the burning church and the fallen Knight. The blood froze in my veins and a fist tightened around my heart, when I saw him carefully stumble upright, like some puppet pulled on its strings, its movements entirely unnatural. A loud crash sounded from the church as the roof caved in on itself, and flames exploded out the tall windows, the hole in the wall, and the great door, momentarily lighting up the courtyard with the power of a thousand suns. In the moment the light flashed brightest, I saw that the Knight had no shadow but the one on his body. I would've liked to say that I was unfazed by what I saw, that the oceans of blood I'd already witnessed and the many deaths I'd wrought had somehow endowed me with an unshakeable resolve. But, that wasn't the case...

I ran screaming down the side of the hill, trying my damndest to get as far away from the undying Knight as possible. My foot slipped on the way down and Father Adam flew from my grip as I tumbled through the grass. Panicking, I picked him up again and hurried up the next hill. I never once looked back, fearing what I'd see shambling towards me in the distance.

At some point we reached the road, though I honestly couldn't say how. I was breathing quickly, each breath a shallow wheeze, my legs wobbled like crazy, and my body was sore from the earlier fall. Without warning, a rider approached us on his horse. His face had a look of concern, which was fair, since we probably looked like a mess, plus the Father was still unconscious in my grip. I should've questioned the sheer coincidence of this encounter, but simply took it for granted. Not everything has to make perfect sense, least of all when you're running for your life.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I... need... your... horse..." I said between each laboured breath.

When he was about to protest, I drew my blade and pointed it at him.

“Now... please...”

He quickly dismounted, and even helped me carefully lift the old Father onto the back of the mare. I jumped onto the horse as well and, grabbing the reins with one hand, scrolled through my inventory and tossed the man a sack of twenty silvers. He looked at the coins in his hand with some befuddlement, likely thinking this was the weirdest robbery ever.

I kicked the sides of the horse and it took off. I couldn't remember ever having ridden a horse before, but it was like my body just took over. *Just like riding a bike*, I thought, not for the first time.⁵⁷

Halfway to the Village, Father Adam finally came too. He was sporting a solid purple bruise on the side of his head, and his old liver-spotted skin looked pale and weak.

“*The Catacombs*,” he said in a whisper. “We have to go to the Catacombs.”

I didn't question him, and simply asked, “Which direction?”

“North. Across the river and at the foot of the *Forlorn Castle* cliffside.”

I quickly changed directions and took the first road that led north, rather than south to the relative safety of the Village.

We were heading towards the castle, which meant I'd have to fight the King soon. I wondered if the *Forbidden Catacombs* would be the Stage before the King's, since I wouldn't be going into the castle yet, but rather, *under* it. I still had no idea why the catacombs were so important, since Father Adam hadn't explained it yet. But then again, I also hadn't asked. I figured it would all be revealed when we got there, so I just focused on the road ahead, as the mare galloped across the gravel and dirt.

An hour-or-so later, we crossed a partially-broken stone bridge that spanned the wide, rapid-flowing Riven. Ahead of us was still nothing but the hilly landscape, stretching far into the horizon.

Sometime later, we passed through a small village.⁵⁸ The houses had boarded-up doors and windows, and its streets were covered with old dried blood and the scattered remains of people who'd died many years before. It reminded me of Silt and the Farmstead in many uncomfortable ways.

That village was the first of four such settlements we passed.

Upon leaving the fourth behind, the Father spoke up for the first time since crossing the river. There was none of the rasp in his voice any longer, and his eyes were clear-blue and saw the world. He even seemed slightly younger.

“Twelve years ago, the first of the Forlorn appeared before us, wearing the guises of those long-thought-gone. They set upon the cities, towns, and villages north of the Riven, indiscriminately killing every living soul. All to feed some sick desire within them. It was like a Shadow of Death had stretched across the land, cast forth from the gates of the abandoned castle. A group of our Kingdom's bravest knights travelled to the castle, intent on finding the source of these Forlorn monstrosities. All but one of them perished in those halls, and the one survivor died shortly after of some sickness that turned his skin purple with rot. Before his death, he spoke in delirium of *The Forlorn King*. Nobody

⁵⁷ Granted, in this case, the horse was nothing like a bike, but you get my point.

⁵⁸ An actual village, not like the Forgotten Village, which, as I've already explained, was more of a town.

believed him of course, nobody but me, that is. You see, the Church has known about the Forlorn curse long before our lands became plagued by it.

“Once, long before our Kingdom’s downfall, a Prince found a blade on his expedition to some desert land far away. It imbued him with tremendous power, allowing him to defeat his foes and unite our warring Lords under one banner. But soon after, that power took control of his mind and those of his closest followers. They became Forlorn, and it shook our Kingdom to the verge of ruin, until a magician from those same desert lands came to our doors, holding a fragment of the sun. With his flame, the magician banished the shadows and killed the Forlorn Knights and their King. The cursed blade was hidden away in the deepest depths of the Royal Family’s tomb and the fragment of the sun with it.

“Fifty-two years ago, the last King was killed by his only son during a heated argument. It is said that the fiercely-loyal Royal Guard became so enraged with the Prince that they sealed him away in the Catacombs. Somehow, the Prince must have found the cursed blade, and turned his father’s Knights into his own, becoming the second Forlorn King.”

“Is that why we are going to the Catacombs?”

“Yes. With the key in your possession and the map in mine, we must locate the fragment of the sun and use its powers to seal away the cursed blade that rests in the hand of the Forlorn King. Only by the light of a *True Flame* can we banish the shadows.” I wasn’t sure how he knew I had the key, since I hadn’t mentioned it to him yet, but I just assumed he’d heard about the Tournament or something.

As if on cue, the tallest spire of a large castle crawled over the horizon. The closer we got, the more it became visible, until we were greeted with a full view of a stone castle, sitting proudly at the top of a great cliff. At the foot of the cliff, a cobblestone road snaked up the incline, lined with tall iron lanterns on either side and reaching all the way to the castle gates, where, even from this distance, I spotted a closed portcullis. The castle perimeter was lined with large stone walls, and its location at the edge of the cliff provided it with a natural defence that would’ve made sieging it a troublesome affair. However, if it was truly abandoned, and no soldiers patrolled its walls, it might be possible to simply waltz in there unannounced.

Five minutes later, we reached the tail of the cobblestone road, and before us lay the road towards the castle, but Father Adam pointed us left off the side of the cliff, to some downwards-sloping dirt path that looked too precarious to venture on horseback. We left the horse behind and took the descent one careful step at a time. Although the Father looked in far better shape than I’d ever seen him, he still hobbled like an old man.

The slope took us down to the edge of the cliffside and treated us to a harrowing footpath along a narrow trail with no guardrail and a bone-chilling view of a fifty-plus-metre straight drop to a coastline of jagged stones. Beyond the jagged coast was a vast expanse of deep-blue sea.

As we edged along the side of the cliff, the wind off the sea beating at us relentlessly, I realised we weren’t going in through the main entrance of the catacombs, but rather heading for some alternate route that would take us to the crypt’s deepest level. The true entrance to the catacombs most likely lay within the walls of the castle. But I didn’t question the old priest’s plan. There were a lot of things

he knew about this place, which I didn't, and I was sure that this was ultimately the safest route, although one misstep would lead to a long fall and face-full of sharp stones.

After sidling across an edge no wider than two handspans, our hands glued to the jagged rock wall for safety, we reached an opening into the cliffside. It was only a metre-and-a-half at its tallest, so both of us had to stoop low to enter through it. The inside was even narrower, forcing us onto our hands and knees, and we carefully crawled through a tunnel that became progressively darker the further in we went. Twice I scraped my hands on the dagger-sharp jagged stones, but it was all worth it when we reached a large cavern system, after crawling in the pitch-black for some minutes. Of course, it was still incredibly dark, but not so much that you couldn't sense your immediate surroundings. Father Adam continued on without pause, following some unseen path. I couldn't see him, as he was too far ahead of me, but I heard his scraping steps echoing through the darkness and tried my best to keep up.

The climb through the cavern was far easier than our trek along the cliffside footpath, but it was a slow progress and we spent several hours in the darkness before we reached our destination. By then, I'd consumed half the loaf of bread, both of the sausages, and almost the entire waterskin.

Up ahead of me, light shone out of the side of the cavern wall and, in the light, I saw the outline of bricks. It seemed like the Catacombs had been built into the cliff. The Father's silhouette was painted on the rock wall opposite the hole, his body illuminated by the light source within the man-made structure.

I followed him through the partially broken wall and we emerged into the dusty cobwebbed interior of the Catacombs, though our immediate surroundings didn't so much look like catacombs as they did a prison. If the Father's story was true, we were likely inside the patricidal Prince's cell. Upon crossing the threshold, a powerful-and-deep male Latin chanting filled the air, echoing off the far reaches of the tomb. The chanting voices lamented the dead, like some religious prayer. A few seconds later, a banner appeared, "*Now entering Emergent Stage 'The Forbidden Catacombs'.*"

At the opposite end of the tiny cell, a rusted-yet-sturdy cell door barred our way out. Beyond the metal bars was a large chamber with tombstones on the walls, the graves themselves seemingly carved into the stone. The middle of the chamber held a brazier atop a stone pedestal, a tiny brilliant flame yet flickering within it. I pulled the key from my inventory and approached the cell door, though quickly realised the lock wasn't engaged and pushed it open, producing a piercing metallic *screech* that reverberated through the stale air for what seemed like ages. Dust, dirt, and a plethora of insect husks covered the tiled floor of the tomb and lay thick enough that our first questing steps into the chamber left behind visible footprints. I scanned our surroundings, but no clues remained of the ones who had lit the brazier.

"It is but a fragment of a fragment," the Father mused, inspecting the brazier flame in the centre of the chamber. "What we seek is the Flame from which this piece was torn." Prompted by his own speech, he pulled a rolled-up parchment scroll from his robe. It was stained by his own sweat and sagged slightly in his hands, but he seemed capable of deciphering it nonetheless.

Without a word, he immediately approached one of the four walls in the chamber and began tapping the various carved bits around the stone face, clearly searching for some hidden mechanism. I walked around the room while the Father investigated the wall. The room was perhaps ten-by-ten metres in diameter, and the light from the small flame seemed to reach even the farthest nooks and

cracks. More disturbingly, the chamber had no entrance nor exit, at least if you didn't count the broken wall in the cell. I also failed to understand what purpose my hard-earned key served, when the cell door was already unlocked.

A sound of elation escaped Father Adam's lips, as part of the wall before him slid aside with the sound of stone scraping across stone. It looked like the rest in the chamber, but the two tombstones attached to the hidden door were fake. As I passed through the opening, I noted the names of on the fake tombstones, which weren't names at all, but rather a sentence written in Latin: "*The path you seek is before you.*" The dates beneath were marked with an X.

As we moved through the narrow opening, we came into a short tunnel and reached another fake wall that slid aside when Father Adam pulled on a handle recessed into its façade. Light flooded the claustrophobic tunnel and we emerged onto a narrow pathway in a long chamber. The path led straight across the room, but, as I joined the Priest, I saw that spikes covered the floor three metres below. The narrow path was no more than a handspan wide, so it seemed inevitable that I'd fall and each a face-full of spikes. What's more, as the Father took his first questing steps across the dust-covered stone walkway, the room seemed to come alive.

Hidden within the walls next to the many lanterns holding brilliant flames, a plethora of crossbow traps started letting loose their long-kept supply of bolts. Plinks and crashes came in a deafening cacophony as bolts slammed against the walls opposite their traps, but I quickly noticed there was a pattern to the madness.

Right wall fires, then left.

Given that the firing patterns overlapped so that no place was safe to stand, aside from the exits, it meant that we'd have to stutter-step our way across the room. If we mistimed our steps, we'd be turned into pincushions. We could potentially just wait for the traps to run out of bolts, but something told me that, given the nature of this Realm, there would be no end to them.

"Seriously? Traps?? Since when did this World become a puzzle-platformer??"

"Follow my lead," the Father just replied.

I didn't get the chance to respond, as he jumped straight ahead, just after a bolt passed in front of him. A second later and he moved forward again. I sighed, looking at the old man making his way across the walkway.

"Fuck..."

Woosh then *plink* said the bolt as it flew past me and into the wall opposite. I moved into its path immediately after, then waited for the next trap to fire before leaping ahead.

Aside from the Latin chanting in the background, the cacophony of the traps firing, and the many sounds of crashing bolts, you could also hear Adam and I's laborious breathing and exhausted grunts as we moved across the room. If it wasn't for the life-threatening aspect of the room, it would've been a great work out, since the whole body was involved: abs, knees, and arms for balance; feet, shoulders, and thighs for the strenuous traversal; and neck for constantly keeping track of the wall-mounted traps.

As I thought about such pointless things, I suddenly mistimed my rhythm and only barely avoided certain death as I flung out my blade to slap away the incoming bolt.

"Focus!" I heard Father Adam yell. He'd already made it to the exit.

"Shut up," I mumbled, then leapt forward again.

We were both breathing quickly when I caught up to him, and we spent a few minutes just letting our stamina replenish before pushing through the gate, next to which was a lever to disable the traps. Unlike the prison chamber, this door wasn't a fake tombstone, but rather a door made of simple iron bars like that of the prison cell. Similarly, it wasn't locked and pushed open with an ear-splitting *screech*.

The tunnel we went through next was slightly wider than the previous one and it curved around to our left, leading to another unlocked gate and a long room.

"Another trap?" I asked the Father.

"This one is trickier," he replied.

I'll take that as a yes then...

In order to explain the mechanism to me, he got down on his knees just before where the room started and put his hands on the floor. As his weight on the engraved stone increased, it started pivoting towards us, until eventually it was flipped ninety degrees and led to a drop into more spikes below.

"It would've been way easier to just go through the castle," I commented.

"Focus," he replied.

Since when was his this annoying?

After the large three-by-three-metre floor tile had returned to its normal state, the Father looked ready to go. I wasn't as confident as him though, and had to inspect the walls first to ensure there weren't more crossbow traps next to the many torches that lined it.

"You have to do it," he then said.

"You're shitting me..."

"There's another switch at the other end which disables the trap."

"Again, I have to ask why the hell we went in from this way..."

"Focus."

I sighed heavily, exhaling out my nose. Then I took a running start before sprinting across the first platform.

The tile only got to a twenty-degree tilt before I leapt off it and onto the next. As I landed on the second one however, it started tilting to the left. I sputtered a long string of profanities as I scrambled to the right to balance it out, and ended up in a 'forest-shitter' pose as I stood with my arms out and legs spread wide to keep the platform from tilting to either side. Slowly, I got my feet closer to the centre of the tile and then I tried walking across it.

Though it felt as uncertain as walking across a rope with no railing for support, I managed to reach the third platform. As I carefully put my weight on it, the second platform started tilting again so I jumped off it. Unlike the first two, this tile didn't move at all, which I concluded to mean that it would tilt forward as soon as I moved past its centre-point.

I took a deep breath, then ran from the edge to the centre, before leaping off and landing on the fourth tile without ever triggering the third. The fourth was like the second and I quickly found myself back in *that* awkward legs-spread-wide pose.

"Be careful!" the Father yelled belatedly.

"Yeah, no shit..." I grumbled to myself.

“The last platform—” he started, but I was already moving.

As I made to run across the fifth and final tile, it just simply fell away. I only managed to hang on to it by grasping the delicate edges of the surface engraving with the very tips of my fingers. Somehow, I was able to hold my entire bodyweight by just my fingertips, as though I was some seasoned free-climber.

Though it was gruelling, I was able to lift myself up the three-metre-long tile little-by-little. I wasn't sure where I got the strength from, though the idea of being impaled ass-first as well as the copious amounts of adrenaline surging through me were both strong contenders.

I crawled up and onto the ledge just before the gate and fell to my back, my chest heaving as I drew in the stale air of the chamber. My whole body was burning from exhaustion, but I knew that there'd be another room.

There's always three...

After giving myself ten minutes to come down from the adrenaline high and exhaustion, I got to my feet and pulled the heavy lever next to the gate. Several clicks sounded throughout the chamber, no doubt safety-pins getting into place under the platforms to prevent them from tilting. The fifth tile still remained down however, so, after Father Adam walked cautiously towards me, I had to catch him when he leapt from the fourth tile and over the fifth.

We moved through another bending tunnel, this one going to the right, and were greeted with another long hallway with a pit full of spikes. Spaced randomly throughout the floor were tall pillars. They were situated in such a way that you'd have to jump to get to the next. Further, each platform was barely half-a-metre in diameter, making landing on them a precarious ordeal.

“This is way too excessive for a single prisoner,” I told him.

“And yet he escaped,” the Priest countered.

I thought to the broken wall of the cell. “Your security is only as strong as its weakest link.”

While taking in this third challenge, I considered the path I wanted to take.

“You think you can do this one?” I asked him.

“I will be alright,” he replied. “But be careful of the pillars. They sink when you put your weight on them, so you have to be fast.”

“Of course they do...”

I'm SO done with this place already...

Although this was the third chamber, I made it through with the least effort of the three. The sinking pillars were slow enough that it wasn't necessary to fret too much about them, but I also simply leapt for them one foot at a time, kicking off with my left to land with my right, then kicking off with my right to land with my left, and so on. Though I hated myself for thinking it, it was actually kind of fun.

Father Adam imitated my movements in a way that I thought was way too spry for his old body, but then again, in the light of the brilliant-glowing torches, he seemed so very different from the liver-spotted frail monk I'd met in front of the Old Church several days before.

The lever in the third chamber caused the pillars to stop descending into the spikes as well as releasing a narrow walkway that followed the left wall. It almost seemed more dangerous to walk along the narrow path than jump from pillar to pillar.

From the exit of the third chamber, the following tunnel curved left and led up a wide-stepped staircase chiselled into the stone of the cliff.

We emerged at the top onto the landing of a great chamber that sat atop the three below. At the opposite end to our entrance was the exit. It seemed simple enough, but I knew it was misleading, though I couldn't figure out what the gimmick to this place was. Unlike the other rooms, the lights here came from braziers fixed into the ceiling.

Father Adam held out the map, studying it carefully. Then he looked to me. "Are you ready?"

"I guess," I replied, not knowing what was about to happen.

He took a step forward, and the whole tile he stepped on recessed into the floor, then, with a sound that made me think the whole place was falling apart, walls shot out of the floor, beginning near the exit and then coming our way like a wave of stone. Within ten seconds, we suddenly found ourselves staring down a narrow hallway. The whole room had become a maze.

Based on the size of the chambers below us, I guessed the entire chamber had to be something like twenty-by-twenty metres in size, though it was possibly more than that.

Without skipping a beat, the Old Priest moved forward and I had to scramble to keep up, lest I be left behind to wander alone and lost.

Our progress through the labyrinth was slow, as we had to stop every now-and-then to check the map, and I became increasingly worried about one of the Forlorn suddenly appearing in one of the halls, interred here on some eternal vigil.

"Don't worry," the Father said, reading me like an open book. "The Forlorn cannot venture down here."

"Because of the True Flame," I realised.

"Even the fragments that fill the braziers and torches on our path are sufficient to kill the Forlorn, though only the Flame itself can defeat their King."

This revelation did ease my mind a bit, though not entirely. I still failed to see how a flame could kill that which a blade could not.

Our careful journey through the many twists-and-turns of the maze was ultimately uneventful, and, after what felt like hours, we found ourselves in a hallway that led to the exit. But then I thought about something. I'd been tracking the turns and what-not, in case I had to make it out of here alone, and I knew we weren't facing the right direction.

"Where are we? This isn't the exit."

"Quite right. This is the stairwell to the True Flame and the Cursed Blade. The maze is the hub linking the prison and the chamber housing the blade."

"And the exit we saw?"

"That leads up into the castle proper."

We continued through this other exit down a long staircase very similar to the one that'd just recently led us up. However, it was much longer and seemed to go deeper into the cliff, below the prison cell and where we'd entered, as though reaching towards the underworld.⁵⁹

The torches set into the walls of the stairwell seemed brighter than the rest we'd seen and their intensity increased as we delved deeper, reaching a point where it felt as if I was getting sunburnt from being exposed to their light.

"We're close," the Father commented, bathing in the bright rays.

At the bottom of the long stairwell we emerged into a chamber much wider than the trap ones, as well as longer. Except for half a metre in front of the entrance and exit of the room, all the tiles on the floor had curly letters on them that'd been chiselled into the stone with incredible precision. Across the room was a stone door with a keyhole in the middle. It seemed that not only was the map and key necessary, but so was the knowledge to bypass the puzzle.

I studied the letters for a while, but the solution was lost on me.

However, without any hesitation, Father Adam walked across the tiles, following the letters that spelled out *Flammam Veritatis*.⁶⁰ After he reached the opposite side of the floor puzzle, I followed behind him, recounting the spelling ad nauseam within my mind, stepping back-and-forth across the floor in a snaking pattern.

I was quite sure it would be possible to jump across the puzzle, if I could get a running start and bound off the wall, but something told me that such a solution would be punished by the design of this World's Architect.

When I reached the opposite side of the floor puzzle, I realised that a different returning path spelled the same two words, and I was sure that should I try to retrace my original trail, spelling the words backwards, it would trigger whatever trap was hidden in the walls and floor.

The Father and I both studied the stone door keyhole for a moment. Part of me wondered if this was another potential trap, but I felt like the floor puzzle, the labyrinth, and the trap chambers were already enough to halt any would-be graverobbers.⁶¹

Father Adam didn't protest when I simply inserted the key in the lock and spun it thrice. A heavy *thud* sounded in the wall as whatever bolt that had fastened the door came undone. It took the both of us to pull the stone door open, and we were breathing quickly when we entered the small chamber beyond.

Floor to ceiling was no more than two metres, and the walls looked far denser than the rest of the catacombs, likely combining with the massive door to produce a lockbox of sorts, impenetrable without the key. How the key and map had ever escaped these trapped halls in the first place was something one might wonder, but we were both too enthralled by the flame trapped within an opened glass lantern, which stood against the wall, to wonder such questions out loud. The flame danced within its confines like an elemental fairy or lightning in a bottle, and the small room was warm like a summer's day and bright enough that too much exposure would turn you blind in minutes. Next to the bright flame lay sturdy-looking chains and an open metal coffin too narrow to fit a human, yet

⁵⁹ Or, more likely, the shoreline of jagged rocks below the cliff.

⁶⁰ Latin for "The Flame of Truth".

⁶¹ Also, the rule of three.

taller than me. *The Cursed Sword*, I thought. Whoever had locked the sword away down here had known the danger it posed, but, despite all their precautions, their efforts had been in vain.

The Father snapped me out of my stare as he shuffled across the room, with something akin to religious reverence, and carefully closed each of the four shutters on the side of the lantern holding the True Flame, hiding away the Flame so that only the lights of the puzzle room lit us from behind.

“You’ll need this,” Father Adam said, the catacombs map. There was some finality to his words.

I pocketed the parchment map. “Aren’t you coming with me?”

“No,” he replied soberly. To explain why, he lifted the heavy lantern off the floor, releasing the pressure on the tile it had stood on. Immediately the door behind us slammed shut, cutting off almost all of the light. I turned in panic, finding nothing but a wall, with a thin bright line across its length, the only source of light in the lockbox, but no keyhole.

Hefting the lantern, he moved it over towards the closed wall and sat it down. “Take it with you and shine its light upon the visage of the Forlorn King. Only then can you truly fight the evil that possesses him.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“I must stay here so that you may leave,” he replied and sat down on the tile, recessing it just like the lantern had done. With a loud scrape of stone-on-stone, the wall jumped open enough for me to put my hand through the crack. I quickly pushed open one side of the wall/door, fearing the Priest would accidentally release the pressure on the tile and crush my hands.

“I do have one last request,” the Father told me.

I looked at him expectantly.

“Would you mind returning to me the Book of Sermons?”

I’d left the last bit of food and drink I had with me, as well as the nondescript catacombs key, but by then the priest had already started reading from his book and suddenly looked as old as when I’d first met him. After a quick consultation with the map, I made my way out of the small room, then passed across the puzzle floor and into the adjacent chamber. I looked back once I was at the end of the chamber, but the wall was now closed again, with nothing but a keyhole in its façade.

The trek towards the true entrance of the catacombs was long despite the punishing pace I set myself. At one point I had to backtrack when I misread the directions on the map. It was hard not to get impatient when the going was so slow.

When I finally reached the end of the labyrinth I was covered in dust and cobwebs, and was so hungry that I could’ve eaten an entire horse by myself. I almost regretted leaving the remainder of my food with Father Adam. Almost.

I’d gone through about thirty different hallways in the maze and for some reason still remembered all the turns I had to take if I wanted to return to where the Father sat beyond the puzzle room.

As I climbed the many steps out of the tomb and into the darkness above, the background music changed from the ominous chant to a different kind of male choir, incorporating both light and deep tones, and with a clear guiding voice, which recited the chant and was accompanied by the other voices at various intervals. Word by drawn-out word, it told a tale which recounted the history of the Kingdom from its inception, and, I guessed, led to an eventual story about the current Forlorn King and the murder of his father.

At the top of the spiral staircase,⁶² I was greeted by a decently-sized entrance hall leading into an antechamber. Thankfully, the catacombs stairwell was inside the keep itself, which made things a lot easier. The keep entrance nearby had a great set of doors that likely led to a courtyard outside, and opposite the catacombs landing another set of stairs led to what I imagined were the upper floors, and from there to the spires and towers I'd seen from afar.

Like the tomb below, the air was stale, and dust lay thick on all visible surfaces. Every corner of the room had large, complex cobwebs crisscrossing back and forth, though I didn't spot a single living insect, neither prey nor eight-legged spinner. Some light fell through the two small windows on either side of the large door, though it wasn't much, since night had already crawled across the realm. Part of me was shocked that the Father and I had spent so much time underground, but another part of me had already known.

I took a deep breath, then exhaled slowly, trying to calm my beating heart. I wasn't sure if I was well-enough prepared nor if I truly had what it took to beat this guy. I mean, I didn't even know what I was going to be up against. I wondered if I had my skipping of the Hamlet Stage to thank for that...

I took my first careful step, and another, then another, etc., until I entered the antechamber. The small room had paintings lining the walls, though they were all either entirely faded to the point that you couldn't tell what they were supposed to depict or simply torn and broken. From the antechamber two doorways led to other smaller rooms, their purposes unknown to me, but I also wasn't interested in them as much as the open doorway in front of me, which led to a larger room, either a dining hall or throne room. Or possibly a mix of both.

As best as I could manage, I tiptoed into the room, which was incredibly dark, though some light did fall from high in the back, where tall narrow windows were set into the wall and let slivers of silver moonlight touch the floor. Six large pillars held up the vaulted ceiling and separated the floor before the throne from the elevated areas to the left and right, where once the Aristocracy might have watched the masses kneel before their King or where guests to a feast would have slouched along great long-tables. But now, the hall was empty, completely void of furniture or decoration. A few dark lanterns and braziers stood pushed up against the walls, as if cleared away to open up the floor, but not even a painting touched these walls. No chandeliers hung above. No tables and chairs awaited an audience. No royal-blue carpet led from the door to the throne. Nothing. Well, nothing except the throne itself. A massive slab of stone. A crude, almost barbaric, edifice of power.

Despite myself, I gasped when I saw it was occupied. In the dark, he blended in, and only a faint reflection off his dull plated armour gave away his figure, which sat rigidly atop the massive throne. I felt him watching me from beneath his crowned helmet, so I gave up my attempt at stealth and crossed the floor. I heard the plates shift as he tracked my approach across where a fine carpet might once have lain. Five metres from his seat, in which he still remained, I got on my knees and placed the heavy lantern before me, like some offering before the Ruler of this realm.

But he wasn't the King any longer. Not a true King, anyway. He only ruled shadow and death, and I was here to bring an end to his reign.

⁶² Which, I might add, took me seventeen minutes to climb in the darkness, since I couldn't really use the lantern without giving away my plan.

In one swift pull I drew the front shutter from the lantern and cast forth a beam that lit the entire darkness, so that one might think night had turned to day in an instant. The beam fell directly on the figure upon the throne and in the brief glimpse I saw, before I shut my eyes to the light, I took in everything. His face was emaciated, and the leathery, decaying skin was pulled taut across his skull. His eye sockets seemed hollow, but his eyes still remained, though were entirely black. The hair that fell from under the crowned helm and past his shoulders was wispy like that of a man long since passed. Of the three 'living' Forlorn I'd encountered, he was, sad to say, in the best condition. He hadn't fallen into decay entirely, his wicked power keeping a shred of life remaining within him, and his armour was still immaculate, albeit dull from lack of polish. The expression I saw on his face in that glimpse was one of surprise and bliss.

Just to make sure the light of the True Flame had actually killed him, I carefully opened my eyes to a squint. In that moment the figure rose from his seat, took one step towards me and fell to the floor, landing on one knee.

It hadn't worked. He was still alive. But as I thought these thoughts, I realised that the King no longer controlled the body. I saw it in the way the face became shrouded in shadow, and how the body struggled upright, as if tugged by strings from above. I quickly got up from my knees as well and drew my blade, but it was already too late. Darkness fully enveloped his armoured form, and he seemed to grow taller, becoming nearly twice my height. From his body shot forth a wave of shadow that shook the room and tossed me across the floor like a ragdoll, wrenching the katana from my hands and throwing the lantern against the wall where it smashed and set the True Flame free. It lit up the room with the power of the sun, casting long ominous shadows from the pillars.

"In you I hope to find a worthy husk, to replace the one you destroyed in that scorching Light," said an unnatural voice. It didn't come directly from the possessed body of the King, which was now entirely coated in a thick layer of darkness, instead it seemed to emanate from everywhere around me.

I let out a groan as I got to my feet again, now at the opposite end of the throne room and my discarded blade a few metres behind me. The True Flame hung in the air slightly further back, like some confused firefly cast astray in the night.

The chanting in the background halted entirely, and slowly, building in the silence, a new sound entered. It was an epic, booming, heart-pumping male-and-female choir, joined by trumpets and violins, singing words I couldn't grasp. A banner appeared before my eyes, *"Now entering Stage 'The Forlorn Shadow'."*

When I took up my sword, something came over the floating fireball behind me, and it swept across the hall, halting the advancing abyss-black figure as it danced between the pillars, and then charged straight for me. It collided with the edge of my blade and immediately infused it with a bright flame, which hovered just above its surface. I should've expected it, considering my blade couldn't slay a Forlorn by itself, but the True Flame could. And really, what was I thinking? That the final boss could simply be beaten by shining a light on him? In hindsight it was quite naïve.

"It could have been simple," the disembodied voice complained. ***"But have it your way!"***

In the light of my blade, I saw the shadowy figure pull a massive object from beside the throne. At first, I couldn't tell what it was, as it too was coated in shadows, but as the Forlorn Shadow approached to a chorus of scraping armour plates, I realised.

The Cursed Sword!

“Even the brightest flame can lose its way in the dark!” spoke the distorted, unnatural voice, and on cue the room became completely shrouded in darkness that even my sunlight blade couldn’t piece.

I could see no more than half-a-metre in front of me. With my sense of vision lost, I had to rely on auditory cues instead, and I waited with bated breath, as my ears tracked the advancing metallic sound. It was two separate noises coming from the same direction. One was the shifting metal plates, belonging to the King’s armour, and the other was like something dragging along the stone floor, a continuous screech that only became louder the closer it got. Then the second sound vanished, and I heard a *swoop* of something heavy passing through the air.

Instinctively I jumped backwards out of range, and, not a second later, I saw the pointed end of the massive sword slam down from above, followed by a loud *crash* and the flagstones cracking in half. A buffet of wind rushed past me, disturbing my hair and cape. Good thing I still had my intuition, otherwise it would’ve been my skull and not the floor that was split. Strangely enough, I was still fully in control of myself, my muscle memory somehow not triggering, despite the apparent danger I was in.

A small voice in the back of my head was telling me to get the hell out of here, right now. But I pushed it away, and when I heard the scraping of the sword along the floor again, I charged for it. I passed the dark form and swung wildly, momentarily letting panic guide my blade. Though it still connected. It was a shallow cut, but it produced an alien shriek from the Shadow.

“When the light vanishes, shadows reign!” the voice yelled, this time from behind me. I didn’t fall for it though. I could still hear the metallic sounds ahead.

“Your shadows are nothing!” I yelled back. “I’ve already killed three of your worthless minions!”⁶³

“I will make more. Lend your body to me, and together we shall rule these lands!”

“Never in a million years,” I whispered and charged at it again.

The Shadow might’ve anticipated my move, but its body and blade moved too slowly to do anything about it, and though the Cursed Sword cleft the air, I’d already ducked past it and performed my Lacerate along the Shadow’s side.

Another roar, this time more human.

“Enough games, submit to my will!”

I didn’t respond, and instead just stood my ground. I felt a pillar at my back, and more or less knew where I was. I realised why the demon was taunting me. It likely couldn’t pierce the darkness entirely, still locked away in the husk of its former vessel, and thus needed my voice to find me in the enormous room. Even the beacon of light in my hands seemed imperceptible to its clouded eyes.

I waited by the pillar until I had relocated it. Its body was shuffling around somewhere across the room, past the next set of pillars. A faint metallic sound was the only evidence of its passing.

When the flame had imbued my sword, a rush of new knowledge had followed. I’d learnt a skill, specifically for this fight and uniquely tied to my choice of weapon. I took one step forward, stepping down loud enough for the Shadow to hear me across the open space. I lifted my blade above my head, charging up the attack, my muscles storing up power like a spring being squeezed together, ready to

⁶³ Okay, technically the Aristocrat doesn’t count, since it wasn’t a proper part of this World, but rather Iberius’ plaything.

explode at any moment. When I was sure the Shadow was heading straight for me, I fired off the special attack.

My flaming sword carved the air as it slammed down in front of me, sending out a massive cleaving fire, and then slashing horizontally to follow-up the first line of fire with a second, so that they together formed a burning cross that roared as it shot through the dark. I tracked the light through the darkness, which seemed to part as it passed through, and, for an instant, I saw the lit-up figure of the King's shadowy husk, before my burning cross hit it square in its chest. An incredibly-bright explosion followed, which burnt away all the shadows shrouding the mighty hall. A warm breeze returned back to me, ruffling my cloak and hair like some playful hand.

I'd won.

Honestly, it was pretty anticlimactic...

I wondered if I got to keep the flame enchantment on my blade, since it still remained, even a full minute after I watched the last embers float away from the burnt-out corpse of the One they'd once called the Forlorn King. And strangely enough the music still remained, though somewhat subdued at the moment, but not entirely gone.

Then, a black monstrosity crawled from the ashen husk its vessel had become, like some monstrous insect moulting out of its carapace. It was disturbing to watch and made me deathly afraid, despite the overpowered weapon in my hand. Part of me wished the room would just become shrouded in darkness again so I wouldn't have to look at its malformed, disturbing appearance.⁶⁴

As fast as my feet could carry me, I ran in the opposite direction, seeking the comforting protection of my steadfast pillar, but that *thing* was faster. The most disturbing part was how silent it was. It was entirely shadow, after all.

I was seized around my stomach and waist by a crushing darkness, which hurled me across the room like one might toss a used towel. Unlike a towel, however, my body cracked as it collided with the solid throne.

I hit the top of the throne shoulder-first and my entire right arm dislocated itself, the shoulder bone torn apart as well. I almost passed out on the spot, but unfortunately the Shadow wasn't done playing 'Toss the Human', and I was pulled from the floor and cast towards the entrance, not too far from where I'd dropped my flaming sword. I didn't break anything as I landed, but I was already in enough pain as it was, so it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

Fuck, I thought. *This is it. This is how I die.*

I tried desperately to scroll through my inventory to grab a healing potion, but by the time I had it in my hand, the Shadow was back for more, and, when I took flight again, the flask fell from my grip and shattered where it landed.

After landing hard on the flagstones and sliding for a bit, I didn't try to heal but instead ran for my blade. I almost reached it too, but then a deformed black hand slapped me into the nearby pillar, cracking two ribs and punching all the air from my lungs. It didn't seem like I'd get to die easily.

⁶⁴ I suppose this is the point where I admit to celebrating too early. My bad...

Distantly, I wondered how much abuse you'd be able to take in this place before it affected you in the real world when you returned. When everyone finally escaped from this otherworldly prison, they'd have phantom pains, PTSD, and several other mental illnesses, of that I was sure.⁶⁵

Using my one good arm, I dragged myself across the floor, heaving for air as if I had forgotten how to breathe properly. Everything hurt. Whether I moved or not, my entire body was on fire with the pain from my shoulder and ribs, not to mention the million bruises I sported all over my body. The dark hadn't crept into the edges of my vision yet, but I was dangerously close to losing consciousness with every tug of my body across the dirty floor.

The Shadow hadn't grabbed me yet, as I slowly advanced towards my sword, but instead stooped over the burnt-out corpse, laughing maniacally to itself in *that* distorted-and-alien voice, perhaps mistaking the body for mine. Its malformed, abominable outline bulged further outwards and it was suddenly seized by a frenzy, lumbering over towards the throne which it pulled from the floor and slammed repeatedly into the ground, the quakes trembling across the room.

I managed to grasp the hilt of my blade and prop myself up against the pillar it lay next to. The familiar touch of my weapon filled me with the resolve I needed, and while the Forlorn Shadow raged about the room, crashing into the walls and pillars in some monstrous fit, I succeeded in drawing the remaining potion from my inventory and pulled the cork from the flask using my teeth. As the life-giving red liquid washed down my gullet, the air was pumped back into my lungs and the dizziness faded.

That being said though, it hurt like a bitch when my arm returned to its socket, and I involuntarily let out a cry, which echoed across the room and immediately snapped the Shadow out of its frenzy.

With amazing swiftness, the Shadow charged towards me, and I sent out a Quick Draw of my blade that, despite just being a desperate move to scare it away, hit it directly in what was possibly its face. The shadowy abomination had no substance, so there followed no satisfactory feedback as my burning edge passed through it, cleaving its body cleanly in two. The sword subsequently flew from my hand, my shoulder apparently not healed enough to immediately take the abuse I was putting it through.

But it didn't matter. This time I was sure I'd won. And no, I wasn't celebrating early. I saw the entire shadowy abomination dissipate in the air before me, the single burning strike enough to finally end it, and thank the Gods for that or I'd probably have been crushed to death or tossed around the throne room again until it grew bored and killed me properly.

As the epic melody faded into the eerie silence of the castle, I couldn't help but feel incredibly underwhelmed. I mean, where was my fanfare? My crowd of adoring villagers who I'd saved? My princess in the tower? Nowhere, of course, go figure... Though a small glowing wisp above the burnt-out husk of the King did promise some kind of reward.

As I made my way to it, I made sure to collect my trusty katana, which I had so rudely tossed across the floor. The True Flame had finally vanished from the flawless black edge, its task now fulfilled.

The item I found on the King's body was honestly really disappointing. It was a ring...

⁶⁵ Though one could hope the Watcher was a benevolent deity, who'd wipe everyone's bad memories as a reward for conquering his wicked trial.

'The King's Seal'

-Accessory-

Jewellery > Ring

"In the old days, this ring would pass from father to son with every new ascension to the throne. It was said that any King who wore this ring could always tell Right from Wrong. Now its splendour has been corrupted by a Shadow forlorn and any who wear it sees the world through the Shadow's wicked eyes."

Trait(s):

'Possessed'

'Shadow Eyes'

Equip

Discard

Weight: N/A

...Yep, just a ring. A lousy accessory. But then I looked at it properly as it sat there in my inventory. The tooltip showed a rusted gold ring with a clouded, grey gemstone. Along the rim of the socket holding the gem in place were faded, unreadable letters, and inside the gem itself was a blurry image of a dark apparition. The ring was weightless and had two traits attached to it, which surprised me, when I had at first simply assumed it to be a mere accessory that might be worth a small fortune to the right buyer, but nothing more.

And oh, how wrong I was. Looking at their trait descriptions, they read: *"The wearer will hear voices"* and *"The wearer gains the ability to see in the dark"*. It was pretty obvious whose voice I'd hear if I put it on, but, even then, I considered it a worthy trade for an ability as powerful as that of being able to see in the dark. Lastly, I read the flavour text at the bottom out loud to myself.

I immediately clicked *'Equip'* and heard *that* disturbing voice in my right ear, like the whisperings of a manipulative friend. ***"How splendidly it hides the Sun. Seek the blade,"*** it simply said and then vanished. The dark throne room was then washed over by a wave of grey and a flickering amber that set the outlines of all nearby surroundings aflame in its strange light. For some reason the Sight hadn't been available to the Shadow while it rested in the husk of the King, but I attributed that curious fact to the corruption of the King's eyes, which I'd noticed when I'd seen him in the lantern light.

While I admired my amber-and-grey surroundings, a soft *ping* sounded in my ear, like an electronic bee buzzing within my ear canal. Looking at my skill menu, I saw one new available point to upgrade. Because I think better when I'm seated, I planted my ass on the filthy floor, which in the

Sight of my new ring was unfortunately revealed to be far more disgusting than I could've ever imagined.⁶⁶

This time, I had three abilities available to choose from: '*Triple Lacerate*', '*Helm-Splitter*', and '*Ghost Blade*'. Triple Lacerate would add a third slash to the Lacerate ability, which seemed useless when compared to what the other two offered. The description of '*Helm-Splitter*' stated, "*With the katana raised above your head, slam the blade down hard enough to shatter armour and bone.*" As a new addition, the skill had traits, which stated that it was '*Unblockable*' and '*Impossible to deflect or parry*'. The third-and-last option was called '*Ghost Blade*' and had the same traits. The ability itself said, "*When used, the next normal katana strike will pass through any defence.*" I liked the sound of being able to bypass any defence, but ended up going with Helm-Splitter, since it seemed the most useful. If I'd had this ability when I'd fought Captain Tabian in the tournament, then he wouldn't have given me so much trouble. Granted, Ghost Blade would also have done the trick in that scenario, but I suppose that I just liked the idea of being able to break armour as opposed to bypassing it, not to mention the fact that my '*Passing Breeze*' already did bypass most types of armour I'd encountered, and so being able to break the armour, which I couldn't bypass with my blade, seemed the most logical option.

I couldn't stop myself from yawning when I left the throne room and passed through the chamber beyond. I had no idea how long I'd been in this castle, but I was eager to get back to the Village and tell Jakob about my exploits, possibly after getting a good night's sleep.

As I reached the landing to the catacombs below, I made a terrible discovery. The way was completely barred by fallen debris. It would seem that in the fight against the Forlorn Shadow, the ceiling in the tunnels below had collapsed. I could only hope that Father Adam had made it out alive, though deep down I knew there was no way he'd ever be able to leave the tomb he'd willingly been interred into. Even if I went back through the cavern by the cliffside ledge, I was sure I'd find the hidden entrance barred or destroyed as well.⁶⁷

I didn't mourn Father Adam, though I did feel bad for leaving him in that horrid tomb. I mean, I didn't actually know him, and he was *just* a figment of this world, but the distinction between fabricated and real was becoming so blurry that it was hard not to care.

A few minutes later, when I felt I was ready to leave, I pushed open the large door, emerging out into a courtyard dimly lit by the light of the silver moon and partially by my newfound Sight. The air was cold, though not to the point of freezing, but enough to be able to feel the wind chill my exposed face.

I placed a hand on my scabbard when I saw the figure standing some metres ahead of me, in the very centre of the large open space within the confines of the castle walls. *Strange*, I thought. I was pretty sure the King had been the last boss of this World, unless I was somehow mistaken. Though

⁶⁶ If what you are picturing is: fifty-or-more years of collected dust, animal droppings, old dried blood, and scattered body parts, with a side of smashed bone fragments; then you are on the right track.

⁶⁷ Sometimes there's nothing you can do. It's rough feeling so powerless, but within a fixed world such as this, things are decided in advance, like the threads of fate. At least when it comes to the lives of those fabricated beings that inhabit it. We humans transported here are the volatile elements that are supposed to make everything interesting and unpredictable.

something was also odd about the person in front of me: They didn't fit in. There was a certain recurring theme to all the enemies and allies of this World, and that slight discrepancy in the build, height, hair style, and clothes of the Stranger made it clear they were a player like me.

"What do you want?" I yelled. My voice echoed off the far walls and returned a second later, though the player didn't answer. Then I saw what they were holding. A sword. And not just any sword: *The Cursed Sword*.

When the person started walking towards me, I realised that they weren't interested in a chat. No. They were here to kill me and take my stuff. A Player-Killer, just like those I'd been warned about. Just like Kerebor...

I slid my right foot back to give myself better balance and placed my hand on the handle, ready to send out my strongest attack when they came close enough.

In the seconds that passed, I took in many details about the person, who, as they drew nearer, was lit up by the amber lights from my ring, which seemed to have a limited range of eight metres or so. First off, my assailant was a woman. Her hair was reddish-brown and similar in length to mine, though a lot thicker and wild, like an animal's. Her face was haunted, skin grey, eye sockets and cheeks hollowed as if from a lifetime of starvation. She wasn't exactly tall, though still taller than me, and I got the impression her character was meant to look Eastern European. The armour she wore was sparse, basically just a black leather jacket, black linen trousers, and darkened metal gauntlets and greaves. I wondered if the lack of armour was a compromise necessary to wield the hefty blade in her hands.

All black, just like me.

She dragged the massive blade behind her and the scraping noise it made across the hard earth reminded me of the throne room fight. Not only was she using the same weapon as the Forlorn King, but also the same stance. I distantly wondered if she too was possessed by the Shadow somehow, despite the fact that I'd already defeated it. It made me wish I still had the True Flame with me.

Then she stopped.

"Even the brightest flame can lose its way in the dark!" she yelled suddenly, her voice distorted like the Shadow's, but distinctly human.

On cue the night became pitch-black. Even my Sight afforded me no more than a metre of visibility. Immediately after, I heard a *whoosh* through the air and instinctively jumped backwards, as a massive blade slammed down towards me. But I wasn't fast enough. The sword point connected with my breastplate, scraping a thick groove down the cuirass just as I sprang out of the way. The force of the blow, albeit glancing, was enough to knock me back. I quickly turned the fall into a roll, got onto my knees and then charged ahead, my hands still glued to my scabbarded sword.

This bitch just ruined my beautiful armour. She is going to suffer for that!

I let loose a charged Quick Draw towards where the attack had come from. My blade passed through the air unchallenged and then something cold sliced open my left arm, followed by a *thump* as the heavy blade hammered into the ground.

I fell back, trying to figure out how badly hurt I was, but a rush of air forced me to change direction as the sword swung past me in a horizontal slash. She was way faster than the boss had been, and completely unpredictable, with no discernible patterns to exploit. I wasn't just fighting another

player; I was fighting someone experienced in fighting players. To say I was screwed was an understatement.

I didn't want to die like this, so I put on my best game face.

"Is that the best you've got!?" I taunted.

From behind came the tell-tale rush of air, and I moved out of the way, this time erring on the side of caution, since I now knew how ridiculous the reach of her sword was.

She was on me again before I even had time to prepare, but I managed to fall back unscathed. It seemed my taunt had fired her up, since she once more barely gave me a chance to recover, before attacking again.

Granted, she clearly still had the upper hand. I couldn't see her, but she could somehow see me, which made any attempt at counterattacking pointless. And it would only be a matter of time before all my dodging and sidestepping wore me out completely.

After her fourth attempt to cut me up failed, I realised the true reason behind her frantic onslaught. The veil of darkness was dissipating.

Just as the realisation struck me, I backed up into a solid obstacle. It might have been the outer wall or one of the structures in the courtyard, though I couldn't tell. It seemed my attacker wasn't stupid. She had deliberately corralled me into a corner.

Another *whoosh* sounded before me and I ducked sideways, just as the heavy blade passed by me and tore into the solid wall. I tried to move along the wall, while my she regained her composure, but not even a second later, a horizontal slash carved along the wall and I only barely managed to pass under it. Not letting an opportunity go to waste, I quickly got up and kicked off from the wall, while also casting forth a minimally charged Quick Draw. There followed a sharp clash of metal on metal, and although my strike had clearly been blocked, I was now behind her and I slashed my sword down vertically in a Helm-Splitter strike. But despite catching my opponent by surprise at first, my follow-up only struck the earth.

However, the reach of my amber lights was slowly growing. Her special attack, the cloud of pitch-black shadow, was now almost completely gone. This fight was about to become far more even.

I both saw and heard her next attack. It was an incredible spin, like a human tornado, using the sword as a weight to propel her body forwards, while simultaneously slashing all around her. The sound the blade made was incredibly loud, but she no doubt knew I could now see her, and thus was resorting to different tactics. It was a cool attack, likely one of the abilities tied to the greatsword she was wielding, but its telegraphing was too obvious, and I simply backed away, trying to position myself near the middle of the courtyard, where there was plenty of room to manoeuvre. But as I backed away, some unseen force pulled me off my feet and I fell on my ass. The wind she was generating with the spin had dragged me towards her!

Like a vulture spotting a feast, she lunged for me with a massive overhead slam, similar to the one that had messed up my armour. For a second, I lay there watching the amber lights play along her outline as she dove for me, but then I snapped out of it and quickly scrambled backwards, just as her blade slammed down between my legs. She twisted her grip on the short handle and drew the blade out of the ground in a forward slash, which carved through the earth and towards me. I kicked

off from the ground and turned the move into an impressive backflip⁶⁸, not wasting a second before sending forth a Quick Draw, followed by a Lacerate. She blocked my powerful first strike by planting her sword in the ground and twisting her body around it, like someone hiding behind a large shield. For the double-slash, she used her gauntlets to quickly block them.

This was bad. I was still outmatched, despite being able to see her.

Then an idea popped into my head. It was a *really* stupid idea. But I couldn't think of a better plan.

I dodged the next few attacks she sent at me, patiently waiting for the right opportunity. And then she performed her overhead slam again, and I knew it was time to strike.

Time slowed as I charged straight for her whilst that enormous blade cleaved down towards me, aiming right for my head. As I came within her reach, I saw the realisation in her eyes, but she didn't try to avoid my blade as I plunged it into her leather jacket and through her chest. Then her blade also hit home, though it settled painfully in my shoulder instead of my head, thanks to a small adjustment I made at the very last moment. If not for my armour, it would have taken my entire shoulder and arm with it. Granted, the pain was still enough to make me cry out.

My cuirass was now officially ruined. There was the large groove in front and now also rent metal in the neck and shoulder-guard. It wasn't a mortal wound I'd received, since only the blade up near the hilt had hit me. That said, I felt warmth spread from my shoulder and under my clothes, as a lot of blood travelled down my body. I also felt the uncomfortable sensation of a memory being ripped from me as darkness crept into the fringes of my vision.⁶⁹ She lost her grip on the sword and it fell over my shoulder, followed by a *thump* as it hit the ground behind me.

She took a step towards me, further spearing herself on my obsidian edge, which right now looked like a piece torn from the night sky, its bloodied edge mirroring the landscape of stars above. Her head fell on my good shoulder and her arms hung limply from her body. It almost seemed like the sword in her chest was the only thing keeping her upright.

Then she let out a brief laugh, followed by a cough. I knew she would die any moment now.

"*He* gave me the name *Mítvy*," she said, followed by more coughing. She strained her voice again, trying to say something important before her time was up. "In my home country..." Another horrible cough. "... that means..."

Maybe a minute passed before I realised that she was dead. I almost expected her to finish the sentence any moment, even though I knew.

"Your name was *Mítvy*," I whispered into her ear. Her body was still warm as it slumped against me. My arms were getting tired of holding up her lifeless body, but I persisted.

"In your home country that means..." I sniffled once. I couldn't help it. Tears streamed down my cheeks. "*Dead*. That's what it means..."

I couldn't really tell you why, but I ended up using my sword, and later my hands, to dig her a grave in the middle of the courtyard. The top layer of the earth was almost completely solid, but a few

⁶⁸ Sorry, that should read: "...*what I thought was an impressive backflip...*"

⁶⁹ Somehow I noticed it, despite the darkness that reigned all around me. It was like a different kind of 'dark', as though not *just* the absence of light, but the total domination of darkness.

centimetres down it was more like mulch. Half an hour later I laid her body to rest in the cold earth. It was a shallow grave, but I hadn't seen a single animal in this World outside of the Village and Gothershall, so I doubted she'd become food for scavengers.

Argh, again I was applying too much real-world logic to this realm. It was starting to become a bad habit. I doubted someone like Iberius was thorough enough in the design of this World to create a functional food-chain. After all, he had himself admitted to manufacturing whole characters just to have a specific kind of pastry to enjoy. Clearly his priorities were less about realism. It made me wonder if the following Worlds would be the same. I hoped not.

I turned back to where she had died and awaiting me were two separate floating wisps. One by the discarded cursed sword and the other directly above the large bloodstain Mrtvy had left behind. I went to the cursed sword first and looked at the tooltip before deciding whether or not to pick it up:

'Claw of the Forlorn Shadow'

-Melee Weapon-

Sword > One-handed > Greatsword

"Some say it was an argument that caused the Prince to kill his King, others say it was greed. Nobody knew that a shadow had wormed its way into his mind as he slept and set the wheels spinning. The Royal Guard interred the murderous Prince to a cell amongst his ancestors, but soon they found themselves compelled to set him free, as if guided by some unseen hand their bright fires could not dispel. With the help of his former captors, the Prince found his way to the blade that whispered to him at night and hummed a familiar tune in the deep silence amongst the dead. Pulled from the tomb lit by that bright flame, the slumbering being within the sword came to life and left its vessel for another. Unnatural darkness fell upon the new King's realm and those who did not abandon their towns, died in their homes as the Forlorn marched from the Keep they had once sworn to protect. The Forlorn King took one final seat in his throne and never again rose from his place. In the dark of his throne room, only the light of a True Flame could make him shed his Forlorn Shadow and let his soul rest alongside that of his dead father."

Trait(s):

'Heavy'

'Pact'

'Tainted Blade'

Equip
Discard

Weight: 6.3 kilos

Its weapon category sounded preposterous when I first read it, though that explained why the handle was so short and why its attacks were slow. Its weight was an immense 6.3 kilos, which made my assumption about her armour seem likely. If used by someone in metal armour, they would likely not have much leftover capacity to carry much in their inventory, nor have much in the way of stamina and movement speed.

The ‘Heavy’ Trait did exactly what I’d first guessed: “*Weighs more than normal greatswords and attacks slower.*” The second trait description was a bit of a surprise: “*The wielder has to enter into a pact in order to be able to use the weapon.*” But the biggest surprise came when I read the final trait’s description, which stated, “*Inflicts taint, causing wounds not easily healed.*” It was true though, my shoulder wound was still bleeding, and the pain had made me switch to using mainly my left hand while digging the grave. Even the reasonably-shallow cut on my left arm hadn’t congealed either. But I didn’t have any healing potions, so it wasn’t like it made a difference...

The item art showed the double-edged blade, the short handle, and a static swirl of darkness around the edge. And then there was the flavour text, which was quite extensive, and provided important insight into this World and its lore.

I was fairly sure this should’ve been my reward for defeating the Forlorn Shadow, as it specifically mentioned the True Flame, which was directly tied to the quest Father Adam had given me. Maybe only one player could wield it at a time, or perhaps it wasn’t a guaranteed reward. During my last talk with Jakob, he’d told me that he didn’t even know there was a special ‘quest-chain’ for the old monk, since no one talked about it in public. It kind of made me wonder what the normal boss fight would’ve been like, though, if I had to guess, it was most likely nowhere near as difficult, at least when compared to fighting the Forlorn Shadow itself.

After staring at the tooltip for a minute longer, I remembered the thing my possessed ring had said: “*Seek the blade.*”

Even though I knew I wouldn’t use the massive sword, I put a hand on its hilt, and my surroundings were immediately drowned in shadow as a disfigured apparition appeared opposite me, stooped over the blade as though a reflection of myself. An odd humming filled my ears, like a cup overflowing with wine, and I lost all awareness of the world around me. I looked up into its ‘face’ and it mirrored me.

“I knew you would not let this power pass you by.”

“How are you still alive? I killed you.”

“We live on the fringes of light and flourish in the dark. Even the Sun itself could not purge us all from this world.”

“Well, I don’t want your power.”

“A shame. We could have had so much fun together... you and I...”

Then the apparition vanished and so did the cursed sword, snatched from my hand by the shadows around it. Its disturbing voice still reverberated through the air as the shadowy veil faded and the humming quickly subsided.

“The blade was yours for the taking, senseless mortal. You would scoff at such immense power? What insolence,” the voice in the ring berated me.

“Shut up,” I replied. I knew honeysweet lies when I heard them. Wielding that blade would only have made me a slave.

Hopefully nobody else would figure out how to obtain the sword, or I’d have to come back and deal with them as well. There was clearly something perverted about the sword’s power, I mean, why else would Mrtvy have been trying to kill me?

I then remembered something that someone had told me: *“No one has cleared the Forlorn Castle in a long time.”* So that was what it was. She hadn’t just been targeting me, no, she’d probably killed dozens of players trying to clear this Stage, maybe even more than that. I wondered if she would’ve attacked me immediately, had I not entered the castle through the catacombs.

I realised all these hypothetical questions could never be answered, so I instead went over to the other floating wisp. As I held my hand inside it, a long list of Mrtvy’s items popped up. She’d had enough food to last three weeks, and also two ‘Potent Healing Potions’, although very little money. The idea of looting a dead player’s inventory irked me at first, but it wasn’t like anyone was going to miss these items. Mrtvy wouldn’t even be able remember that she’d lost them, so I might as well take the things that could help me progress.

After two-or-three minutes of looking through it all, I ended up only taking the two potions, her remaining thirty-seven silver, some bread, and a full waterskin.

I popped the cork off one of the flasks and downed the entire bright-red liquid inside it. As that familiar heat burnt away my pain and started knitting shut my wounds, I realised that the ‘Taint’ inflicted by Mrtvy’s attacks still affected my body, as only the shallow wound of my left arm healed completely. My shoulder wound had stopped bleeding, but hadn’t fully healed. Perhaps it would just take longer for the healing to do its work, otherwise I’d have to use the other healing potion to fix it, which I wasn’t keen on, considering it was the *Potent* type, which required Artisan-level Alchemy to make.

Hold on a minute.

The potion Kerebor had given me had also been a Potent one. It made sense that someone like him would have that high-level of an item, considering he was part of the Frontier, but how the hell had Mrtvy gotten her hands on these? Had she bought them? If so, weren’t they worth a fortune? I knew from my brief experience with the craft that levelling the Alchemy skill was *very* time-consuming, and I highly doubted it would be possible to reach Journeyman-level, let alone Artisan, in the first World. Just by a rough estimate, I knew I needed to craft over a hundred ‘*Weak Healing Potions*’ to level up to Journeyman, which would not only take an immense amount of time, but also cost a fortune in materials. Which meant: someone had to have given these potions to her or she was a player who had returned to this World after progressing through the later Worlds. Which also reminded me of her last words. She’d said *He* gave her the name ‘Mrtvy’. I didn’t like the idea of someone out there helping player-killers, but it wasn’t like I had any ideas on how to find or even

stop whoever was behind this. I just hoped that Mftvy was the exception and that I wouldn't encounter more PKers waiting at boss fights.

When I was completely sure I had everything I needed, I left the castle behind, going through a convenient hole in the courtyard wall that I hadn't spotted when I first arrived with Father Adam.

I took the snaking road down the slope carefully, as my entire body was incredible exhausted from going without sleep for so long. Meanwhile, the sun slowly poked its head up over the horizon.⁷⁰

By some minor miracle, my commandeered horse still grassed by the foot of the cliff where the Father and I had left it the previous day.

I crawled onto its back, grabbed the reigns, and kicked it in motion. Despite the constant jostling followed by every step of its hooves, I dozed off a few minutes later.

⁷⁰ Great time to show up... Not like I could've used the help of the sun to deal with that obnoxious shadow or anything...

Crimson.Rain

When I came to, I was crossing the great river on the road back to the Village. I was still pretty tired, but decided to stay awake until I made it all the way back to the tavern. It was comforting to know that the horse could find its way home, since it might as well have taken me to the middle of nowhere.⁷¹

I sipped from the waterskin and ate the bread I'd looted from Mrtvy. It wasn't exactly a sturdy breakfast, but it would make do for now.

Not far from the Village I came across a discarded set of armour. In my weary state it took me a second to realise that I'd seen it before. It belonged to the Forlorn Knight that had attacked the Old Church. It seemed that killing the Forlorn Shadow had also gotten rid of the Forlorn under its control. Unfortunately, the armour was just part of the scenery and didn't have a floating wisp above it. Which was a shame, since I was in need of a new cuirass now that mine was a complete mess.

As I emerged into the town, I noticed that the pain in my shoulder was entirely gone and, after carefully touching it, I knew that the wound was fully healed too, which was a relief.

Shortly after I passed the marketplace, a man came running, screaming, "Hey, you!"

I already knew why he was accosting me. I'd stolen his horse yesterday.⁷² He had somehow not encountered the Forlorn, but I simply chalked that down to lazy design on the part of Iberius, this World's Architect.

After an awkward exchange, I dismounted the mare, and gave him back the reins. The horse itself seemed completely indifferent to who rode it.

I went the short distance back to the tavern on foot. My legs were tired and sore, but I persevered. Soon I'd get to sleep in a nice, comfy bed.

The chime cheerfully announced my arrival as I passed through the tavern door.

Like some kind of *déjà vu*, every single patron turned at once to stare at me. Several audible gasps followed. I knew how this was going to play out, so I quickly ploughed through, tossing five silvers to the red-headed waitress and hurrying up the steps before a mob had time to form and block my way.

Only one person followed me up the steps. The sounds of their light footsteps followed closely behind me. When I reached the landing on the second floor, I turned to see if it was someone I knew, but as I beheld the effeminate man with a gaunt face, strong jawline, curly brown hair, and greenish-blue eyes, I didn't recognise them at all.

"Aiko," he started, "How was it? The Forlorn Castle? Was it tough?"

I moved away from him a few steps, getting closer to the door of my usual room, just in case he tried anything.

"How do you know my name?" I asked. "And how do you know what Stage I came from?? Are you with *her*!? Are you with Mrtvy!?"

⁷¹ Not much different than auto-pilot, I suppose.

⁷² Although to be fair, I *had* paid him...

The young man looked very taken aback by my words, but, as his confusion passed, I saw realisation roll over him. Then he sighed, looking to the floor with a sad smile.

“You forgot me... Ah, that’s cruel...” he muttered. “Two in one week...”

“You haven’t answered my questions. If you aren’t with *that* Player-Killer, then did you know me in my previous life or something? I’ve already had enough of people like that, so don’t waste my time.”

He put a hand on his chest. His fingers were very thin, almost skeletal. “I’m Jakob. We were friends. *Are* friends. You’ve just forgotten.”

“I don’t remember you.”

“Well, yeah, that’s how it works...”

“If there’s nothing else, then I’ll be going into my room. Don’t try to follow me!”

“Aiko, wait,” he pleaded. Despite myself, I stopped halfway through the doorway.

I looked at him expectantly.

“You said there was a player-killer? At the castle?”

“That’s right. She called herself Mrtvy.”

“You probably don’t remember this part either,” he explained, “but I warned you that something was happening to the people that went to the castle.”

I wracked my mind, seeing if I could recall such a thing. “I vaguely remember something about that. But I don’t remember you, at all...”

“That’s okay. I’m quite familiar with how this works. Unfortunately...” he replied, the latter part with a deep-reaching sadness to it.

Another victim of this cruel world, I mused.

“You should be able to recall events I was part of, even if you don’t remember me. Like how I gave you the money to buy your armour, or how we fought Red Rian during the Raid on the Village, or how you, me, and Patrik went to the Stage in Silt together.”

“How do you know Patrik?” I replied. “I remember going to Silt with him, but I did the Raid on my own and bought this armour with *my own* money. How do you even know such things about me??”

I saw him grit his teeth, looking as though he was about to snap at me, but then he seemed to swallow down his temperament and looked me in the eyes with a series stare. “Patrik is *my* friend. I introduced you to him! Seriously, Aiko, you can’t be so stubborn to believe I would know all these things about you without a reason. Clearly I know these things, because I *know* you!”

I returned his gaze. “You may be right or you may be trying to deceive me. I have certainly met plenty of horrible people already, and one of them tried *that same* trick on me. So forgive me if I’m being suspicious, but please just leave me alone. If I really did know you, then the memory will return to me, but until then just stop pestering me about things I can’t remember.”

With a *slam*, I shut the door to my room behind me. I felt very confused and the events of the last day were still weighing heavy on me. I did recall the feeling of losing a memory to the edge of Mrtvy’s sword, but had I really forgotten a close friend of mine? Or maybe I’d just forgotten

something stupid⁷³ and this ‘Jakob’ character was trying to do what Kerebor had attempted, right after I awoke in the fields outside the Village.

This place is hell and toying with memories can make anyone seem evil, even when they are not. How on earth am I supposed to make sense of all this??

Eventually I gave up trying to forcefully recover *whatever* I’d lost and ended up relaxing with a bath, using the opportunity to make sure my wounds were completely healed. To my dismay, the shoulder wound had left a thin dark scar. It made me worry that I’d end up covered in a spiderweb of scars by the time I caught up to the Frontier. There was of course the possibility that the scar was the result of the cursed sword and not because of the wound I’d sustained. Either way, I resolved myself to avoid intentionally receiving a blow from a cursed sword in the future.

Against my better judgement, I decided to once more postpone sleep, and after putting on my townwear and storing my armour and cloak in my inventory, I slipped out the window, hoping the young man wouldn’t try to follow me.

Hopefully Kerebor also learnt his lesson... I prayed. If Iberius was to be believed, he might still be splashing about in Silt Lake on a piece of barely-buoyant driftwood.

I carefully scaled down the side of the tavern wall, and somehow managed to avoid being spotted by the few people in the street, as well as the now-crowded tavern.

I held my breath as I emerged into the busy marketplace, but once more discovered that without my black attire and cloak, no one knew who I was. Here, amongst the thousands of thronging adventurers, pretenders, and layabouts, I was just another forgetful face in the crowd.

Upon entering the Armourer’s shop, *that* overpowering smell of leather and oil hit me like a brick, and, just like the day when I’d bought my armour, the shop was completely empty.

“Welcome back,” the Armourer announced in a gruffy voice. “What can I do for ye today?”

I pulled the destroyed cuirass from my inventory and set it down on the wooden counter with a heavy *clunk*.

“I need something better than *this*,” I explained plainly.

The armourer looked offended for moment, but then disappeared into the back. After a few minutes he returned, holding a cuirass in each hand, his thick calloused fingers locked in a tight grip on the one in his right hand. He placed them both before me with a grunt of effort, and I spent a moment looking over the two options he’d brought out. The one on the left was far too heavy, but the one on the right was somehow lighter than my ruined cuirass, and it was black, which immediately made me want it. But I wasn’t stupid. He was going to ask three-or-four times the amount I’d paid for the first one, and if it wasn’t actually capable of stopping a heavy blade, then I’d just be wasting my money.

I tapped the lightweight black cuirass with a finger. It sounded pretty solid.

“Will *this* stop an attack from a two-handed weapon?”

“You bet.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

⁷³ Considering that the first memory I lost was that of my own name, it seemed quite possible. Maybe the memory I’d lost now was of my great-grandmother’s special onigiri recipe or something silly like that.

“If it doesn’t, and you survive, I’ll pay you back twice its cost.”

Hmm, that wasn’t actually a bad deal. “I’ll take it.”

“That’ll be six gold and twenty-five silver, *if* you let me have your ruined one.”

I choked for a second, but quickly regained my composure. That was more money than I was comfortable spending right now, but all the money I had on me would disappear if I died anyway, so it was no use being stingy. I needed it.

“Okay, you have yourself a deal.”

The coins felt incredible heavy as I placed them on the counter. It was kind of difficult to trust the Armourer’s words, considering the broad grin on his face, but before I could change my mind, he’d pocketed the money.

I grabbed my new ‘*Blacksteel Cuirass*’ and stored it in my inventory. While it was lighter than the old one, it wasn’t light enough to change my available stamina nor my movement speed, as it put my total weight at 6.35 kgs.

With a sudden urge to make back the money I’d just spent, I went to the library-turned-barracks and sought out the Captain.

When I explained to him that I’d defeated the Forlorn King and the Shadow that controlled him, he looked surprised, as if he couldn’t believe what I was saying. But then some realisation dawned on him and he told me that a Forlorn had been spotted outside the Village suddenly collapsing and turning to dust, leaving nothing but its armour behind. The smile on his face was itself almost worth all the trouble I’d gone through. Almost... He looked seriously pleased.⁷⁴

He went on to spread the good news to his men, and soon the former library was brimming with cheering guards. Apparently, they owed me ‘eternal gratitude’, but didn’t actually cough up any tangible reward for my heroic deeds.⁷⁵

An hour later, when I left what had turned into an impromptu party, somewhat tipsy from drinking a bit too much beer, the Captain stopped me by the door and asked if I’d managed to find the Royal Family’s signet. He said he’d personally pay a handsome fee for its safe return, and for a minute I debated against giving him the ring or not. But, I ended up deciding to keep it, telling him that I’d unfortunately not seen such an item.

I returned to the tavern in my inebriated state, bustling my way through the crowded taproom, skimmed-over by the many eyes that were glued to anyone who entered, in anticipation of a glimpse of someone whose appearance they didn’t even know...⁷⁶

When I got to my room, my face found the soft pillow, and I passed out on the spot.

The following day, I left the Forgotten Village through its southwestern gate and, ten minutes later, found a worn wooden sign planted along the south-going road. According to the Captain, I should wait by the sign for a carriage that could transport me to a faraway region, which was plagued by internal struggle and whose leaders were hiring foreign mercenaries to aid in their conflict.

⁷⁴ I suppose it was kind of like if you were told you had a serious illness that would kill you a week from now, but then on the 7th day the doctors suddenly discovered that you’d been miraculously cured.

⁷⁵ Go figure...

⁷⁶ I.e. *Moi*.

Apparently, three separate factions were vying for the control of an ancient city and it was said that so many warriors had died that their blood flowed like rivers and even the rain had turned crimson.

It seemed this was the only option forward, which, along with everything I'd learn the last few days, confirmed my guess that this trial was designed to be progressed through linearly, though I couldn't rule out the possibility of skipping ahead through some secret means.⁷⁷ I decided to just take everything in stride and not lose my head trying to predict all the possibilities. All that mattered was that I didn't stop progressing, so that I could leave this fabricated reality behind, and once again see the real world and remember all the things I'd forgotten.

A-minute-or-two later, I saw a carriage on the horizon, approaching with frantic speed. As it came nearer, I noticed that it was pulled by two emaciated and panicked horses, its carriage consisting of rotting wood and rusted metal, and its driver cloaked in a dark-grey shawl, which covered his hair, nose, and mouth, and also draped over the rest of his hunched body, obscuring it from sight.

The carriage came to an instant halt in front of me and the door creaked open on its own. With some hesitation, I entered and sat down on the spotted-and-torn cushions inside. The door slammed shut immediately after and the ramshackle horse-drawn death-trap took off immediately. I shuddered as part of the ceiling shook itself loose and fell down onto my head.⁷⁸

Through the holed curtains covering the window in the door, I watched the world pass by rapidly and then the strangest thing happened:

The light of the sun grew brighter and then darkened an instant later, like watching the day pass by in less than a second. This weird phenomenon repeated again-and-again, rapidly speeding up, until it became a pulsing strobe-light of night and day. The rush of the carriage pulled me into my seat and it felt like the air was ripped from my lungs, as though I was suddenly in freefall.

I looked around the carriage as it was lit by a rainbow of colours, then covered in darkness, then lit-up, over-and-over. My eyes started swimming and I blinked, for just an instant, and—

“Now leaving World ‘The Forlorn Kingdom’.”

In the void that swallowed me, a voice, which I immediately recognised, addressed me with its warbling, mind-addling, and melodic tones.

I have watched you and you have done well. As promised, here is your reward:

My mom handed me a stack of printed-out papers. They were still warm and smelled toasty. Without asking what they were, I looked at them.

After glancing over the first page, I felt agitation take me and I quickly leafed through the rest, before looking up at her in outrage.

“Why are you doing this!?”

⁷⁷ Especially not after Iberius revealing to me that it was possible to ‘bypass’ a Stage.

⁷⁸ What I mean by “shuddered”, is that my whole body spasmed with repulsion and dread. I then proceeded to ruffle the ever-living crap out of my hair, trying to remove it. You know, just like any normal person mortified by bugs.

“As you can see, we found a small apartment for you near the school. It is just a short walk from Enmachi Station. This way you won’t need to commute so far every day. Now, go pack your bags, I have scheduled for the taxi to be here in about twenty minutes.”

Knowing her, the bags would already be in my room. She liked to keep everything neat and prim.

“What did I do!? Why are you kicking me out!?”

“You know why!” she exclaimed, then immediately calmed herself. Like a fucking robot switching between moods to fit the situation.

I was crying by this point, grasping onto her ironed, blue dress, but, like the housewife-dictator she was, this had no effect on her. She didn’t even blink as she grabbed my wrists and pushed me off of her.

The brief, but rough, grip on my bandaged wrists flared up the pain that’d been barely-noticeable for weeks. Or maybe it was just the situation that did it. After all, those wounds were as much emotional as they were physical.

“Just tell me what I did!”

A great puff of air came out of her nostrils in the heavy sigh that followed. It felt like I was watching her try to convince herself not to slap me.

“We cannot handle this anymore, Aiko. It’s too much. Your poor father has gone down with stress because of it. You know that!”

“We? WE?? What about me!? What about how I feel?? Have you ever once thought about how I feel?? Dad is too weak to tell you this, but you’re a psychotic OCD maniac who cares more about her fucking vacuum cleaner than her own family!” I wanted to scream back at her, but I didn’t. Of course I didn’t. I never actually told her how I really felt. Instead, I slumped my shoulders and said, “I’ll go pack.”

The apartment they’d bought me was four decades past its prime, with its only luxury item being the beeping-and-singing toilet. It had three rooms: the bathroom with the aforementioned toilet; a closet that narrowly fit my bed; and the living room that held a kotatsu twice my age, which saw much use during winters, not to mention a kitchen with a sink, a hot-plate, and a mini fridge. It was a shithole compared to my parents’ suburban two-storey, but at least it was close to a 7/11, and the neighbours, all elderly and half-senile, were nice and welcoming.

The first few nights in that cold and unknown place, I cried myself to sleep, cursing the unfair life I’d been given and my own impotence to change it into something better.

I opened my eyes and found a completely different environment surrounding me. I was no longer sitting in the carriage, but instead stood in the middle of a wide dirt path, surrounded on all sides by a vast forest. The soft earth only had my footprints marking my journey, which was strange, considering I didn’t remember walking here.

The trees around me were a cascade of colours, as if a giant had vomited forth a rainbow and the colours stuck to the trees, flowers, and land. The flora before me were in full bloom, ignorant to the seasons and the natural order of such things. I saw spring-time cherry-blossom trees in white, pink, and red. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and white flowers and bushes were everywhere.

Amid these were also orange and white autumn-blooming Osmanthus trees, which filled the air with an overpoweringly-sweet apricot aroma. There were many more plants beyond these, but my knowledge of such things was limited, so I could only name a few. One thing I did notice though, was that the majority of plants were ones I'd seen enough of for them to be innately familiar to me, almost nostalgic.

I decided to continue walking along the road which ventured further into the colourful forest. The air above me, as I walked along the trail, was clear of any foliage, as if the trees did not dare to block the sky above the road.

Five minutes into my journey I felt a drop of rain on my head, but I didn't stray from the road, even though the trees would offer me shelter from the light shower that slowly formed. Something about the unnatural appearance of the flora made me hesitant to even near them.

The rain peacefully continued to fall down upon my armour, the soft earth, and the trees, filling the air with a chorus of *pitter-patter* sounds.

I felt rather light-headed and confused. The trip in the carriage had done *something* to me beyond just transporting me to this strange place. I had the feeling that I was forgetting something important.

About ten minutes later my hair was thoroughly soaked. Rain continually formed on my armour and accumulated into bigger droplets, before falling down on the ground to join the red puddles on the now clay-like dirt all around me.

I watched a crimson bead of water trail down my dark cuirass. Saw the drops dripping from my hair. Felt the tickling sensation of them rolling down my face to gather on the edge of my chin and fall away.

Red.

The rain was red like blood, like a cut in the clouds above was spewing forth a crimson flood.

A few more steps and the forest opened up. The wide road I'd followed dipped down and away out of sight. I reached the edge of the trees and saw the landscape beyond. From my vantage point on the raised hill where the forest ended, I beheld the red fields in the distance, the mountains bordering the horizon, and the large city they seemed to encompass.

Amidst the endless red rain, a flute song cut through the air in a sombre tone, like that belonging to a *Shakuhachi*.

A banner appeared before my eyes and I suddenly realised what I was doing and where I was. The floating text stated, "*Now entering World 'The Fields of Red'.*"

A new World. It took me a second to remember what that meant...

I wasn't on earth any longer, no, I was in another world. A realm beyond earth, controlled by some kind of Watcher deity.

Of course...

It was so obvious now that I thought about it.

How could I even forget??

I hoped this wouldn't be a recurring thing every time I progressed to a new World. I mean, there was a possibility I might not be able to recall what I was doing and end up becoming like the Forsaken, who no longer remembered their goals or lives before entering this cursed hellscape.

More memories rocked through me, as I recalled what I'd lost during my fight with Mrtvy. On top of those memories came the 'reward' I'd obtained for beating the first World.

I fell to my knees in the mud, tears rolling down my cheeks.

"I'm so sorry, Jakob," I whispered to the rain. I wanted to run back the way I'd come and somehow return to him so that I could apologise, but a cowardly part of me also knew that I wouldn't do it, as though admitting fault was something that could hurt me.

Besides, even if I did have the integrity to do it, how would I even go about returning to the Forlorn Kingdom??

With cold-hearted practicality, I discarded the heartache that I felt for having ever doubted my friend and considered my 'reward'.

Thanks to the memory I'd received from the Watcher, I knew a bit more about myself now. I remembered *that* moment so vividly.

My mom had kicked me out at the age of fifteen, six months into my first high school year. I couldn't remember why I had those bandages on my arms, nor what had led to my mom being so upset. I did, however, perfectly recall my childhood house in Kyōto's richer suburbs, and I definitely recalled *that* old apartment they'd gotten me. Six miserable years I'd lived there, as I went through high school and university. It had never once felt like home.

I knew why this specific memory had been returned to me. I looked to the sky as the rain drops fell down my face and screamed at the Watcher who no doubt found amusement in my torment.

The reason that *this* memory was the one chosen, out of all the ones I sought returned, was because I had wanted to be reunited with my family. I now knew that my family had never given a shit about me. The Watcher was using my memory against me to try and kill my resolve. But it wasn't going to work.

"Watch me, you fucker, I'll tear through all the challenges you put before me!"

I sat in the mud for a while, contemplating my newfound memories, when a new kind of notification, a *booong!*, sounded in my ear. As I pulled up my menus with the special gesture, I saw that an exclamation mark sat next to my 'Skills & Weapon Progression'.

When I opened it, I saw that a new tab had appeared in the top, next to 'Weapons' and 'Crafting'. It was called 'Watcher's Rewards'. I braced myself for the worst as I opened it, but found that there was just a single entry: '血鴉'⁷⁹. I looked at its description.

You're kidding me... this Watcher is a sick bastard.

It was a unique ability ostensibly tied to my moniker 'Raven-Black', which read: "A raven of blood emerges from your wrist and lunges at a designated target, stunning them for five seconds."

Additionally, there was a star icon, similar to the traits on my katana and ring, as well as the Helm-Splitter ability. It read as follows: "This ability requires a memory to be sacrificed. After using this ability, thirteen days are needed to recharge it and all other Watcher-granted abilities."

Why on earth would I ever use such an ability?? The Watcher is just screwing with me...

⁷⁹ Pronounced "Chi-garasu" or "Chi-karasu", meaning "Blood Raven" in Japanese. The same symbols are also used to mean the same in Chinese, but the pronunciation would be different. Given that it seemed tailored in my image as 'Raven-Black' and the fact that I was Japanese, I assumed it was a specific ability unique to just me.

After I eventually got up from the mud and made my way forward, down the hill, I quickly saw a masked man slowly making his way up towards me. My eyes fell upon the blade at his waist, and from here I could tell by its shape and width that it was a Chinese *Dao*. Although why I even knew such a thing was strange. Perhaps it was because of deep-seated knowledge from my real life, or maybe it was knowledge the Watcher had imbued me with for some important insight.

He stopped short a few metres from me when he'd reached the peak of the hill. From behind his wooden mask, I could feel his eyes watching me, likely assessing how much of a threat I was to him, but then he seemed to reach some kind of conclusion.

「ようこそ禍根市へ。我は笑う剣士の二郎で御座る。」 he said.⁸⁰ It took me a second to realise he was speaking a language different from the previous World's, and then it was like something clicked and I instantly knew what he'd said. This was a bizarre feeling, because he'd spoken in Japanese, which I should've known.⁸¹ But it was as if my brain couldn't comprehend the meaning until it'd adjusted or something. I wondered if this was a side-effect of the 'knowledge injection' employed by this realm, because it was, in a way, similar to the weapon skills and how despite knowing what a move looked like, you couldn't perform it accurately until you acquired the skill.

When I replied, "I'm Aiko, a traveller from the Forlorn Kingdom," it was entirely in Japanese,⁸² my mother tongue, but the dialect and words I used so naturally, were ones completely outdated by modern standards, or at least from what I could remember using in the past.

Jirō bowed shallowly, performing a flourish of his crimson and black cloak, which seemed more reminiscent of European Aristocratic custom than Japanese tradition. Judging by the style of his clothes and weapon, it was clear that he'd been inspired by foreign cultures. He wore a sleeveless, thick-threaded dark-green vest with peaked shoulders; a white British-styled shirt underneath; as well as oddly-baggy black pants, possibly Chinese or Indian; and shiny steel greaves and boots of the finest Medieval Italian craftsmanship. There wasn't much of a theme going on and it was hard to believe that he'd intentionally chosen to wear such a random outfit. His expressionless⁸³ light-brown wooden mask with its circular eye-holes was unfamiliar to me, and I didn't get the impression that it was inspired by any culture, but rather just something crudely made by his own hands. Attached to the mask was a thick 'wig' made with long strands of white fabric that'd somehow not been discoloured by the red rain, and which draped over his head and fell down his back, giving him an uncanny semblance with the *Oni* and *Yokai* depictions from Japanese folklore. Normally, *Oni* and *Yokai* masks tended to be smiling, and, considering he'd introduced himself as "*the Laughing Swordsman*", I found the absence on his mask somewhat perplexing.

"Do follow me, if it pleases you," he said. His voice was muffled behind the mask, and it sounded strange. I couldn't tell if he was Japanese or not, and the way he pronounced certain words made me think that he was speaking through clenched teeth.

⁸⁰ "Welcome to *Kakon-shi*. I am Jirō, the *Laughing Swordsman*."

⁸¹ Granted, it was spoken in a generic kind of Samurai-age way, the kind so often depicted in old movies and anime.

⁸² For the sake of story-telling, I'll do you the favour of keeping the narration in the same language. Yes, yes, I know. You're welcome.

⁸³ Okay, so it wasn't expressionless, but more like (: - |) which wasn't exactly much of an expression...

Despite my apprehensions about the Masked Man,⁸⁴ I followed him back the way he'd come, down the hill and towards the city. *Kakon-shi*, he'd called it. Unless I was misunderstanding the words, the meaning of the name was something along the lines of, "*The City which is the Root of Evil.*"

Why couldn't it just be something nice for once? I was starting to get the feeling that "*Happy Fun Land*" would not be an available World in this game...

"Now entering Safe Zone 'Kakon-shi'."

⁸⁴ It's like the 2nd thing your parents teach you: 1 – don't accept candy from strangers in a van; 2 – don't follow weird masked men; 3 – always look both ways before crossing the street; etc...