

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 flittering 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 to 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-
Knife > Dual-Wielded > Dagger

"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 swallows, 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, splattering 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 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 a 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.”

Jakob 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 he 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 ranged 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.

‘Blacksteel Cuirass’

-Armour-

Armour > Torso

Armour Type: Medium

“A simple cuirass made from the lightweight and strong Blacksteel alloy. The Blacksmith bought this second-hand from a travelling merchant from the Black Mountain.”

Equip

Discard

Weight: 1.6 kilos

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

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.

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. 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

⁷⁵ Go figure...

⁷⁶ I.e. *Moi*.

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.

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!?”

“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 Mítvy. 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 *boooong!*, 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...

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

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.

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.

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.

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 realm...

"Now entering Safe Zone 'Kakon-shi'."

⁸³ Okay, so it wasn't expressionless, but more like (: - |) which wasn't exactly much of an expression...

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...

Allegiance

The part of Kakon-shi that my Guide led me through were little more than a collection of shacks and small wooden houses. The people who lived in them and milled about the area were dark around the eyes, listless, and impoverished. Their clothes were scarce and worn thin, their bodies malnourished and frail. One thing that struck me immediately was the lack of children. It wasn't that there were only a few children, no, there were none whatsoever. The Forlorn Kingdom had had a lot of children running about in the Village, so it was notable to say the least.

We passed beyond the eastern Slums and entered into the Marketplace with rows of stalls full of merchants and craftsmen, and the smell of food in the air. The people here were far healthier, but still had *that* strange darkness in their eyes. It was then that I remembered where I'd seen eyes like that before. The memory of my would-be killer, Mrtvy, her eyes brimming with darkness, like deep wells full of all the worst things imaginable. Eyes like those came from experience, and not the pleasant kind. I recalled the Captain's tale of a land torn apart by a bloody struggle. In such struggles it is always the ordinary people who suffer the most, despite just trying to live their lives in peace.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked the Masked Man, after we'd passed through the Marketplace and entered into the Residential District, which was a few steps above the Slum in terms of quality, but still far from luxurious. The houses here were also made from wood like those in the Slum, but their construction had been done in a proper manner, and several of them had their own cute little gardens. The streets were, however, completely deserted, which I found to be more than just a bit unsettling.

"I am bringing you to my employer," he said, without breaking stride or turning to look at me.

I wondered who his employer was, but didn't bother asking.

I will find out soon enough.

Among the many houses in the Residential District were occasional shops and local restaurants, which, unlike the makeshift stalls in the Marketplace, had permanent residence here. One of such shops was an antique dollmaker's, which we stopped in front of, though I wasn't sure why.⁸⁵

Without explanation, Jirō slid open the door and entered. When it became obvious that this was our destination, I quickly followed suit, though more than just a little bit confused.

The inside of the store was fairly disturbing to behold. Rows of shelves on the walls, as well as tables lined around the room, displayed an uncountable number of dolls in many different shapes and sizes. A few even hung from the ceiling, like meat in a butcher's cold-storage. Some were human-sized, with intricately-carved life-like faces, and some were smaller than my hands, but crafted with painstaking detail, which was no doubt bothersome work. What I found most disturbing about all of this, was that the reflective glass beads, or jewels in some cases, within the eye sockets of the dolls, made it appear as though they were tracking my progress through the store. Amid the gaze of the

⁸⁵ Part of me figured that Jirō just had really odd hobbies, which, considering his outfit, wouldn't be too far-fetched an idea.

several hundred dolls, I felt my skin ripple with gooseflesh, and I did my best to avoid looking at any one of them for too long.

The Masked Man was already at the other end of the room, just about to descend a staircase I hadn't noticed. I hurried over to his side, eager to leave the room, and I could've sworn I heard him emit a brief chuckle at my expense.

The wooden steps led down into a basement and each footfall produced a drawn-out *creak*. Before I'd made it halfway down, a voice hailed my Guide from within the darkness.

"Is that Jirō who goes there?" The voice that sought us out was frail and flawed, like whoever it belonged to was old and disused to speaking.

"I brought you what you asked, *Genzō*."

"Only one? What a shame."

I stopped by the foot of the staircase, staring into the pitch-darkness from which the voices came. From the sounds of it, the basement seemed far bigger than the store upstairs, and I got the feeling that this was some kind of secret base or outpost.

After a moment, my Sight started to activate, and orange lights wormed their way across the walls and floor, limning the contours of my surroundings, but then Jirō lit a candle on the table he was standing by, as well as several more around the room, making my Sight retreat and vanish like a banished shadow.

My guess turned out to be fairly spot-on, as the glow from the flames revealed a large chamber with some kind of bed on the floor in the corner, several tables with scattered papers and letters on them, as well as a bookcase housing a variety of books, ranging from mythical stories to Chinese works on warfare strategy and philosophy. In the very centre of the room was a table with a large map of the city and its environs. Coloured pieces, like those from a boardgame, were scattered across it: red, white, and blue. The majority of the white pieces were assembled in what looked like the northern part of the city, whereas the red and blue ones were assembled at various points outside the city limits, though a few were also within the city itself: a couple of the red bricks occupying the Slum we'd passed through earlier, and blue ones taking up spots in the western part.

"What is all of this?" I asked, looking at Jirō.

Jirō in turn looked to Genzō, who was currently bent over a scroll of some kind that he'd somehow been reading in the dark before we arrived.

The old man turned around, his baggy, dark-grey yukata sloshing around his thin body as he hobbled across the floor towards the table in the middle, supporting his weight on a gnarled wooden staff.

"Excuse my *errand-boy* for not explaining it to you first. This is after all a volatile situation we're dealing with," the old man began. Although it was impossible to see his expression under the mask, I could tell from the way he shifted his stance that Jirō didn't much like being referred to by such a title, although he said nothing.

"I'm here because you need mercenaries, right?"

"Yes and no. We aren't looking for just anybody. We require capable fighters who may aid us in saving our lands from this bloody civil war."

"What started the conflict? If you don't mind me asking. I'd prefer to know the full story before I agree to anything."

“The same as any other war: Greed,” Jirō responded, before the old man had a chance.

“Indeed,” Genzō concurred.

“The leader of the *White Tiger* clan was too soft in dealing with his rivals and when he didn’t immediately seize on the opportunity to smother the ember of animosity, the two other large clans took it as a sign of weakness and believed that they could do a better job of ruling Kakon-shi and her people.” There was quite some resentment in Jirō’s voice, and I got the sense that this was a touchy subject.

“Do not let anyone else hear you speak like that or it’ll be your head that rolls next.”

Jirō laughed. “I would like to see them try! Besides, you know I’m right, Genzō.”

“I didn’t say I disagreed, but, in times such as these, loyalty is valued higher than wisdom.”

“I take it you’re both part of this White Tiger clan?” I asked, interrupting their little back-and-forth. It was hard to believe these weren’t real people, but just very sophisticated ‘automatons’ constructed by a World Architect and sprinkled with the magic of the Watcher.

“We may have certain misgivings about our current ruler,” Genzō stated. “But we still believe him the most capable man to run this city. The *Vermilion Bird* and *Azure Dragon* clans both think they could do a better job of it, but this war was wrought by their hands, not ours. Jirō aside, most of the warriors of the White Tiger are peacekeepers, not executioners. The Vermilion and Azure clans believe that military prowess easily translates to political acumen and that they have what it takes to govern our city, but—”

“They are wrong,” Jirō chimed in.

“And what exactly would you have me do?” I asked them.

Genzō put his wrinkled hands on the edge of the table and smiled, showing his stained teeth. “With my extensive network of spies throughout the city and countryside, I have managed to locate both the Vermilion Bird’s fort and the Azure Dragon’s mansion, as well as their hideouts in the city. The plan was to have an elite group of mercenaries invade their bases at night and cut off the heads of the snakes, extinguishing the flame of war that has roared bright for the last seven years. However, since it was only you who answered to our summons, the plan has to be altered. I will work out a way for you to somehow infiltrate their clans, so that you can get close enough to their leaders to deal the killing blow. But, while I do that, you must go to *The Palace*. *Byakko-sama* wishes to vet our prospective mercenaries.”

The old man looked me up-and-down, then shook his head. “Do you have anything more formal than *that*?” Before I could even reply, he continued, “Of course you don’t... Jirō, when you take her to the Palace, make sure she’s given a bath and some proper clothes.”

“Understood.”

I followed Jirō as he went back up the stairs and left the creepy store full of dolls. Outside, the rain had seized, and the rooftops and streets were now covered in red, with puddles scattered everywhere. It looked like the aftermath of a massive fight, but based on the lack of reaction from my Guide, I gathered that it was a common occurrence.

A melodic duet of a *Koto* and *Shamisen* backed by a *Taiko* drum suddenly erupted, and a banner sprang to life before my eyes, stating, “*Now entering Stage ‘Allegiance’.*” I’d forgotten that it was still possible to enter a Stage while in a Safe Zone, so it caught me by surprise and sent my heart into a panicked flutter.

I looked around, while the string duet sounded through the air, startled by the announcement and imagining enemies descending upon us from the shadows of the nearby buildings.

For several minutes, I scrutinised every building, alley, and street that we passed, but no one engaged us, so I eventually relaxed, though I didn't let down my guard entirely. My left hand remained on the scabbard at my hip, prepared for anything.

“What is your relationship with the old man?” I asked, when we passed beyond the Residential area and into what, based on the size of the houses around us, I assumed to be the Noble District. The streets here were also deserted, and it seemed like most residents of the city had evacuated for some reason. The houses, or mansions rather, all had walls surrounding their grounds, as well as large metal-braced wooden gates. The bit of the houses that was visible from outside the walls gave a good impression of their size and height, which were several times larger than even the largest houses in the previous district. The rooftops were made up of darkened tiles, which sloped down elegantly and seemed very familiar to me. Every now-and-then there were a few modest shrines or temples amidst the large building complexes.

After a minute-or-two of silence, Jirō responded to my query. “He's my father. He caught me trying to rob him in the street and decided to adopt me into his family for some reason.”

The answer surprised me so much that I didn't immediately reply, and then when I regained my composure a minute later, I didn't feel like asking anything else, so we simply passed by the beautiful mansions, while the melody in the background continued playing.

Twenty minutes later, when the sun was making its journey towards the horizon, the red rain returned, quickly soaking through my armour, and making my usually-puffy hair stick to the sides of my face.

Jirō, who was a few metres ahead of me, stopped directly in the middle of where a street crossed ours. I quickly ran to his side, and asked, “What's wrong?”

He raised a finger to the flat smile of his mask, indicating that I should be silent and listen. At first, I heard only the rain and the *twang* of the Koto and Shamisen in the background, but then the sharp metallic *snap* of blades colliding sang through the air. From the sound of it, it wasn't more than two-or-three streets away.

Without warning, the gate to a nearby, walled-off mansion opened and footmen, as well as a few Samurai, all in black armour with red *Higanbana*⁸⁶ symbols painted on their chest plates, surged towards us, their roars like thunder.

My black edge left its scabbard and caught an incoming blade in its path, cleaving it in half and continuing straight through its wielder's left arm, parting the armour there as though it was made of paper. I spun quickly and used the momentum to carry my edge onwards into another, his crimson blood cascading outwards like an explosion, falling back down amongst us, indistinguishable from the red rain.

I heard laughter, like that of a lunatic, and, without looking, knew from its strange muffled quality that it belonged to Jirō. Suddenly, his self-proclaimed title made sense.

⁸⁶ 彼岸花, literally meaning “*The Flower from the Other Shore*”, but known as “*Red Spider Lily*” in English. It is a flower often associated with Death and the Afterlife, i.e. ‘the Other Shore’. Quite an interesting motif for an army to sport...

While we both carved our way through the enemy forces, I had a few moments where I caught glimpses of my Guide in action. He was a whirlwind of steel, the Dao lightning-fast and lethal in his hands. It would've been an awe-striking display, but his continuous manic and cheerful laughter was extremely off-putting, turning the sight from that of a skilful display of swordsmanship into that of a brutal slaughter. Not to mention, his ridiculous strength made him seem like a monster, as he on more than one occasion killed opponents with a single punch that shattered their bodies.

Then a different mansion gate burst open, spilling forth another wave of foes in the same black armour decorated with the red flower, pushing me further away from my Guide, who seemed to have entirely forgotten my existence and our supposed arrangement.

I let fly my Quick Draw, slicing two men cleanly in half, with my blade settling itself in a third, a Samurai wearing several layers of armour which had caught my edge within it. I panicked for a moment, as I struggled to withdraw my blade from its trap, but quick thinking had me perform my Lacerate, which turned the man currently 'holding' my sword into four separate chunks, and allowed me to follow up the movement with a wide slash, forcing my bloodthirsty assailants back.

As I was shoved down a side street away from my objective, I realised that my stamina would deplete before I saw an end to the enemies surrounding me, as more kept flowing in from around the district, seemingly every single Vermillion Bird warrior striking simultaneously. If they were only aiming to kill me it was kind of excessive, but I guessed that Jirō had likely been their original target, with me just getting caught up in their mess. We'd also heard fighting nearby, so the red faction was perhaps hitting several locations at once. I wondered if they'd also get to Genzō, and found it unsettling that even he had not seen this coming, despite his so-called 'extensive' spy network.

When it was evident that there were far more enemies than I could possibly defeat unscathed, I decided to listen to the little voice that always yelled in the back of my mind during situations like these.⁸⁷ So, with as much dignity as I could manage, I pushed off from the mob around me and hastily returned my sword to its home, then promptly put one foot in front of the other and took off in a hurry. I heard my attackers follow behind, but all their useless armour weighed them down too much and I easily made my escape due to my high '*Movement Speed*' stat.

I turned a corner, continued straight on through a different part of the Noble District, passed many beautiful mansion-like homes, took another corner, crossed another street, and another corner, and so forth. Eventually I reached a different battle, but, to my surprise, found Red and Blue forces engaged with one another. It seemed that not just Jirō's faction, the White Tiger, had been the Vermillion Bird's target, but also the Azure Dragon's hideouts that I'd seen on the map in the basement.

A group of four warriors were standing with their backs to a burning mansion, protecting some of their allies, who lay injured on the ground before a smashed-in wooden gate. Their group: a lone Samurai, barely holding back four men by himself; an archer, who wasn't much use in these close quarters; and two inadequately-dressed 'civilians'⁸⁸, both only wielding short, low-quality one-handed and straight short-swords that lacked a crossguard just like my own blade. Their attackers easily had five times their number, but struggled to properly utilise this advantage in the narrow street,

⁸⁷ You know, the one most sane people possess. It usually goes something like this: "*Ruuuuuuuuuuun, you idiot!!!*"

⁸⁸ They looked like civilians, but were clearly invested in this battle, which made me think they probably were more than just that. The terms *Shinobi* and *Ninja* immediately crossed my mind.

and so, spotting an opportunity that I couldn't simply pass up on, I flanked the black-and-red footmen, who fell before my blade with hardly any effort.

When I used my Helm-Splitter to break through the decorated helm of the Red group's leader, the entire party started scampering away in fear. Although, to be fair, at this point most of them had already been ready to run for it, their leader being the only thing maintaining group cohesion.

The Archer nailed a few of the fleeing warriors in the back before they could escape his line-of-sight. The longbow in his hand made a beautiful sound as it let fly one arrow after another with an even, well-practiced pace. The loose fabric draped over his armour and reaching all the way to the ground like some sort of thin coat was, similar to that of the Samurai next to him, entirely blue with a white outline on the back and sleeves marking out their symbol, which was also a flower, although I didn't recognise it.

As the Samurai approached me, he made a gesture to his men and the three of them went to see to their friends. I performed a flourish of my sword, sending a clean line of blood across the ground, where it blended in amongst the puddles of red rain and corpses. The look he gave me as I scabbarded my black edge was one of careful scrutiny, but also gratitude.

He bowed deeply before me, "You have our eternal gratitude⁸⁹ for saving us. I will personally see to it that our Master rewards you handsomely for your deed." Hopefully this handsome reward would be enough to make up for the investment I'd made into my new cuirass.

The Archer returned to the Samurai. "Sir! Two of the men didn't make it, and the remaining three won't be able to run with the wounds they've sustained."

"Understood. Tell the survivors to hide as best they can. We'll have to evacuate them later."

The Archer made a sound to indicate his understanding and returned to the men in front of the smouldering mansion compound.

The Samurai gave me that same look again, then said, "If you wish to receive your reward, we shall have to rely on you once more, lest our tongues be cut from our corpses and word of your deed becomes void. Would you kindly escort us to our Master and help us save any of our allies in trouble, should we come across them?"

"Sure. Lead the way."

"Hanada, with me! You two," he instructed, pointing at the 'civilians', "you know what to do. Alright, we're heading out!"

A chorus of wordless one-syllable sounds echoed from his men, and the Archer ran to catch up with us as we hurried in the direction of the Marketplace. Before we rounded a corner, I looked back towards the burnt-out mansion, and saw the two suspicious 'civilians' now fully-clad in the enemies' armour, one even wearing the dead Samurai leader's former attire, smashed-in helm and all. I guessed that these men were likely far more expendable than the Samurai and Archer who I was escorting, and would soon seek out other fights, and, using their disguises, sabotage the Red faction's forces from within.

We reached the Marketplace after ten minutes or so, and were met with blazing stalls and dead bodies everywhere. Many of the bodies were clearly just merchants and civilians, and I found it bitterly

⁸⁹ Again, with this... If I had a penny for every time I'd heard this... well... then I'd have at least two pennies...

ironic that they'd been targeted by the people claiming to be championing their cause and wanting to set the city *straight*. Their attackers were clearly nothing more than bloodthirsty psychopaths.⁹⁰

Further towards the Slum, I spotted Azure footmen battling it out with Vermilion troops. I was about to intervene when the *bwoooooaaaaa* of a horn sounded above the fighting, and suddenly everybody froze. Even clearly-personal vendettas were put aside as the two factions disengaged from each other and started preparing for an all-together different fight.

“What’s happening?” I asked the Samurai.

“The *White Wolves* are coming. Our footmen will hold them off, but we cannot stop!” I found this response to be slightly confusing considering his request for me to help any of his allies we came across, but I let it slide.

As we passed through the ranks of Azure footmen lining up on the opposite side of the street from the Vermilion forces, I saw that some of the Red leaders were likewise retreating, although a single Samurai remained, proudly facing what, judging by the footmen’s faces and postures, was certain death. I didn’t see any Blue Samurai besides my companion though. The Vermilion strike had likely taken out the Azure leaders first, thereby crippling their command structure.

“You hate the White clan enough to put aside your differences, even though the Red clan attacked you first?”

I expected a long, convoluted explanation in response, but the Samurai simply answered, “Yes.”

We hurried down the street leading away from the market and I heard yelling in the distance, coming from the Red Samurai. “Brace!” he shouted, and even the Azure footmen, who’d been fighting them no less than a minute prior, followed his command.

The horn sounded again, much closer this time, and I turned around just in time to see a shower of arrows rain from the sky, followed by the charge of a brutally-efficient company of helmetless warriors in white-and-grey armour lined with fur around the neck. Unlike the Azure and Vermilion clans, the *White Wolves* fought using metal-reinforced wooden shields, similar to the Japanese warriors of earlier periods, but strange considering the period this World was imitating. Why I somehow had this knowledge about shields of all things, I couldn’t fathom, but I also didn’t have the time to properly perform a self-analysis at the given moment, as I was in fact running as fast as my legs would carry me, terrified out of my mind by the sight of these ‘Wolves’, even more so considering the speed by which they cut through the footmen.

I found it disturbing to think that the word ‘peacekeepers’ had been used by Genzō to refer to the white warriors, who, in that moment, seemed so extremely adept at killing... but then again, I supposed that another word for peace could be tyranny, and a tyranny needed an iron fist to maintain its rule...

By the time we reached the Slum, the three of us were all thoroughly exhausted, but we’d escaped the *Wolves* for now.

“We can rest easy for a bit,” the Samurai said, after we’d stopped under the shelter of one of the few safely-constructed buildings in the area.

⁹⁰ Yes, I understand this is quite hypocritical coming from me...

“I wouldn’t be so sure. This is Vermilion territory after all,” I replied, recalling the war table I’d seen in Genzō’s hideout.

Hanada the Archer and the so-far-unnamed Samurai both looked at me. Clearly, they’d had no idea. “How can you be so sure?” the Samurai questioned me, his tone of voice in no way hiding his suspicion.

“It’s a long story... which I’ll happily tell you, when we aren’t in any immediate danger.”

His eyes narrowed slightly. To be honest, it was a fair response, since I too would’ve thought such a thing was suspicious, but he then eased up a bit, “Very well, I will trust your word.”

“So, how far is it to this base of yours?”

“Our Lady holds court in her family mansion located in a small village south-east of Kakon-shi, past the forest.” I remembered one of the blue pieces on Genzō’s map, which had been the one furthest away from the city, and which the Old Man had gestured towards when talking about his original plan to assassinate the Azure and Vermilion leaders. I wondered if I should kill this Azure Lady and try to return to Genzō, so I could continue with the original plan, but first I needed to actually get close enough to do that, which meant I had to keep these guys safe.

We left our shelter a minute later, the rain still falling down across the city, though with less intensity than before. I was slightly better off than Hanada and the Samurai, since most of my clothes underneath the metal cuirass were somewhat waterproof, although my boots were pretty soaked on the inside.

While trudging through a muddy street, passing ramshackle houses that in no way offered protection against the rain for their residents, I realised that this district too was vacated of the people who’d previously crowded it. I suppose that was quite standard for Stages taking place within Safe Zones, but it was still hard not to feel uneasy about it.

“Now,” the Samurai started, “when you stand before our Lady, it is of the utmost importance that y—”

A loud, wet *thud* sounded without warning and the Samurai stopped dead in his tracks. Time seemed to slow as he turned back towards us, unblinking, and when he tried to tell us something, only blood gushed from his lips, and that’s when we both noticed the shaft buried in the side of his neck, the sharp tip only barely poking through his jugular on the opposite side. A disturbing gargle sounded from him and he fell to the ground in a clatter of armour.

I quickly turned to Hanada and yelled, “Get to cover!”

Before I had time to move, an arrow slammed into my armoured back, knocking me forward with quite some force, followed immediately after by one that ripped across my leg in passing, shredding my trouser-leg and drawing a thin red line across my skin.

I jumped into a corner between two makeshift buildings, next to where Hanada was hiding, and succeeded in covering almost my entire body in putrid-smelling mud. Another couple of arrows slammed into the side of the house in front of us, unable to reach within our tiny recess.

“Do you see them anywhere!?” I yelled, trying to pointlessly wipe mud from my face.

Hanada stuck his head out of the cover for an instant, another eager set of arrows sprouting from the side of the building seconds later. “One is in a hut opposite from us, and the other is at the end of

the street. They have friends waiting to charge us, but they're keeping their distance for now. It seems you have quite the reputation already, *Rōnin-san*.⁹¹"

"My name's Aiko," I corrected him. "Can't you deal with them? You're an archer, right? Pretty skilled too, from what I remember."

"I would, but I dropped my arrows next to the body of *Mori-Sama*..." he replied.

"Okay, listen. I'll get your arrows to you, and you'll deal with archers. Do you think you can handle that?"

Hanada smiled a confident smile, although I could tell his hands were shaking. "Of course."

"Good. Because we're not dying here. You hear that?"

"Understood!"

"Alright, let's show these fuckers who they're dealing with!" I said, and leapt from the cover, landing on the ground before Mori's body, sliding a little beyond my intended destination due to the slippery mud and my momentum, but it was okay, because I managed to look cool doing it, like a dancer skating across ice... Anyway... I followed it up with a perfectly timed Quick Draw,⁹² painting a crescent in the air with my blade, severing red droplets mid-fall, as well as batting the two incoming arrows to the side. I immediately turned to the dead body behind me and, using the backside of my blade, hooked the belt-strap of Hanada's quiver and swung it towards him. Half the arrows flew out, but he quickly caught two in his right hand, and, like a fire had been lit in his heart, he readied the first arrow, ducked out of cover for an instant and let it fly down the street, returned to his cover, readied the next, and leaned out of the cover again, waiting for the other archer inside the house to reveal himself. Seconds later, when the enemy archer had readied his own arrow, he poked his head out of cover and instantly a fletched shaft appeared in his eye-socket.

The first archer at the end of the street lay flat in the mud, with an arrow similarly planted in his eye.

This guy isn't messing around...

The footmen nearby looked panicked for a moment, but then made up their minds and charged towards us.

"I have your back!" Hanada shouted, a ready arrow on his bow.

"Just don't hit me on accident!" I returned and ran towards the incoming group.

The first footman before me jabbed a plain spear at my stomach, but his movements were predictable enough that I simply rolled my body to the side and opened him up with my dangerous edge, like a butcher making the first precise cut into a large piece of meat. The next fellow came at me with such speed that, when I backed away, I slipped in the mud, but managed to use my fall to hack my blade at his knee, sending him likewise to the ground. I quickly got to my feet again, a fresh layer of mud caking my armour, and in a single movement stabbed the fallen warrior in the chest, killing him. Three more came at me, but, before they could close the distance, an arrow flew through the neck of one guy, deflected, and then continued into the flank of another. The first man fell to the ground in a shower of blood from his severed throat. Caught by surprise, the third guy didn't have time to counter my downward chop, which caught him in the neck and tore into his shoulder. I kicked

⁹¹ Basically, "Miss Masterless Samurai". Although, Rōnin literally just meant "wanderer" or "drifter".

⁹² Just like the time when Red Rian's archers had Jakob and I cornered.

him hard in the stomach, freeing my blade, and spun around, performing my Lacerate, which skilfully sliced through the second man, who was fully focused on the arrow wound in his side.

Then the last man, their leader, appeared before me, armed with a long *Tachi*⁹³ in both hands, its large scabbard mounted horizontally across his lower back. He had the trademark black armour of his clan, along with the red Higanbana insignia. His shoulders had large plates, into which one of Hanada's arrows immediately settled itself, unable to pierce fully. The Red Samurai's helmet came with a neck-guard and a red demonic-looking mask, as well as two antler-styled horns on top of his helm. The configuration of his armour gave only a few possible vulnerabilities I could exploit, such as the gaps of armour above his mask and in his armpit and groin, but, I immediately discovered that my sword's '*Rend Armour*' trait had no effect on his iron plates, as my blade only scratched its surface, after he successfully deflected my attack. Further, his large blade had a red groove running down its length on both sides. It glowed ominously, reminding me of the Red Swordsman from the Tournament Stage in the previous World. I already knew that it was bad business, so I completely altered my stance and let him do the talking... with his sword... hoping it would tire him out.

He moved fast despite his large weapon and heavy armour, but it wasn't fast to the point that I couldn't easily dodge his attacks. With immaculate form he moved through a variety of attacks, as though he was presenting before judges. His edge made a strange sheering hum every time it cleft the air between us. When it became evident to him that he wouldn't ever land a blow on me he stopped and changed stance, going from holding his blade low at the beginning of every set of strikes to holding it back and above his shoulder. The glow along his weapon intensified and he exploded forward in a leap that caught me completely by surprise as he covered the two-metre distance between us in an instant, slamming me back and off my feet as his blade knocked against my chest.

I rolled head-over backwards, covering myself in mud for the third time, although at this point it was like putting icing on top of icing, so it wasn't really like it changed anything.

I quickly got to my feet again, checked that my cuirass was fine: which it was. Then I bounded backwards as he once more leapt for me with that superhuman speed and agility, this time following it up with a forward thrust that actually pulled him forward in the mud with the weight and momentum of his blade. I dodged towards him and to the side, releasing a quick Lacerate that struck ineffectually against his plated arm, then quickly moved around his back, sending forth a minimally-charged Quick Draw aimed at the nape of his neck, but his helm blocked that too.

Suddenly, I realised something terrible. Somehow all my stamina was spent. I could only watch as the Red Samurai rotated his body and slapped his blade against my stomach, my cuirass blocking it once more, but the blow knocking all the air from my lungs and tossing me backwards. However, before he could exploit the opportunity, one of Hanada's arrows settled itself in his eye socket, stopping him.

A few seconds later he took a step forward, as though unfazed by his mortal wound, but then another arrow slammed into his face just below the ruined eye and above the rim of the demonic mask.⁹⁴ I could still hear him breathing, although he didn't move any further after that.

⁹³ A predecessor to the Katana, with a larger blade and a more pronounced curve.

⁹⁴ Impeccable grouping, if I had to say so. A real 11/10 shot right there.

With wobbling legs, I got up from the ground and, using my sword as a cane, made my way to the immobilised Samurai. I carefully pressed my shaky blade into recess of his armpit and with painfully-slow movements forced it through the thin layer of cloth and then his flesh, pressing as hard as I could until I hit the artery in his arm and blood gushed forth. Using all my weight I pulled the blade out and tumbled down into the mud. Moments later, the petrified Samurai collapsed, the last bit of whatever-the-hell-kept-him-standing giving way.

Hanada came to my side and helped me up. “Splendidly fought,” he said, praising me. I didn’t have the energy to tell him that I couldn’t have done it without him, but I was sure he knew.

Above the body of the slain Samurai floated a wisp, which, when I hobbled over to it, revealed the Samurai’s former mask:

‘Vermilion Bird Oni Menpō’⁹⁵

-Armour-

Armour > Metal Mask

Armour Type: Medium

“A metal mask shaped like the lower half of a Demon’s face, with a throat-guard connected to it. Protects part of the wearer’s face and allows from a helmet to be secured to it with its strap. Once worn by a Samurai of the Vermillion Bird clan.”

Equip

Discard

Weight: 0.2 kilos

It didn’t seem to be unique, but just a bog-standard item. It also wasn’t a cosmetic item like I thought, as it was listed as a *‘Metal Mask’* and had a throat-guard attached to it, meaning it actually served a functional purpose, besides giving the Samurai a way to secure his helm strap. I didn’t really see the point in having just half a mask, so I the item was worthless to me, but, as it only weighed 200 grams, I kept it nonetheless, since I might as well sell it for profit.

When I was done inspecting my meagre loot, Hanada and I made sure no more enemies lay in wait further up ahead, and together we left the Slum and the body of his former leader.

Bit-by-bit, my stamina returned, while we made our way out of the city, across the landscape of red fields and through a multi-coloured forest just like the one I’d encountered immediately after arriving in this World. We didn’t take a single break on the way to our destination, as though Death itself was on our trail.

⁹⁵ Menpō = “Face Guard”.

As we made our way through the forest, I could've sworn the colours were shifting and melting before my eyes, though it might've been a side-effect of the exhaustion. Regardless, I quickly became extremely dizzy and nauseous.

Maybe two-or-three hours later, when the sun was lost from the sky and reddish-orange light painted the clouds, we reached the edge of the forest and the beginning of crimson rice fields. The fields were submerged in blood-red water and tended to by farmers wearing conical rice-straw hats, and all had the same dark spots around their eyes. Past the red fields were the outskirts of a small town or village, but clearly not inhabited by just farmers, as I could spot, even from this distance, several houses of decadent design and elaborate build, not too dissimilar from those of the Noble District in the city.

“Is *this* the place?”

“Yes,” Hanada replied. His voice sounded worried. “I do not know how they will react when we return without Mori-sama by our side.”

“Don't worry, I'm sure it'll be fine!” I lied.

“I hope you are right. Besides, a warrior of your mettle would surely be a boon to our clan. I hope they will acknowledge this truth like I have.”

We followed a raised dirt path between two red fields and continued towards the settlement. As soon as we came ten metres within the nearest house, five men sprang out from the fields on either side of us, clad in camouflaged suits built from crimson reeds and straws, which allowed them to completely blend into the rice stalks. Each of them wielded the same straight shortwords I'd seen in the hands of the suspicious 'civilians' earlier, once more confirming my theory that they were Shinobi⁹⁶.

“Halt!” ordered an archer, who suddenly emerged onto a nearby rooftop.⁹⁷

“It's me, Hanada!” I noticed Hanada's speech changing from the humble expressions and words he used when speaking to me or his late leader into a more casual tone. No doubt he was the superior between the two of them.

“Hanada-san?” the other archer half-yelled, surprised. “We had heard everyone in the city died. How did you manage to escape the Wolves?”

“With her help,” he said, gesturing towards me.

The man on the rooftop looked at me for a moment, sizing me up, then continued with the interrogation of my guide, “And Mori-sama?”

“The Reds got to him.”

A brief expression of grief flashed across the archer's face, but he quickly composed himself and said, “You should go see our Lady, she will want to hear your report.”

“On our way,” Hanada replied. The five Shinobi surrounding us backed down and away into the rice fields again, and, even though I kept my eyes fixed on one of them, he soon vanished among reeds.

⁹⁶ 忍び in Japanese, owing to the verb “*shinobu*” meaning “to conceal/hide oneself”. A loose translation of the word would thus be: “someone who conceals themselves”.

⁹⁷ His command was a bit pointless to be honest, 'cause we weren't moving anywhere with five blades pointed at us.

“Follow me,” Hanada said. Clearly, I’d been staring a bit too long at the stalks waving back and forth, and he was losing his patience.

“Lead the way.”

We proceeded past the nearby house, from which the archer still watched us, and came out onto a wide dirt road that spanned across the village, passing the many different houses and shops. Everyone we passed stared at us⁹⁸ as we walked towards the big mansion at the end of the road.

The houses here were extremely varied in size and make, with the more elaborate and expensive ones closer to the large mansion. It seemed that this village housed everyone in the service to the Azure Dragon’s leader, all the way from the lowly merchants and up to the proud Samurai.

When we reached the end of the road, two imposing Samurai in attire similar to what Mori had worn, though with the addition of frowning full-face masks and throat guards, stood before the large wooden gate to the expansive mansion behind them.

“Halt,” one of them demanded.

“I would like to be granted an audience with the Lady.” Hanada’s tone and words changed again and though it should be normal to me, I couldn’t help but pick up on it for some reason.

“She is with her council at the moment, you’ll have to wait,” the other Samurai replied in a monotone voice.

“It is urgent, I have just returned from Kakon-shi.”

The two guards looked at each other. “Very well,” the first one said, “but don’t interrupt Her meeting unless She addresses you.”

“Understood,” Hanada replied.

We made to enter through the gate, but one of the Samurai put his hand on my chest, stopping me. “Not you,” he stated.

“Get your filthy hand off me,” I replied and slapped his hand away.⁹⁹

Instantly, the two Samurai had pulled their blades, a Tachi and an *Uchigatana*,¹⁰⁰ but Hanada quickly got between us. “Stop!” he urged. “It is important that she sees the Lady too, after all, she is the reason I am even standing here now!”

The guards didn’t budge.

“Listen!” Hanada said, his conciliatory tone gone. “If you want to fight it out with her you can do so afterwards, but right now we need to speak to the Lady. For all I know, the Wolves might be here at any moment!”

The mention of the White Tiger clan’s kill squad caught their attention and suddenly they didn’t seem too sure about what to do.

A small door set into the frame of the large gate suddenly opened, and an old, wrinkled, congenial face with ruffled hair poked out.

“What’s the ruckus for?”

⁹⁸ Correction: “... *stared at me...*”

⁹⁹ I consider this a fairly tempered response to someone groping me like that.

¹⁰⁰ Descendant of the Tachi sword and predecessor of the Katana. The Samurai wielding this particular sword also had a shorter version, forming a pair known as *Daishō*, “Big and Small”, comprised of a *Daitō* “Big sword” and a *Shōtō* “Small sword”.

“Mitsui-sama!” one of the guards observed, bowing his head deeply in respect, although I suspected it was also to hide the embarrassment on his face.

“Hanada is trying to—” the other guard started.

“Oh, Hanada, you’re back. Come on, get in here.”

Hanada didn’t waste a moment and slipped past the guards and through the tiny door. When I didn’t immediately follow, Mitsui poked his head back into view and gestured at me with a hand.

“Come on, you too.”

I walked past the two guards as nonchalantly as I could, and as I ducked down and went through the tiny doorway, I turned around and pointed my tongue at the guy who’d lain his hand on me. I couldn’t tell what he whispered under his mask, but I was sure it was something like, “*Just you wait...*” followed by an obscene amount of degrading insults. After I killed the Azure leader, he would be first.

The old man wore a modest yukata and wooden clogs that produced *clack* after *clack* as he walked up the stone path leading to the front of the mansion, from inside which a heated discussion could be heard, though the words were muffled through the paper-and-wood walls.

The mansion compound itself was comprised of a large main building, surrounded by roofed wooden walkways that led to various other smaller buildings. The stone path we were following split into three, with the paths going left and right leading around the building and under the raised walkways. Shoulder-height-tall stone lanterns were planted along the paths, and light from the candles within cast soft shadows around the compound. Surrounding the stone path and spread out across the unused open space was white gravel, which had been skilfully raked to resemble waves. A few decently-sized rocks were placed at random intervals throughout the pebble waves, and though I was sure that they had some higher significance to a trained eye, their meaning was lost on me, but the whole of the stone garden did look nice, which I guessed was the main reason behind it.

“Our Lady is in session with her retainers. As you can tell, things aren’t exactly amiable. Do hurry and present yourselves before her, she could use the distraction right now I believe.”

We walked up the wooden steps to the main building and Mitsui slid open the door for us. Upon entering the mansion, he closed the sliding door behind us, seemingly content with staying outside.

Standing there in the entrance, I had a sudden, unexplainable urge to take off my boots. So, I did. As I walked barefoot across the wooden floor, clutching my blood-and-mud-stained boots tightly in an attempt to make as little noise as possible, Hanada looked at me with extreme confusion marked on his face. He’d kept his shoes on...

We walked towards the sound of the discussion coming from a room at the end of a long hall with closed-off rooms on either side. As we approached, I silently pulled up my inventory screen and stashed my boots, the objects vanishing from my grip without so much as a *pop*.

“They have dismissed all the servants. This must be serious,” Hanada whispered.

Suddenly a female voice cut through the air, “... it is our duty to the people!”

“There are far more urgent matters than some ‘cursed’ sword,” one man retorted condescendingly.

“If it falls into the hands of *Suzaku*¹⁰¹, you cannot even fathom the consequences!” the woman urged. Her voice was serene to listen to, like that of a singer who never sung one note off-tune.

¹⁰¹ The Japanese word for the “Vermilion Bird”, though used here as if the name was attributed to a person.

“Even if it that is true, we cannot simply pull our fighters away for this errand. We would be defenceless!” another man counselled wisely.

“And what about these rumours of betrayal?” a third interjected, trying to change the subject.

“I do not believe that our people would betray us.”

“How else would you explain today’s events!? Every last one of our hideouts have been burnt to the ground and not a single one of our spies escaped alive!”

“This is our cue, I believe,” I told Hanada. It took him a moment to react, likely dreading what would happen if he interrupted his superiors. Then he carefully slid open the door, revealing a large tatami-floored room with elaborate ink paintings on the walls and the scent of flowers, which wafted out the room through the newfound opening. An assembly of nine men wearing modest yukatas were seated on pillows in uncomfortable-looking *Seiza*¹⁰², before a woman clad in an azure kimono decorated with patterns of flowers, who sat on a slightly raised podium, also in the *seiza* pose. The men all had similar hairstyles of comical-looking topknots folded flat along the length of the scalp, which no doubt was all the rage amongst the Aristocracy, though Mitsui didn’t wear his hair that way, which immediately made him ten times more likeable. The woman had a white-powdered face, lips painted to appear smaller than they were, and long free-flowing midnight hair. Her beauty was serene, but also dominating and demanding of attention. I also shouldn’t neglect to mention the long spear-like *Naginata*¹⁰³ that lay before her. I didn’t doubt for a second that she probably knew how to handle it well.

“Why jump to the immediate conclusion of—”

Suddenly all eyes were on us. Scowls occupied most of the faces, although the Lady seemed almost happy for the interruption.

“Hanada, you have returned alive. I am pleased.”

Hanada got on both his knees, averting his gaze to the floor. “Sincere apologies for the rude interruption, my Lady, but we come bearing grave news.”

“Are you the only survivor?” As she asked the question, I noticed that her teeth were painted black, but somehow the stark contrast with her white face only emphasised her beauty.

“I am. I would not have made it here alive, if this kind Rōnin had not come to my aid.”

I smirked at the Lady. I hadn’t followed the example of Hanada by getting on my knees, and currently I was trying to decide whether or not to carry through with my original plan.

“Tell me, what is your name,” the Lady asked.

“Aiko... Aomori Aiko,” I replied. For some reason I’d gone with my full name, and as the words left my lips, they sounded foreign and yet familiar.

“I may have use for someone like you.”

I was about to reply when a tremor came over my body and I had to grab my head and brace against the wall to keep myself from falling. Memories flushed through my mind, like a merciless river beating down on me.

A soft, familial voice called my name in the distance. “*Aiko... Aiko...*” I saw my mother running after me like in a game of tag and heard my own laughter in my ears. “*I’m gonna get you...*” the voice

¹⁰² A formal way of sitting with your legs folded under you and your butt touching the heels or soles of your feet.

¹⁰³ A pole weapon with a long, wide blade at the end. Warrior women of Nobility, called “*Onna Bugeisha*”, were known for favouring this weapon.

called, which only made me laugh more. Such a wonderful childish laughter, the kind that comes straight from the root of the belly.

I snapped back to the room and the people staring at me. Cold sweat ran down my neck and back, my hands were shaking, and I felt a tear tickle my skin as it rolled down my chin. Somehow I'd triggered the return of a memory without the Watcher 'rewarding' it to me.

"I may have use for someone like you," the Lady said again. I wondered how many times she would repeat herself until I replied.

I wiped the tears from my face and sniffled pathetically. Then I cleared my throat and said, as confidently as I could manage, "What sort of use?"

"My advisors here tell me it is unwise to pull away what little troops we have available to deal with a growing threat to the east, but one such as you might enjoy the opportunity to exalt yourself to the world. After all, this is a time when warriors flourish at the expense of all others." She didn't sound pleased at all, which I thought was strange, considering that her clan was half the reason why the civil war had begun, at least according to Jirō and Genzō.

"What sort of threat are we talking about? I don't have time for pointless missions."

She laughed at my response. It wasn't a laughter fit for a Lady of her stature, no, it had a kind of cruel tone to it, and, when I looked closer, I was sure that, despite the white powder, I could see a bit of darkness around her eyes, not to mention around the eyes of all who occupied the room.

"Such insolence, and yet, so endearing. The mission is one which might kill you, but if you accomplish it, I will reward you well enough that my dear vassals here will regret their own inaction. To the east lies a temple known as *Namida-jinja*¹⁰⁴, thusly named for the cursed sword it houses. A blade said to weep and curse all who touch it. The Vermilion Bird seeks this blade and its twisted power, but they cannot have it. Such power belongs to no one. You must travel to the temple and cleanse this cursed sword, and then bring me the inert remains as proof."

"How will I cleanse it? I'm not an exorcist."

"Worry not, I have hired a man who is confident he can accomplish this task, but he will need a guard to defend him against the White Tiger's monks who guard the temple."

"Monks? Really?"

"You may joke all you like, but these warrior monks are fierce. In the forty years since the temple was built to guard the sword, they have successfully repelled all who sought its twisted power, but the Vermilion Bird has grown strong enough to finally breach their walls. Thus, the time for action is now."

"Alright, I'll do it." How I'd get inside the temple was something I apparently had figure out when I got there. I was still considering whether or not I should kill her, but I figured it wouldn't hurt to get paid first, although, to be honest, I was kind of starting to like her, even though she also scared the shit out of me. Besides, how much did I truly owe Jirō, Genzō, and the White Tiger clan? They had abandoned me after all.

In response, the Lady smiled an unladylike smile, black teeth on full display. It was honestly quite terrifying to behold.

¹⁰⁴ Literally, "Shrine of Tears."

“You should leave at your earliest convenience tomorrow. You may reside in our spare chambers for the night.”

I nodded in response.

“Hanada,” she said, and the Archer arose, “show her to the guest chambers. Afterwards return to me and report.”

“As you wish,” Hanada obliged and escorted me out the room.

We crossed the main building and left through a door opposite the entrance, then walked along the raised wooden path outside, passing above a garden with many vibrant plants and trees, as well as a pond with Koi fish aggressively slamming into each other as though they’d gone mad.

As we neared my temporary lodgings, a banner appeared, stating, “*Now entering Safe Zone ‘The Hidden Azure Village’.*” I thought that called the village ‘hidden’ was a bit of a misnomer, considering how the White Tiger already knew about it, but I supposed it was similar to the Forgotten Village, which was in fact not forgotten at all.

My room turned out to be a small, tatami-floored wooden building overlooking the garden, which, through a door in the backwall, had access to a hot spring exposed to the open air. It was sparsely furnished, and, aside from a low cupboard with a few cups and a vessel for tea, only had a pillow and blanket for sleeping.

Without a word the entire walk from the main building to the guestroom, Hanada simply left. I was honestly surprised that he hadn’t admonished my behaviour towards his Lady, but perhaps the fact that she had acknowledged me meant that he couldn’t speak out against me. I pushed the issue from my mind and decided to take a bath to clean my body. It was somewhat amusing that we’d been allowed to trudge through this fancy villa with our bodies covered in several layers of mud and blood, but I supposed that was a concession necessary for this fabricated World to avoid being overly tedious by requiring you to wash yourself after every battle, before being allowed to go anywhere.

After a wash and then a nice dip in the steaming water, I rinsed my filthy armour using an available bucket and some of the cleansing solution from my alchemy kit. When I finished, I donned my town clothes and returned to my room, where I found a vast array of food plated on a tray set in the middle of the floor. Using the available chopsticks, I quickly devoured it all in a hurry, and didn’t really question my ability to operate the two sticks deftly enough to clean the entire rice bowl of every last grain of rice. When my stomach was filled to the brim and no food remained, a momentary dizziness came over me, but then I felt renewed and ready to fight again. In fact, I felt like I could fight anyone right then and there.

As a safety-precaution, I looked through my inventory in preparation for the following day, realising in a panic that I only had the “Potent Healing Potion”, and none of the materials needed to distil more. But, in a stroke of geniality, I realised that I might find the ingredients I needed in the garden just outside my paper-thin¹⁰⁵ door.

I left the little room and hopped over the walkway railing and down into the garden lit by stone lanterns, where the fish in the pond were still going at it furiously, with no clear winner yet emerged.

¹⁰⁵ Literally.

The plants here were unnaturally vibrant, just like the forests I'd seen, and it was still quite bizarre to see so many flowers in full bloom. Although there was one flower which wasn't blooming at the moment, its blue petals curled around tiny yellow petals within. I didn't think too much of it though.

After looking through the staggering plethora of flora,¹⁰⁶ I came to the conclusion that I did in fact have absolutely no clue what the hell I was doing. So, I vandalised six different plants that I thought might do the trick and stashed them away in my inventory, after which I tried, with great difficulty, to climb back up onto the walkway. I only managed to somehow trap my foot in the tight gap between two wooden beams that travelled horizontally along its length. To make matters worse, my supporting hand slipped, and I flung backwards, slamming my back into the ground.

As I hung there, upside down and head obscured by grass, I distantly wondered if it was possible to die of embarrassment.

When I'd hung there for a few minutes, my head woozy and face muscles strained to the limit, I decided that no, I didn't want to go out like this after all, since I was sure it'd haunt me into my next 'life', so, I did a sort of walking-on-my-hands pushing motion, until my body was horizontal. I then pushed off from the grass and contracted my abdomen to lift my body up, so I could grab the railing. Thankfully, I succeeded with the first attempt and quickly returned to my room, after crawling over the railing and onto the walkway.

As I sat in my room, face flushed and breathing rapid, I decided that if I discovered that anyone had seen me, I'd have to kill them... even if it was Hanada.

I spent the following hour-or-two experimenting with the ingredients I'd collected. For the most part they were all duds, but I also didn't know how I should modify my procedure in order to bring out the effects of each plant nor if *all* plants in this World even had an effect. When I got to the fifth plant, a flower with pink-veined white petals, I got a result, although it was a 'Diluted Weak Stamina Potion'. That it was diluted meant that I likely hadn't used enough of the ingredient, and when I thought about it, it was perhaps a bit dumb to only collect the petals of the flower, and not the stem and leaves. Even more so, considering that the materials I'd bought from the Alchemist had been just leaves.

The sixth ingredient I tested came from a green bush with tiny, tough, pearl-like, red berries. After spending nearly ten minutes mashing them all to paste in my mortar, I mixed the red paste with the solvent in a flask, set the flask over a flame, and evaporated it into a bigger flask that I poured some of the oil that normally used for the healing potions into. Finally, I swirled it around. The result I got was quite surprising, especially because I'd almost eaten one of the berries before testing them. The red berries, which I assumed would make a red potion, ended up creating a viscous, dark-purple 'Weak Dizziness Poison'.

When I'd finished my experimentations, I stashed my equipment in my inventory, alongside the two flasks which had actually turned out well.¹⁰⁷ I felt knowledge flush through me as the objects left my hands, and when I opened up my 'Crafting' menu, I saw that a new appendix was attached to the 'Alchemy' screen, which was called, 'Known Ingredients'.

¹⁰⁶ See what I did there?

¹⁰⁷ 'Well.'

On the list were three plants, each with their own short descriptions and art. The dark-green leaves I'd used to make the healing potions had apparently been '*Aloe Vera*', while the stamina potion was made from '*Cydonia*', and the dizziness poison from '*Nandina*'. Along with names and descriptions of known plants, the list also included the effects of each plant and recommended oils and solvents used to produce the best results.

From looking at the info, it seemed that the '*Nandina*' could be more potent and have additional effects if mixed with a similar poisonous plant, and certain solvents could increase its duration. In all honesty, I wasn't sure I wanted to use poisons, nor if they were really that effective when coupled with my sword. I mean, there usually wasn't much life left in those cut by my blade, so it just seemed like a waste. I figured poisons might be better on bosses or other players, and it was that last part in particular that made me uneasy. I didn't know how I felt about poisoning another person, it just seemed crueller than outright killing them, but, perhaps, if someone truly deserved it, maybe it was okay?

A loud, drawn-out yawn forced its way out of my mouth. My head was too heavy to think clearly anymore, so I decided that some sleep would be good and crawled under the cover and laid my head on the pillow. I fell asleep before I closed my eyes.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Sounds strange, I know, but trust me on this one.

The. Weeping. Blade

I blinked my eyes sluggishly after I awoke and nearly dislocated my jaw with the yawn that ensued. I'd no idea why, but I still felt incredibly drained from the fight yesterday. It was the first time I'd experienced something like *that* in this realm. I had completely forgotten about the Red Swordsman and the mental note I'd made to stay far away from any glowing blades like that.

"You're a very deep sleeper," a raspy, unfamiliar voice observed. The language and tone were familial, teetering on denigrating.

I sprang to attention, deft fingers pulling my obsidian blade from my inventory to my hand. The black scabbard produced a hollow *clunk* as it landed on the tatami floor.

"Who are you?" I demanded of the stranger who sat against the opposite wall. His scarred face was visible though the rest of his head and body was covered in a blue-grey full-body cloth suit, like some kind of murder onesie. His brown eyes were circled by darkness and watched me with a calm-yet-calculating shrewdness. A blue-hilted shortsword hung on his back, likely the same weapon worn by the Shinobi I'd seen hiding in the reeds yesterday.

"The name's Hayato. I serve *Seiryū-sama*." The name literally meant, "Lord Azure Dragon", though I assumed he was referring to the "Lady". It made me wonder if the "Suzaku", whom Lady Seiryū had mentioned, while Hanada and I were eavesdropping on her council, was the leader of the Vermilion Bird clan.

"Don't you know it's rude to eavesdrop on a lady?"

Hayato snorted derisively. *Asshole...*

"What do you want?"

"I've been ordered to guide you to Namida-jinja."

"I'm sure I can find it by myself."

"I doubt that."

"Don't you have better things to do anyway?"

"Yes. But an order is an order."

I sighed loudly, making sure he could hear.

"Fine, give me a moment then."

"Make it quick, we're wasting daylight."

Okay, at this point I wanted to seriously bash his face in. I mean, I'd been looking forward to another dip in the warm pool and some filling breakfast. But whatever, it'd just have to wait until I finished the next Stage.

I swapped out of my regular clothes and into my black armour and impressive cloak, while Hayato sat against the wall, watching me with a somewhat bored expression on his battle-scarred face.

The scabbard on the floor vanished and appeared on my hip after I equipped it in the character screen. It struck me as a good idea to find some kind of baldric or belt-pouch where I could keep my potions on me, so they'd be easier to access during fights. I decided that after I received my payment for this next Stage, I'd go splurge a bit in the market I'd passed through in Kakon-shi, assuming I'd still be able to enter the city and that the dead vendors had been replaced.

“Alright, let’s go.”

Hayato got up and together we left the mansion and the village.

“We’ll pass through *Nijigahara*¹⁰⁹,” he explained. “Don’t fall behind.” The name reminded me of an old forest near where I lived, or had once lived. The name alone made my stomach tighten into knots for some reason.

As we neared the forest wall, I wondered if I’d ever see Hanada again.

With Hayato in the lead, we passed through the forest in no time, though mostly due to his punishing pace and seemingly-infinite pool of stamina. Even though I did my best to keep up, I had to take a breather now and then.

The forest understory was alive with more plants than I could possibly ever count, and the variety in shades of nearly every colour made it look like some abstract entity. Like my first time through the forest, I started to feel intensely-disoriented as we moved onwards through the brush of tallgrass and vigorous plants, crawling up-and-down the hilly terrain beneath the humongous trees and their sheltering canopies. When next we halted, I spilled my guts on the side of tree, although, thanks to my empty stomach, only bile and water came out.

Hayato watched as I sobbed and groaned pathetically with every pained convulsion and subsequent bodily ejection. Part of me figured that he might not have been created to deal with such a scenario and was simply at a loss for words. Or maybe he just liked to watch...

It took about ten minutes before I felt well enough to proceed. For the remainder of our journey through the expansive woodland, I did my best to simply focus on the back of my Guide and his murder onesie’s calming shade of blue.

When at last we emerged from the trees, a vast clearing greeted us. We were technically still within the massive forest, though altitude-wise higher up than *Kakon-shi* and *Lady Seiryū*’s village. A mountain range loomed in the not-too-far distance, and at the centre of the clearing, some forty metres from us, stood a temple with three-metre-tall whitewashed stone walls adorned with onyx faces along its length. From outside, a towering four-storey pagoda and the rooftops of a few temple buildings were visible. Before the temple, also enclosed by the walls, was a small village with modest wooden buildings, the rooftops of which were only partially visible above the walls. The temple village had one massive gate at the fore and two statues of the Buddhistic *Niō*¹¹⁰ standing only slightly taller than a human, their muscular forms posed as if ready to defeat any who would breach the gate and cause evil within the sacred place. It seemed like a well-fortified place, though, at the same time, I doubted it would be difficult to scale the walls unnoticed.

“I was told someone would meet me here,” I explained to Hayato.

“He should already be within the village. You’ll know him when you see him.”

“What does that mean?”

¹⁰⁹ 虹ヶ原, “The Rainbow Field/Wilderness”.

¹¹⁰ Guardians of the Buddha, who, despite the pacifistic teachings of their religion, are permitted to do violence, as long as it is against ‘evil’. Quite contradictory, if you ask me. Also, let us not forget that the monks of this temple are so-called “warrior monks” ... Pacifists only in name, it would seem.

Hayato suddenly turned away, gazing towards the opposite end of the clearing, where a dirt road snaked from the temple and through the trees. A second later I heard the shouting too.

“Already!?” He seemed to have expected this, but not so soon. “Find the Exorcist!”

“What about you?” I asked, but he’d already started running towards the sounds in the distance.

Great...

I started running too, though in the direction of the village. I crossed the grass plain unseen, as not a single watchtower had been erected from within the walled-off temple. As I reached the wall, I leapt and landed a foot on one of the protruding faces, which, frozen in a scorned expression, looked none too happy about it. I caught hold of the tiled edge atop the wall and, using every muscle in my fingers, pulled myself halfway over, then swung my legs up-and-over and fell down hard on the other side, my feet protesting against the impact of the long drop.

A toothless beggar poked his head out of a tiny dog house, or that’s what it looked like anyway, and sputtered some kind of incoherent gibberish.

“And a good day to you,” I said, smiling briefly, before running off deeper into the village, in search of the unknown Exorcist. To my surprise, no Stage banner popped into view, which meant that I was still in-between Stages, though clearly this place wasn’t safe either, as it hadn’t flagged itself as a Safe Zone. I wondered what would happen if I waited around long enough for what I presumed was a minor army of the Vermilion clan marching on this place, but ultimately decided I didn’t want to know.

My first plan was to look in the various *ryokan*¹¹¹ and other such gathering places, but I quickly realised that this wasn’t at all like the village I’d imagined it to be. Rather, it was more like the Kakonshi Slum, though with marginally-better housing, however, all the inhabitants were living in various states of impoverishment, as though only barely clinging on to life.

I really didn’t like the vibe this place gave off. I mean, what would the monks need all these poor people for? They didn’t seem to feed them at all, considering the emaciation that both young and old suffered. The fact that the massive gate was sealed and that wherever I looked I saw only terrified people, made it feel more like some kind of concentration camp, though its purpose was unknown to me.

I’d been running around the village looking for the Exorcist for roughly fifteen minutes, when I spotted the man: The one who didn’t fit in amongst this malnourished crowd. He wore a brown trench coat over a white shirt, dark-blue jeans, and brown leather shoes. On his back he carried a wooden box, with the straps over his shoulders like some kind of backpack. His skin was pale and one eye was covered by his hair, which was entirely silver-white, but the eye I *could* see was mysteriously green. He did look Japanese, but the hair and eye colours were completely alien. He definitely wasn’t from around here.¹¹²

He seemed to notice me at the same time, and as he stood there, some kind of brown cigarette in his mouth, a bored expression on his face, likely born from waiting around for a while, he said, after exhaling smoke that didn’t flow like smoke ought to, “You wouldn’t happen to be looking for me, would you?”

¹¹¹ “Inn/tavern”.

¹¹² ...or from this time period for that matter.

“Possibly,” I replied carefully. There was something extremely mysterious about this person I thought, but then again, who wouldn’t find an exorcist to be a strange person? So, in that sense, it was perhaps a good quality for someone in that field? *Anyway...*

“Are you an exorcist?” I asked.

“No. I’m a *Mushishi*.¹¹³ Name’s *Ginko*.” Had he just introduced himself as an *insect specialist*? What the hell was he doing here?

“Oh,” I said, disappointed. “I suppose you aren’t who I’m looking for after all...”

“No, I think I might be. Nobody seems to really understand what I do, so the confusion is understandable.”

“If you aren’t an exorcist, then what *do* you do?”

“I handle cases involving *Mushi*,” Ginko replied, as though it was self-explanatory. Given that normally ‘Mushi’ meant ‘insect’, I doubted we were talking about the same kind of insects...

“And will *that* make you able to exorcise a cursed sword?”

Ginko scratched his head. “I’ve never tried before, so I couldn’t say.” He sighed, exhaling more smoke that flowed around him and outwards, as though the tiny particles were hunting down something unseen in the air. “I don’t think a cursed blade is what you should be worried about though. That isn’t why you’re all suffering like this.”

“What do you mean? I’m an outsider like you.”

“Really? You have the same darkness around your eyes, and if you could see the things clinging to you... I don’t even know how to describe it. I’ve never come across a Mushi quite like this one before. Say, you wouldn’t know if there’s some kind of war going on, would you?”

“You don’t know?” I replied, somewhat baffled. How on earth had he even gotten here without noticing? “These lands are plagued by a bloody civil war. Just yesterday a bunch of people were slaughtered in the city nearby. Also, what the hell do you mean that something is *clinging* to me?”

“It’s a Mushi that looks like a four-legged spider, though it has a blood-red pearl for a body. It’s likely caused by a large presence of blood in these lands. Have you noticed anything strange with the rain lately?”

“Yes, it looks like blood.”

“So that’s what it is... I’ve only ever heard of this Mushi, but I believe its name is *Shigurui-no-Kumo*¹¹⁴. It’s attracted to wars, and lays its eggs in blood-soaked soil, its offspring attaching themselves to the plants in that soil and forcing them to undergo rapid growth, which is ignorant to the seasons. Humans and animals will eventually consume the corrupted plants and become the Mushi’s new host. It should leave the body as soon as the corrupted food has been excreted, but until then...”

“What? What’s gonna happen to me?”

“You’ll experience an extreme desire to kill, many times indiscriminately. The Mushi has this effect on people because it wants them to spill more blood, so that it can continue to multiply and thrive. Judging from the fact that I haven’t seen a single person not under its influence, I assume this

¹¹³ 蟲師, literally “Insect Specialist”.

¹¹⁴ 死狂いの蜘蛛, “Death Frenzy Spider”. Very ominous sounding for sure...

war has lasted for quite a long time and claimed countless lives already. Tell me, when did you first eat food harvested in this region?”

“Just last night... Should I stop eating food from here?” I definitely did not want to end up accidentally killing people supposed to be my allies, but I also had to wonder how someone from the Azure clan hadn’t already killed me, if they were under the Mushi’s influence. I guessed that this Shigurui-no-Kumo didn’t break familial bonds or those forged by loyalty, otherwise the clans would’ve torn themselves apart long ago.

“I see,” Ginko responded, letting out a sigh of smoke. “No, you shouldn’t starve yourself. Maybe if you try hard enough, you’ll be able to suppress it, I don’t know, but it would be best to just get out of here.”

“I can’t. I’m supposed to end this war.”

Ginko looked surprised for a moment. “That’s very admirable, but I don’t think one person can stop a war.”

“For now, I’m just trying to prevent it from not getting worse... which is why I need your help in neutralising this blade they’re housing in the temple. The Vermilion clan plans to use it to gain more power.”

“I’m not an exorcist.”

“I know, you said that. But you seem to know more than anyone else I’ve talked to, and if you can see things no one else can, maybe you can still help me in some way.”

“I’m also not a fighter.”

“Are you a pacifist?”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

“Good, then you’re coming with me.”

Ginko sighed again. The thin stream of smoke from the cigarette in his hand curled through the air. “Don’t let me die.”

“I won’t.”

“Take me to this cursed blade then, and I’ll see what I can do. But no promises.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” I said.

We started making our way through the impoverished town, when suddenly the rain began dripping down around us. When we reached the temple, another gate with two Niō on either side stood before us, and the long-awaited banner popped in front of my eyes.

“Now entering Stage ‘Namida-jinja, the Tearful Shrine’.”

The sound of fingers plucking on the strings of a Koto played sorrowfully through the air. It had a slightly disturbing feel to it, as though it wasn’t just playing a sad melody, but actually telling a terrifying story with every measured note. For some reason it reminded me of snow.

“How do you suppose we’ll get in there?” I asked my companion. My previous tactic of crawling over the wall might still work, but it would be risky if the place was guarded.

Before he had a chance to answer, the gate began opening from the inside and we only barely managed to hide behind one of the muscular statues, before a large group of black, grey, and white warrior monks emerged from within and ran across the town, likely to face the incoming Vermilion threat, whose violent shouting beyond the walls was now audible even from where we were.

“Are they under attack from outside?” asked Ginko. Again, I wondered how on earth he’d arrived here and not noticed these things.

It’s almost as if he was teleported here... or, maybe he’s just a bit of an airhead.

“Best not to think about it, let’s just finish the job we were sent here to do. Come on, we can make it through the gate before they close it again!”

I didn’t give Ginko the chance to protest and started running for the open gate. To his credit, he was able to keep up with me, despite the heavy burden on his back.

We had only just made it inside, when someone yelled out a warning. Clearly, they were on high alert and had spotted us immediately, but now that we were inside, I could let my obsidian edge take it from here.

A group of warrior monks charged for us, and immediately Ginko fell back behind the cover of a nearby outhouse. The monks were armed with Tachi, longbows, and Naginata spears. They all wore white cowls and various assortments of either kimonos or Samurai armour. I was honestly quite surprised to see how well-kitted they were, but I supposed there had to be a reason why this temple hadn’t been breached. Until now...

I felt the killing calm descend upon me, and I pulled my black katana from its sheath in a Quick Draw and caught one monk in the armpit, right as he was about to hammer his long blade down on me. My blade continued uncontested through his upper torso, cutting him in two. Using the momentum, I spun and ran my sword through another one’s spear shaft, leaving him with a useless half in each hand and a deep fissure along his stomach and chest. As I turned towards a third, an arrow punched me in the side, blocked by my sturdy cuirass, but nonetheless pushing me off balance right as another spear jabbed at me.

My reflexes had me immediately adjusting, and I spun my body ninety degrees, letting the killing tip slide uselessly along my armour, before spinning around again to grab his shaft and pull him towards me, piercing him through the chest with my sword.

I pulled my blade from his body, just as another arrow hit me in the chest, bounding off my armour and pushing me back. Another monk charged at me with a furious cry and I easily sidestepped his blade, then hammered my own into his stomach and used his forward momentum to cut through him and pull my katana free.

The third arrow to come my way I managed to swat from the air, though I honestly couldn’t tell you how, as my body was almost entirely working off of muscle memory at this point. I was sure that in the past I’d practiced a lot to learn *that*, but now it came to me so effortlessly. The reason why I retained this knowledge was probably because the memory targeted and removed by resetting in this realm was of a different sort than what muscle memory belongs to.¹¹⁵

The longbowman scrambled as I closed in on him, but didn’t have the chance to unsheathe his sword, and my edge cut through the bow he tried to block with and settled in his shoulder, snagging on the corner of his chestpiece, but still managing to sever the artery in his arm, bleeding him out within moments.

As I laboriously wiggled my blade free of its leather-and-metal trap, Ginko came up to me, his usually bored expression traded for a serious one.

¹¹⁵ Kind of like how some Alzheimer’s sufferers still know how to drive, even if they can’t remember directions.

“I had to,” I told him, for some reason trying to defend my actions from his judgemental gaze. He didn’t respond.

We left the bodies in the courtyard before the gate, while the relentless downpour continued. Beyond the courtyard were finely-constructed temple buildings of many varying functions. The largest of the buildings, besides the dark-brown four-storey pagoda nestled in the distant corner of the temple complex, was a two-storey red, white, and black building behind a modest shrine. To our right was a Zen stone garden, and beyond, a luscious flower garden, with a thin stream snaking through it and leading to a Koi fish pond. There was also a bathhouse and a massive iron bell under its own red wooden shelter.

A group of three unarmed monks, all of them dressed in robes of black over white, emerged from the shrine, one yelling a hurried command that sounded like, “Protect the sword!” As one, they hurried in the direction of the two-storey building and we chased after them, however, before we could catch up, another group of warrior monks flanked us from the bathhouse. One of the spear-wielding monks wore almost an entire set of Samurai armour, minus the fancy helmet, which meant that his head was still an obvious weak point. The three longbowmen were by far the bigger threat of their group.

I slapped an arrow from the air before it could hit my companion, and he quickly sought refuge inside the shrine behind us, just as two more arrows found a home in my unarmoured shoulder and the dense wooden pillar of a *Torī* gate¹¹⁶ behind me. The impact knocked me back, splattering my blood across a decorative stone lamp next to the orange-red *Torī*. There were stone lamps in two rows, one on either side in front of the four-metre-tall gate, and the remnants of melted candle wax coated their interiors. The lamps had four sides, one which was open and three others that had been carved out in a way that, when lit, would reveal elaborate symbols to worshippers as they entered the open shrine. The openness of the shrine was one thing that I found interesting, as not even a knee-high fence demarcated where the Buddhist sacred ground ended, and the Shinto shrine began. Within was a modest little hut, with a bell beneath the roof, attached to a thick rope for people to shake and make it *jingle-jangle*. An offering box stood past the rope, and within the shrine interior was a marble-white statue of a furious tiger atop a rock, with the letters 虎白¹¹⁷ written beneath on a metal plaque.

Anyway, what was I doing? Oh, right...

I fell to my knees behind the lantern, letting the arrows of the longbowmen hammer uselessly against the stone, while I hoped for the feeling to return to my right hand. I won’t lie: it was pretty bad. The pain from the arrowhead lodged in my shoulder felt like a tiny person trying to cut his way out, while also occasionally scratching along my collarbone. It wasn’t bleeding anywhere near as much as I thought it ought to, but it was clear that I wasn’t in any shape to hold my sword and I doubted I was much of a leftie, even in a pinch. Nonetheless, I picked up the sword with my left hand, and pushed my weight against it as I tried to stand. Immediately a set of arrows slapped against my cuirass, probably bruising my skin beneath, which no doubt already looked like some kind tortured

¹¹⁶ Literally meaning “bird residence”, referring to an archway denoting the entrance to a Shinto shrine. You may be wondering what a Shinto archway would be doing inside a Buddhist temple, but, you see, Japanese temple builders never were much sticklers for purism, and the worshippers didn’t seem to mind the religious double-dipping, so...

¹¹⁷ Pronounced “*Byakko*”, meaning, “White Tiger”. Like a lot of the writing in the temple, it was written backwards, though I couldn’t tell you why.

canvas upon which an imitation of a Picasso painting was inscribed in the bruised hues of black, blue, yellow, and purple. I was knocked to the ground, and quickly sought cover behind a different lantern.

Using my left hand, I fumbled through my inventory and pulled out the ‘Potent Healing Potion’. I had wanted to save it for something more serious, but then, not being able to use my primary hand was pretty serious. Just as I had managed to pull the cork from the flask using my teeth, an arrow scraped along my stone cover, shredding the skin on my exposed left hand in passing. The pain and suddenness made me lose my grip on the neck of the flask, which tumbled from my hand in slow motion and shattered tragically against the ground, as though it was made from the most brittle of materials.

“Son of a bitch!” I cursed loudly.

I poked my head out of cover for a second, baiting the arrows, which, as predicted, passed overhead almost as soon as I had withdrawn back into cover, then I took off towards where Ginko was hiding behind the shrine, before the longbowmen had time to nock another arrow. As I was running, I saw Ginko rummaging through his medicine box for something, just as an unexpected arrow punched me in the flank. The surprise made my feet slip along the gravel, but I managed to turn it into a slide, so it looked almost intentional, though I landed pretty hard. I added another bruise to the long list, though this one was on my ass, so it’d be the worst of the current collection.

“I don’t have any healing potions!” I yelled at Ginko, even though he was right next to me.

“I’ve got something, just give me a moment.”

Before he had the chance to find it, one of the spear-wielding monks had pushed up to our cover and emerged around the corner. Ginko moved with a sudden speed neither I nor the monk had expected and tossed a glass jar of some dark-green viscous liquid at the guy. The jar shattered against his face, leaving many shards stuck in his skin and one even directly in his left eye. It also deposited a green blob on the side of his head, which quickly crawled down the monk’s torso and then leapt from his legs, rushing into cover underneath the shrine building, immediately vanishing from sight.

I used the distraction to swing my katana at him, although with very little power as I was using my left hand, but the blade still managed to pierce into his side shallowly, embedding itself. Realising I wouldn’t be able to kill him like this, I performed my Lacerate, which carried my blade through him like a knife through butter. Or rather, like a katana through so-soft-as-to-be-almost-liquid butter. The force of the ability almost made me lose grip of my blade, but I kept hold of it until it had turned the monk into three neatly-cut lumps of flesh and rent armour.

“Found it,” Ginko announced, uneventfully, producing a small bottle of golden water. “Take only a tiny sip,” he ordered.

As I sipped the golden water, which seemed to glow by itself somehow, I felt a feeling similar to the healing potions, but several times stronger. A pleasant heat spread across my body, mending my shoulder and refilling my lost energy. I suddenly felt ready to take on a whole army by myself.

“What is this!? I feel amazing!” I exclaimed.

“*Kōki*.¹¹⁸ It is made up of pure life energy.”

“Can I have some more?”

“No,” Ginko replied seriously. “I shouldn’t even have given you this much.”

¹¹⁸ 光酒, “Sake (rice wine) of Light”.

“Why?”

“Too much isn’t good for you, and it seems to have aggravated the Mushi clinging to you. It has grown considerably, which I doubt is good for you... or me,” he explained. He probably feared that the Death Frenzy Spider would make me kill him, but I doubted I’d succumb to its influence, especially when I was already feeding it more than enough blood as it was.

With my body fully restored, I charged out from the corner, just as two of the monks rounded it. I knocked one down and quickly stabbed him through the chest before he could get up. Then, without a moment’s notice, an arrow bounded off my cuirass, pushing me back, just as the other fully-armoured monk swung his Naginata at me, its blade passing only centimetres in front of my face. Ironically, the knockback from the arrow had saved my nose from being sliced in half. I had to hand it to the smithy who’d sold me this cuirass, this thing sure could take a beating, though with some padding behind it, my skin would’ve suffered less from the impacts it absorbed.

I retreated back a few steps, going past where Ginko was still hiding. Just as the armoured monk passed by Ginko, he tripped over an extended foot and fell forward, hitting the ground with a hard crunch of metal and leather on stone.

I looked up at the Mushishi, who was nonchalantly adjusting one of his box-straps.

“What?” he asked, as though I was looking at him funny, for no reason whatsoever.

I just shook my head in disbelief, then hammered my sword down at the rising monk, casting forth my Helm-Splitter, though the helmless monk took its full brunt to his skull, which, as per the name of the ability, did indeed split, quite violently too. Blood, brain, and other stuff¹¹⁹ splattered outwards, but I didn’t waste any time trying to clean it off my blade, as the three archers in the distance hadn’t let up their rain of arrows. Deadly spikes flew at us without pause, hitting the shrine, the corpses before us, and my chestpiece once again, where they bounded off, for the nth time today. It was like bruises were developing on top of bruises at this point. Every movement hurt like hell, as the sturdy cuirass pushed on the raw skin beneath it without mercy. When I was done here, I’d spend a long time soaking in the hot spring of the Azure Lady’s mansion, that much was for certain.

I felt my killing calm, my self-named Dance of Death, take hold of my body yet again, propelling me forward, ignorant to the arrows flying past and overhead. For a moment it was like my body was following a stream that allowed me to step between every arrow aimed at me, like I’d cracked the code of how the patterns worked and was able to avoid harm by repeating certain steps, like those of an elaborate tango, or, Gods forbid, *flamingo*... It made me wonder if the muscle memory that possessed my body had been shaped through hundreds, if not thousands, of times going through the same Stage over-and-over.

I got within ten metres of the archers before my luck¹²⁰ ran out, but I reacted fast enough to swat two synchronously-fired arrows from the air, then I kicked off into a jump, closing that final distance before neither of the three longbowmen had the chance to cock another shaft.¹²¹ With a Quick Draw, I sundered the air with my midnight edge, cleaving taut bowstrings, wooden limbs, and soft flesh, scattering the broken weapons, spilling their unused arrows, and tossing their blood to the wind like a child playing in a puddle of water... viscous, pungent, red water...

¹¹⁹ I honestly wouldn’t even know what to call it...

¹²⁰ Or was it skill?

¹²¹ What? That’s a perfectly normal sentence... You’re the one with a dirty mind, not me!

All three archer fell to the ground lifelessly, and as the adrenaline faded from my blood, I felt the killing calm dissipate bit-by-bit.

Ginko sidled up to me, stepping around the severed body parts gingerly, while I removed the blood and bits of intestines from my blade and armour, using the ‘clean’ headwrap of one of the archers.

“There were better ways we could have dealt with this,” he advised.

“A bit late for that now,” I replied.

“Who knows what kind of defence awaits us in the main building, now that they’ve been alerted to our presence and have had time to prepare?” It was a bit hard to take his cautious words seriously, as the tone in his voice made it seem like he didn’t really care. Rather, he just sounded kind of bored, or like he had better things to do.

“Guess we’ll just have to find out, won’t we?”

I finished wiping off my sword, which was rather difficult as the red blood sort of just disappeared on the obsidian glass, but I’d done it several times already and had developed a meticulous technique to clean it properly. I tossed the bloodied headwrap down on the body I’d borrowed it from.

Will Buddha or Amaterasu smite me for this defilement of their sacred place?

Before we headed to the large temple building where the monks had fled to, I returned to the tiny shrine after spotting a floating wisp above the corpse of the armoured warrior monk. When I touched it, the tooltip appeared before me, stating, ‘*White Tiger Naginata*’. I would have picked it up, if it wasn’t for the fact that its weight would negatively impact my available stamina and movement speed. Perhaps I’d return to pick it up after I finished the Stage.

The gravel crunched underneath my boots, accompanied by the *pitter-patter* of the red rain. We were only a few metres from the temple doors, when they opened before us, like some haunted house or a cliché Dracula movie. As the two separate panels of the door were thrown wide, the corpse of a monk fell through its opening, his blood quickly running down the shallow ramp towards us. He had a clean cut down his back, which had torn fabric and severed armour with surgical perfection.

Now, I’m not one to shy away from a fight, but when I saw the unnatural gloom beyond the threshold and felt the clammy cold brush past me, a shiver ran down my back. I had a very bad feeling about this.

“Seems its power has been unleashed,” Ginko stated calmly.

“Can you see anything I can’t?”

“The ground is covered in what looks like squirming dark-grey hairs. I think it’s a Mushi.”

“Great, so you know how to deal with it,” I replied hopefully.

“Maybe. I will need to study it before I can figure out how to handle it properly.”

“And how long will that take?”

“I don’t know, but—”

Without warning, a body was flung out from a second-storey window, splattering against the gravel only a couple metres behind us.

“I’m going in.”

“I think I’ll stay here... I need to do some tests,” Ginko explained.

“You do that...” I replied sceptically. I couldn’t tell if he was being a coward, or just knew that he’d be of no use to me.

As I stepped over the corpse in the doorway, the music picked up, and an unnerving *twang* cut through it occasionally, echoed by a wordless wailing. It made my heart thud painfully in my chest and with every few steps further into the temple I witnessed more-and-more slaughtered monks, which only intensified its rhythmic pounding. The floor was slick with blood, and the interior was covered in a haze or some kind of supernatural fog, which made the room dark enough for my Sight to kick in, amber lights rippling across the edges around me, highlighting things I hadn't noticed before, such as a staircase in the back, and many more dead bodies, not that I needed to see those, but it did help me avoid tripping.

“It weeps for us. Claim its power,” the entity in my ring suddenly said. Last time it had spoken to me was before and after my encounter with *Mrtvy*, who had wielded the Cursed Blade of the Forlorn Shadow. I doubted it was a coincidence that it'd chosen now of all times to speak to me again. Perhaps it would come in handy in the future if I ever faced off against someone else wielding a cursed weapon, though I doubted it could change the tide of battle just knowing someone carried a cursed weapon. I would've been better off with a ring that alerted me to nearby treasures or something along those lines.

I made my way up the staircase, treading carefully as to avoid slipping. Besides the blood everywhere, water also soaked the wooden floor and walls, as though a massive wave had washed over the temple grounds. It dripped from the ceiling in grey droplets and ran down the walls like transparent worms.

A disturbing scream sounded from a nearby room, making the floor tremble beneath me. I didn't want to go in there, but I lost the chance to flee as the severed head of a bald monk was thrown through the paper-screen door. A second later, the tip of a blade emerged through the undamaged panel next to the hole the head had made on its way out and in three swift cuts the entire sliding door fell to pieces.

The sight of what emerged from within made my stomach fold and the acrid taste of bile flooded my throat. The figure was grotesquely bent out of shape, as though the bones had changed shape and size, resulting in an asymmetrical monstrosity that might once have been one of the temple monks. The remains of a white and black robe hung in tatters about the body, leaving the misshapen torso exposed, but covering the not-so-family-friendly bits below the waist.¹²² Ribs poked the skin to the point of almost piercing, and the breast area was oddly misshapen, as though the monk's body had tried to transform into that of a woman's. Long black hair fell from its head, likely not belonging to the monk, who should've been bald, and its face was... unpleasant, to say the least. The eyes were hollow, totally obscured by darkness, with only a tiny spec of a reflection in them. The jaw seemed intent on leaving the body altogether and flopped pointlessly around below the head, with only skin and a few remaining muscle fibres keeping it attached. The teeth were of seemingly random length, but all shaped like a carnivore's and with several rows like those of a shark. Its skin seemed to slump about the body in places, but were taut as the hide on a drum in other areas, and had the off-putting texture of some lemon-and-pineapple crossbreed. When it laid its eyes on me, my whole body froze. Its head tilted from side-to-side, assessing me, while the lower jaw wobbled around below the head with a mind of its own.

¹²² And thank God for that. I didn't want to have that image burnt onto my corneas for the rest of my life...

A strange guttural stuttering emerged from its throat, and a long whip-like tongue emerged briefly to swipe through the air, as though tasting my scent and my fear.

I then noticed what it held in its right hand, which scraped along the floor as it took a couple steps towards me with its malformed feet. The blade was like a mirror, polished to a perfect gleam, reflecting mostly just the darkness of the room, though I briefly caught my own image, my pale skin and the twinkle of amber light in my chestnut-brown eyes. The rest of the Uchigatana, which the Horror held firmly in its grip, was fairly standard, with the most notable aspects being the grey colour scheme and white lotus flower insignia, as well as the red string that fell from just below the crossguard.

It took another step forward, and I snapped back to reality, pushing aside the dread just long enough to fire off my Quick Draw, slicing the Horror along its chest and upper arm, but failing to even split the skin, leaving only a groove in its granite-like epidermis.

Tremors shook the temple to its very foundations with the scream that erupted from its lungs, and I hurried past it and into the room from which it'd emerged, before it could reach me. My toes hooked on the arm of a body just beyond the threshold and I tripped onto the slick floor, coating myself in a wet layer of blood, grey water, and various bodily ejections.¹²³

What my Sight revealed in that clammy darkness, was seriously fucked-up... Bodies were everywhere. I mean, literally everywhere. Some were pinned to the walls, some just tossed to the floor like broken toys, and a few even hanging from ceiling on meat hooks or ropes. The most disturbing part, besides the bloody pedestal in one end of the room, which seemed to have been the resting place of the sword until just minutes ago, was the fact that the majority of the bodies were in various states of decay, dating back several days and possibly even weeks. The corpses shared two commonalities: they had been exsanguinated, looking like used-up juice boxes, just with a few more meaty bits; and were similar in build to the malnourished townsfolk, trapped within the walled-off town just beyond the temple complex.

I doubted Ginko would still hold a grudge against me for killing the monks when he saw this... The monks had created the monstrosity in the blade. They had fed it with the bodies of the poor and weak. It was almost poetic that their monster had turned on them in turn. Almost... except for the tiny fact that not a shred of human intelligence remained within its black eyes. Only a bottomless hunger shone through, and now that it had finished examining me, it was ready to finally pounce.

The Horror made a crazy leap, which covered the distance from the door to the other end of the room where I was standing and left a long, perfect groove in the tatami floor and wooden wall right where I'd been seconds earlier. I came up behind it after finishing my panicked dodgeroll and stabbed it in the back. My blade only chipped the surface slightly and the moment's hesitation that followed, allowed the Monster to score a hit on my armoured stomach with its blade. The impact sent me flying across the room, and I only stopped when I reached the wall, my body slamming hard enough against it to break a few of my ribs and shattering the wood behind me. Without my cuirass, my body would've been cut in two, and even my armour, which had weathered blow-after-blow, now had an alarming channel across the lower chest area.

¹²³ Don't ask.

I hurried to my feet and, just as the Horror leapt for me again, turned away from it and jumped out the second-storey window, as though mimicking the flying corpse we'd seen earlier.

The landing on the gravel outside was murder on my knees and made my pained ribcage feel ten times worse. To my dismay, the tactic only prolonged my impending doom by about fifteen seconds, as the Thing quickly followed behind me, taking the entire window frame with it.

The ground caved slightly under its feet as it landed, making me think it was a lot heavier than it should've been, which probably also explained its incredibly strength. Instead of immediately leaping for me again, it paused to perform a loud weeping sound, which was utterly distorted by its alien vocal cords. In response to the sound, the mirror-like blade of its weapon began crying, sending forth big globules of the grey water, which soaked into the ground and spread the unnatural haze with it, completely altering the texture of the gravel beneath it, and partially obscuring the Monster.

"It's producing more of the Mushi!" Ginko suddenly warned, but I had no idea what he meant. I just knew I had to stop it, so I charged into the fog, praying my Sight would light the way. However, it wasn't dark enough to activate, which left me with a massive disadvantage. Nonetheless, I pushed on until I reached the grotesque silhouette at the centre of the haze.

I only barely managed to sidestep a reactionary strike, but turned the Monster's overextension into an opportunity for me to exploit by following up my sidestep with a partially-charged Quick Draw into a Lacerate. There followed three distinct sounds of metal-on-stone and though I couldn't see where my attacks landed, it was clear none of them had done much damage. I swivelled around the Horror just as I heard the mirror-like blade whip through the air towards me, and then I hammered my Helm-Splitter down against what I assumed was the back of its head. Instead of the sound of metal-on-stone again, I heard a satisfying *crunch*, followed by a screech and a backwards kick to my stomach that sent me flying out of the haze-covered grey field. I tumbled across the gravel, ripping and tearing skin and leather armour in the process, and reaffirming the fact that, yes, my ribs were indeed quite broken. Another screech and it leapt from its haze cover, clearing the distance between us in a single bound and slamming the mirror blade against my cuirass before I could move away, pinning me to the ground. I felt an alarming give in my otherwise-impenetrable '*Blacksteel Cuirass*' and the kinetic force squished my chest and probably broke a few more ribs, not that it really mattered at this point, because I was fairly sure this was the end.

I looked up at my doom. The Monstrosity's previously-malformed head was now a complete and utter mess following my successful strike to the back of its skull. I could've sworn that it grinned at me as it lifted its mirror blade again. From my prone position I pointlessly stabbed my blade at its gut as a last futile retort before that mirror edge fell upon my chest, cleaving my armour and, more importantly me, in two. The tip of my katana hit its impenetrable hide and I felt a surprising give, as it dug itself into its flesh. I immediately cast forth my Lacerate, feeling the last embers of my stamina whisk out and disappear with it. My blade pulled itself through the Monster's stomach forcefully, no longer obstructed by granite skin, and spilled its vile blood and intestines all over me. The stench was foul, gag-inducing, and eye-watering.¹²⁴ Worse yet, it was still alive...

¹²⁴ Imagine the smell of a sun-baked, bloated corpse, which on its third week of being exposed to the elements, suddenly erupted and cast its scent to the air. Now imagine that you happened to be in the range of the splatter, and you might begin to understand what I was experiencing.

Tremors rolled across the gravelled floor with its monstrous roar, and grey water flowed from its blade, raining down on me, but sadly not managing to clean the filth from my skin. I started crawling backwards while it was occupied, and caught a glimpse of its skin tightening and turning solid, its insides and blood too.

So, this is the effect of its grey field...

It didn't seem like it was impervious to crushing attacks though, considering what my Helm-Splitter had done to its cranium. But, this information was useless, as even the effort of crawling away from its growing haze and spreading grey pool was taking everything out of me. My head was woozy, like when I'd fought the Samurai with the red-glowing sword, and I knew that its next strike would kill me.

Then, out of nowhere, Ginko was beside me, helping me up. In his free hand he had a flask of the golden liquid. Kōki he'd called it. I thought it was meant for me, but as soon as the haze cleared a bit and the dark silhouette within was visible, he tossed it in a wide arc, landing right before its feet and erupting in a magnificent shower of gold. The haze suddenly condensed, and the figure vanished from sight. The golden light disappeared as well, as if swallowed up by the fog.

“What did you do that for!?”

“Just give it a moment,” Ginko replied calmly.

So, we waited. And waited. And nothing happened.

“What exactly are we waiting for? Nothing's happening,” I said, after two minutes of staring at the grey fog in silence.

“Exactly. It has stopped moving.”

“Oh...” I replied, somewhat embarrassed, realising that this was the expected result. The fact that the Horror hadn't re-emerged from its cover meant that whatever he'd done had worked.

I let go of Ginko's shoulder and steadied myself on my blade, digging it deep into the ground to ensure a solid footing. I pulled up my inventory screen and withdrew the 'Diluted Weak Stamina Potion', downing the contents of the flask in one swig. It had an extremely-earthly flavour, and its effect felt quite different from that of the healing potions, and although it was diluted, I felt its energy rush through my veins and clear my head. It didn't do much for my broken ribs, countless bruises, and torn skin, but it was enough to keep me upright, which was more than I could really ask for at the moment.

Gathering my resolve, I pulled my sword from the earth and walked towards the dense cloud. A few seconds later, Ginko caught up to me. As we approached, the rain and light wind slowly dissipated the dense fog screen, revealing a dark-grey silhouette, which was soon exposed to the dim light of the cloud-covered sun. It was a disturbing visage to say the least. The Horror had been captured perfectly, down to every horrifying detail, as it stood immovable before us, locked in a statue prison. I was fairly sure it was dead, but I didn't move any closer than where we stood. The grey puddle that had marked its haze-field, wherein its skin became like granite, was now a solid layer of concrete atop the gravel.

“What did you do?” I asked. I also wanted to yell, “Why didn't you do that sooner?” but refrained.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ I know, it surprised me too.

“After being able to study the Mushi that resided in the grey water, I realised that it was the *Ishino-Uji*, also known as *Mibōjin-no-Ke*.¹²⁶ It is a Mushi which seeks out those struck by grief, especially widows. It burrows itself into the scalp of its host and slowly devours their hair, replacing them with copies of itself, which are in fact larvae. As their hair is replaced, the host gradually turns to stone, eventually becoming completely petrified, at which time, the hair-like Mushi leave the host and seek out new ones to continue the cycle.”

“And how do you cure it?”

“I don’t think it’s possible, actually. I have heard of attempts to pull out the Mushi which burrows itself into the scalp, but no one has survived the procedure, and to make matters worse, the Mushi is invulnerable to fire and many other remedies that normally work on other Mushi.”

“So how exactly did you manage to defeat it?”

“By exploiting its petrifying ability. When fed with Kōki, Mushi tend to rapidly progress through their developmental Stages, which means that even though the host was able to manipulate the Mushi somehow, he couldn’t keep it under control when I tossed the Kōki at him.”

“I see.” I didn’t, or well not entirely. It all went a bit over my head, truth be told.

“What I find to be disturbing though, is that the *Mibōjin-no-Ke* seem to reside within that sword,” he said, gesturing towards the mirror-bladed *Uchigatana* still in the grip of its petrified wielder.

“Do you know how to exorcise it? Or pull those *things* out from it?”

“No.”

“Great.”

As the last remnants of the fog vanished, a glowing wisp suddenly burst into life around the blade and hovered in the air, indicating that I could pick it up. A cold sweat ran across my body. For a split second, I actually contemplated what it would be like to wield this weapon. I mean, if it could give me the *Stoneskin* as an ability, I would become unbeatable. Well, unbeatable *unless* someone had a blunt weapon or abilities that did crushing damage like my *Helm-Splitter*.

“What are you doing?” Ginko asked, as I took a step towards the petrified Monstrosity. “I don’t think you should touch that...”

Ignoring his advice,¹²⁷ I stuck my hand inside the wisp, and a tooltip appeared.

‘*The Weeping Blade*’

-Melee Weapon-

Sword > Two-handed > Katana

“The Widow plunged her husband’s sword deep into her gut and cursed the name of the White Tiger. As her life ebbed away into the blade, a mournful weeping could be heard across the region. It is said that ever since that day, all the white lotus flowers in the country have wilted and withered.”

¹²⁶ 石の蛆, “Stone worm/maggot/larvae”; and, 未亡人の毛, “Widow’s Hair”. Both had an unpleasant ring to them.

¹²⁷ Shocking, I know.

Trait(s):

'Cursed'

'Haunted Dead'

'Pact'

'Unbreakable'

Equip

Discard

Weight: 1.4 kilos

I looked at its four traits: *'Cursed'*, *'Haunted Dead'*, *'Pact'*, and *'Unbreakable'*. I'd seen the *'Pact'* trait on the first cursed blade I'd encountered, and *'Unbreakable'* was self-explanatory, however, the *'Cursed'* and *'Haunted Dead'* piqued my interest. The first one stated, "*Wielding this blade lowers maximum health and stamina.*" The latter read, "*Those slain by this blade cannot find rest and will haunt the places they died.*" It seemed that in this particular instance, the reduction of health and stamina was meant to counter the sword's strengths, similar to how the *'Heavy'* trait on *'The Claw of the Forlorn Shadow'* had been an obvious weakness.

As for the other trait, I wondered what its implications were for players killed by it. Would they be unable to reset back to the first World, or was there perhaps a time limit on it? I honestly couldn't tell what it did, as I saw nothing out of the ordinary with the monks that the Monster had slain. You know, aside from the fact that they all had the same kind of frozen expression of horror on their faces... The item art showed the sword itself, the mirror-polished blade, dark grey scabbard and handle, the white lotus emblem, and the red string tied around the handle just below the crossguard.

When I read the flavour text, it confirmed what Ginko had told me, that the Mushi were attracted to widows in particular, and it seemed to confirm something about the thing possessing the blade having a relation to the White Tiger clan, and, now that I thought about it, the sword was likely of their design, meaning her husband had been one of the clan's soldiers, though I had no idea why she would be cursing the clan for her husband's death. The mention of the lotus flower was also interesting, as that was one of the few flowers I hadn't encountered throughout the super-blooming forests and gardens.

When I'd finished reading, I grabbed the handle, but struggled trying to wrestle it from the statue's frozen grip. I ended up snapping off two fingers before I was able to pull it free. Thankfully, the Monster was completely dead at this point.

I made it all of two steps towards the exit, when I realised something. The music hadn't stopped, and, as if on cue, the entire area was blanketed in fog, so thick that I could barely see the ground.

"What's happening?" Ginko yelled from somewhere a few metres ahead of me.

In response, a screeching female voice cleft the air with its high-pitched tone. "*WILL YOU BE MY VESSEL? THEY MUST ALL DIE! MY POWER IS YOURS IF YOU FINISH WHAT I COULD NOT!*"

My ears were ringing from the pure volume of it, and I felt a presence just behind me somewhere, though there was nothing when I turned around, but, even if there had been, I likely wouldn't have seen it through the fog.

"I won't be your puppet," I told the spirit.

"*NO!*" it yelled, the sound dragging out until it lost the last shred of its human quality, becoming more like the roar of the Monster I'd already fought. The blade flew from my grip off to somewhere deeper in the fog.

The music picked up, and the unnerving *twang* and female shrieking accompanied it like some twisted attempt at a choir. The Koto sounded nothing like itself anymore, its wonderous plucking at the strings seeming possessed and distorted, lacking any guiding melody, but still managing to provide exactly the kind of backdrop you would imagine in this kind of scenario.

Moments passed as I tried to fumble my way to Ginko. Then I heard footsteps. Several of them. From the uneven rhythm, it was clear that several were limping or physically impaired. Suddenly came the *swish* of a blade flying towards me. I moved backwards just in time to see it pass in front of me and then vanish back into the fog. From the brief glimpse, I could tell it was a Naginata, which gave way to a disturbing realisation. It wasn't the Weeping Widow attacking me. No, it was the warrior monks.

My lungs were already working overtime and a slight wooziness clouded my mind. I couldn't afford to use my abilities, not unless I could make them count, and if I exhausted myself here, I'd be dead... or worse.

Another hiss of a blade flying through the dense air caught my attention, but I couldn't move fast enough as it sliced me across the leg, cutting through my pants and leaving a shallow groove just above my knee. I stabbed my blade at where I thought my assailant might be hiding, feeling the impact of my blade up through its handle and hearing the wet, fleshy sound it made. I'd struck deep into either its torso or head, but then I heard its blade again, and knew that it wouldn't be that easy. I managed to twirl my body away from the strike, but something suddenly caught me in the back, stabbing my cuirass and pushing me forward. Before I could adjust, a third sword slammed down towards me and I tried to escape its path, but stumbled into something solid, breaking my nose and tearing the skin on my face. I then saw it was one of the stone lanterns I'd hid behind earlier, and I immediately knew where I was.

In a desperate attempt to save myself I turned around and sent forth a cleaving strike with my Quick Draw, feeling the satisfying feedback up through the handle as I carved through the three reanimated monks. But then the wooziness really set in, and I could barely stand on my feet.

Although my attackers should've been dead, they continued making sounds like their severed bodies were still trying to move. *It's like I was fighting zombies*, I thought to myself. Then wondered what the hell a 'zombie' was and why my mind had conjured up such a word.

More shambling footsteps sounded in the distance, though with my vision impaired I couldn't determine just how far or close they were. But it didn't matter. I couldn't even lift my blade above my waist and I had to cling to the lantern just to avoid falling. Slowly, I moved around to the lantern's other side, hoping the dead-but-still-moving monks wouldn't find me, though the sounds of them continued to come closer. I didn't understand how they could see me, or smell me, or whatever the

hell they were doing. I cursed my ring, which was supposed to give me an advantage in the dark, but was completely useless when it came to this kind of situation.

“Ginko! Where are you?” I yelled.

Silence.¹²⁸

Well, fuck. This was apparently how I’d go out. I couldn’t say I liked the idea of being slowly chopped to bits, so I started moving away from my cover and towards where I thought the temple building was. If I was gonna die, I didn’t want it to happen while I was cowering pathetically behind a lantern. Plus, I was sure the Widow would kill me faster than her meat puppets could.

As I was crawling across the harsh gravel, which bit into my hands and knees, I bumped into something. My heart froze as I looked up at the silhouette.

“Is that you?” whispered a familiar voice.

Relief washed over me. “Oh, thank the Gods. Where were you?”

“I was looking for you, but I didn’t want to make too much noise, since that seems to attract them.”

Oh. Great... Good thing I’d yelled loud enough that even people outside the temple complex would’ve heard me.

“I can’t do anything, I’m completely out of stamina,” I told him.

“I don’t have anything for that,” Ginko replied.

“I just need some rest.”

“There’s no time for that,” he warned, and a moment later I heard the shambling footsteps on the crunchy gravel only a few metres away. I wondered if he could actually see them through the fog, but didn’t ask.

Just as he’d done earlier, he grabbed me by my shoulder and we hurried towards what I assumed was the main building. The pain in my ribs was a continuous beat of pain, and my broken nose throbbed as though it was an accompanying instrument, while blood tickled my skin as it made its slow progress down my face.

Suddenly, Ginko stopped. I hadn’t realised that he’d lost his cigarette until he withdrew a fresh one from a pocket in his trench coat. He set it to his lips and carefully lit it with a match, acting like he had all the time in the world. A huff, then another, followed by an exhaled plume of mysterious smoke moments later. It flowed from his mouth like tiny tendrils, and little-by-little expanded and cleared the fog around us. He huffed again, the next exhale spreading further, removing more than before. After his third exhale, I could see more than ten metres in any direction, and ahead of us I saw the source of it all. A woman whose body was made of thin grey worms, long hair falling down in front of her face like a veil, and the mirror blade skewering her chest like some extreme body piercing. Flanking her were a score of monks in various states of dismemberment, rocking side-to-side as though the strings that held them upright were slacking now-and-then. I looked over my shoulder and saw two other monks closing in on us. The disappearance of the fog hadn’t seemed to make it easier for them to sense us. It was like they were blind.

“What should we do?” I whispered to Ginko.

“Do you see her?”

¹²⁸ Well, ‘silence’. There were still the footsteps, background music, and the ambient wind-and-rain.

“I do, why?”

“Her body is made up of the Mushi, but she is still connected to the sword. Severing that connection might kill her.”

“And how do you propose we do that? I can barely lift my own sword as it is. Can’t *you* do it?”

“I told you, I’m not a fighter.”

“Right, you did say that.”

“Maybe you could pull it out of her body?”

“Really? *That’s* your plan??”

“I don’t see any other way.”

I sighed in response. “When I die, I swear I’ll haunt you.”

At this point, a modicum of stamina had replenished. It likely wasn’t enough to afford even a single sword swing, but I figured I had enough to at least cover the distance to the Weeping Widow before the shambling corpses could reach us.

“Wish me luck,” I said, and wrenched myself free from his grip.

I stumbled for a second before regaining my balance, then stowed my sword away in my inventory and willed my body to move, before setting off in a sprint.¹²⁹ My whole body felt heavy, almost like the gravity of this World had tripled, but I continued closing the distance. I caught a quick glimpse behind me of Ginko wrestling with an unarmed monk whose head looked like a split watermelon, but I didn’t stop.

Four steps, three, two, one, and I was there, both my hands seizing the handle of the Weeping Blade. I tried to yank it out of the Widow’s body, which pulsated with the movements of the worm-like hairs, but it was no use. Then a roar sounded from her head,¹³⁰ its sound completely alien to my ears, and I wondered distantly if the Mushi were trying to replicate her voice. My train of thought was forcefully interrupted as a powerful hand struck me in the chest.

Wind brushed my hair as I flew across the courtyard. The air in my lungs tasted like fire and I couldn’t breathe. There was another roar in the distance and, as I slammed hard into the ground, I heard metal *clang* next to me. My own reflection stared back at me from the mirror-like blade, its face was a bloody mess. I blinked once, and everything went dark.

When I came to, Ginko was looking at the sword next to me. Poking it with a stick as though it was a dead animal he’d found.

“Are you okay?” he asked with his back turned. It didn’t really sound like he cared.

I took a deep breath and coughed a lot. It hurt like hell when my lungs pushed against my ribcage.

“What... happened...?” I managed to croak out. Gods, my voice sounded like a mess.

Next to me lay my beautiful, dark cuirass. Its front had a groove along its length and was more like a bowl, thanks to a newly-formed deep dent that should’ve crushed my torso. How Ginko had managed to get it off me was a mystery, but then, his whole nature was strange to begin with, so I didn’t linger on the question for long.

¹²⁹ Let’s be honest, it was more of a jog, really.

¹³⁰ Or rather, the lump of worms that was supposed to look like a head, though it lacked eyes, nose, ears, and mouth...

“When you pulled the blade from its body, the monks all collapsed and the Mushi turned to stone again. *She* is still standing over there, if you want to take a look,” he explained, pointing to some place I couldn’t see from where I lay.

“Did...”

“Yeah, you did it. It looks like the sword has become inert. I think the spirit left the safety of the blade to try and defend itself. How it managed to control the Mushi is still a mystery though. Usually, it’s the other way around.”

I blinked in response.

“Give me a moment, it should be done shortly.” I didn’t know what he was talking about, but a minute later he brought a cup with scalding tea to my lips and, even though it cauterised my tongue and the roof of my mouth, I immediately felt its healing properties take hold. Heat flowed across my body, erasing the pain in my chest and numbing my throbbing nose. With my every heartbeat I felt increasingly stronger and energised, until I was able to rise to a sitting position. The wooziness was pushed back, but still remained like smoke in the depths of my skull. My broken ribs and nose didn’t heal themselves together, but also didn’t hurt as much when I breathed in-and-out. Pain was replaced with a soreness like the one following a long workout.

“What is that?”

“Tea.”

“Yeah, but what kind of tea?”

“The healing kind.”

“Ugh... whatever.” I could’ve used something like that in the future, but if he wasn’t sharing, I’d just have to try to figure it out myself. I could potentially make some kind of numbing and energising potion from the plant he’d used.

“So, what now?” Ginko asked me.

“I need to bring this the Lady, as proof of our success,” I explained, gesturing towards the mirror blade.

“Okay. I will remain here for now, in case more of these Mushi appear. I will go see her later for my payment.”

“Suit yourself,” I replied. I wondered if there would still be monks fighting with the Vermilion force beyond this temple complex and how they’d react to the Mushishi and the scene around us. I also wasn’t sure if Ginko could manage to find his way to the hidden village by himself, but then again, maybe he was more capable than I gave him credit for.

“Don’t get yourself killed,” I told him.

“Shouldn’t I be the one to say that?” he commented smartly.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” I replied, while picking up the inert blade and my ruined cuirass.

‘The Weeping Blade (inert)’
-Melee Weapon-
Sword > Two-handed > Katana

*“Once possessed by a mournful and vindictive wraith,
this blade is now an inert sword with a dulled edge and
tarnished sheen.”*

Equip
Discard

Weight: 1.4 kilos

I felt a shift in my stamina and movement speed as the additional weight of the sword increased my inventory weight and put me in a higher weight group. My movement speed was lowered to Modest and my stamina capacity was set to seventy percent, down from eight-five. Additionally, without the cuirass on my body, my armour rating fell from Modest to Low.

As I headed for the exit, I noticed that the music had finally stopped. There would be no more surprises it seemed.

The sight that greeted me beyond the temple gate was an unsettling one. The impoverished town, which had prior to our arrival been thronging with malnourished residents, was now completely desolated. There were a few sounds of fighting beyond the gate at the other end, through which, it seemed, the residents had fled. I didn't blame them. They'd been used by the monks to sate the Weeping Blade and whatever fate that awaited them beyond the walls likely couldn't be worse than what they'd already experienced.

I decided to not interfere with whatever fight was still taking place between the remaining monks and the Vermilion warriors. Whether or not this place remained in the hands of the warrior monks or was conquered by the bloodthirsty Reds was all the same to me. My job was done, and I was too injured to even consider taking on another opponent before I'd had time to rest.

A nagging *ping* sounded from somewhere deep within my ear. It seemed my hard work had at least earned me something besides a useless blade and a broken body.

Before leaving the now desolate town I found a dark corner in-between two houses and pulled up my skill menu. The glowing line, which showed my weapon experience, had reached 'Level 5', which held a new set of divergent paths. My choice of new skills was either 'Deflect' or 'Feint'. Their explanations were self-explanatory: "*Deflect incoming attacks*", and "*Feint an attack to mislead your opponent.*" I could technically already do either of these things, but clearly my form was way off and acquiring either of them would make me far more effective at using the skill. Feinting was quite a useful tool, but perhaps more of a skill to use against players, whereas deflecting would be more of a universal tool at my disposal, and, considering I couldn't block with my weapon, I chose this skill. As I clicked 'Accept', knowledge flooded my mind and the ability was stored in my muscles as though I'd always known how to pull it off.

When I was ready to finally leave the temple village, I climbed up-and-over the same section of wall that I'd entered from. The doghouse-like abode nearby was vacant just like the rest of this place. My sore body protested as I grabbed hold and pulled myself up, while my aching chest felt like an open wound whenever I accidentally grazed it along the stone. Once on the other side, I started making my way back. Though, to be honest, I had no idea exactly how I'd get back, as I couldn't

remember what path Hayato and I had trekked. Then I realised, to my own embarrassment, that I had a map...

There were several roads that led back to the Azure village, but I decided to take the long route, which avoided the majority of the Nijigahara forest by crossing through farmland. I'd had enough of the rainbow-coloured forest and, honestly, a change in scenery felt needed right about now.

Perhaps an hour later, I finally emerged from the smothering trees. Crimson fields spread out before me, rolling up-and-down with the hilly contours of the land, not too unlike the waves in a sea of blood. I found the thought of these fields being contaminated with murder-spree-inducing Mushi to be quite upsetting, but I needed to eat from the land's harvest and the animals of the multi-coloured forests if I didn't want to starve. Hopefully, I'd be able to curb any homicidal urges until I made it out of here. A critic would say that I'd already fully embraced my homicidal urges, but up until now I hadn't killed anyone on accident or by impulse, and I was hoping to keep it that way.

Scarlet reeds swayed back-and-forth in the gentle breeze, and there was something mesmerising about watching the wind crawl across the fields in wave-after-wave. While taking in the view, I followed a dirt road that split the farmland in two. On this side of the Nijigahara forest, the signs of the war were few, and the farmers who tended the crops didn't seem too alarmed by my passing. In fact, several of them bowed in respect, as though I was a Samurai of some distinction. No doubt they were just playing it safe, considering how some Samurai had an unfortunate habit of 'testing' their blades on any who offended their honour, regardless of any actual wrongdoing towards them...

A melody slowly unfolded itself as I made my way across the seemingly-endless fields. It was a wandering melody played on a piano, with bells accenting its various notes throughout. Part of it had an eerie, almost foreboding feeling to it, other parts were mysterious or questioning.

Ahead of me, a farmer came into view over the crest of a hill and started making his way towards where I'd come from. I noticed a few of the nearby farmers tracking my progress, which wasn't unusual, but something about it triggered my suspicion, though I didn't stop.

When the incoming farmer was perhaps fifteen metres from me, my attention caught on the way he was walking and how he held one arm behind his back, as though reaching for something. His face was shielded by the rim of his conical rice-straw hat, and yet I could feel the intensity of his focus on me.

"Now entering Emergent Stage 'The Red Fields'."

Not good.

As soon as the banner evaporated, the approaching 'farmer' moved with unexpected suddenness, flinging something small at me from across the road. I didn't see what it was, but still managed to roll my body out of the way before it could hit me. My hand didn't make it to the hilt at my side before I was struck in my upper arm by something sharp. I turned and saw one of the farmers in the field to my right reaching for another projectile hidden behind his back, perhaps in some unseen pouch. I pulled out the dart-like *Shuriken*¹³¹, which had only partially pierced the arm of my leather

¹³¹ A throwable weapon that comes in many shapes. The one currently residing in my arm was known as a *Bō-Shuriken*, i.e. a "stick-shaped throwable blade".

tunic and nicked the skin beneath. It barely even hurt, though that might have been caused by the remnants of Ginko's tea still in my system.

As if I could predict its trajectory, I turned and flung my blade from its scabbard, slapping another shuriken from the air in one continuous motion. In the same moment, the guy behind started running towards me, wielding a short sickle in his hand. It was almost like fighting someone wielding a shovel, granted, the sickle was quite a bit sharper, but it was still kind of terrifying that a farmer's tool could easily turn into a weapon, depending on whose hands it was in.

Putting my newfound skill to use, I neatly deflected the incoming chop, setting the Shinobi off-balance and leaving him open, allowing me to follow up the deflect with a slash down along his torso. My blade sheared through his clothes, parting the flesh beneath without any resistance. Before the Shinobi's body had landed on the ground, another jumped at me, wielding the shorter, straight Uchigatana I'd come to associate with their kind. It was clearly a useful weapon, as its size and form made it easy to conceal beneath baggy peasant clothes.

I went for another deflect as our blades met, but he quickly adapted, not allowing me to exploit the momentary opening and disengaging so that his friend behind me could attack. I sidestepped the downward slash of his *Tekkō-kagi*¹³² claws, but as I moved away from his follow-up, my foot slipped, as though my legs couldn't bear my weight, and I ended up with my ass planted on the ground. My body suddenly felt numb, and, as I swiped my sword at his legs to push him back, I could barely feel my fingers gripping the handle.

The sword-wielding Shinobi seized on the opportunity and drove straight for me, but I was able to lock his blade with my own, keeping it an uneasy few centimetres from my head. As I rose to my feet, pushing him with me, my whole body teetered on the brink of collapse.

Though I managed to avoid the sword's killing edge, holding my blade above my head completely exposed my flank, which the clawed Shinobi exploited, managing to drive the four claws on his right hand into my unprotected side, all the way up to his knuckles. My whole body shuddered with the impact and a scream left my lips. The other man was still trying to force his own blade down on me, but I used my remaining strength to push his blade up, then I pulled my edge away from his for just a second, before driving it down on his straw hat with a Helm-Splitter to devastating effect. The clawed man had already pulled free from my side and was trying for another stab, but I moved away from his clawed punch and chopped my blade upwards in the same movement, cleaving his hand at the wrist.

We both fell back, blood dripping from his dismembered arm and my punctured side. I put my right hand against the wound, trying to stop the bleeding, but it simply oozed between my fingers. The warm blood trickling down my hand felt kind of nice, but then the pain flowered from my wound, as the numbness began to fade. I suddenly realised that the shuriken that'd hit me had been coated in some kind of paralysing poison, though it'd been too weak to put me out of commission completely.

With his good hand, the remaining Shinobi reached into a pouch hidden on his lower back and quickly tossed four thin needles at me, which I didn't manage to swat from the air in time, and they settled in my left shoulder with barely a prick.

¹³² A light Shinobi weapon consisting of claws attached to brass knuckles, which can do a lot of quick damage at close range.

Realising that these were likely poisoned as well, I charged towards him, letting go of my side to grab my sword in both hands as I drove it down on him in another Helm-Splitter. He tried pointlessly to block with his one good arm, but it was no match for my flawless edge, which tore through him, splitting his entire body along its length. I took a step back, marvelling at the result as he fell into two separate pieces, his insides spilling out between them, but then my body rocked violently, and I fell down onto my back, my body coated in a viscous numbness once again.

I didn't pass out, but I also couldn't move, so I just lay there for a moment as I waited for the effect to dissipate. The melody in the air also calmed and disappeared, and was replaced by the usual Shakuhachi flute song, as more-and-more of my blood slowly dripped down onto the earth beneath me.

Thirty minutes later, I could finally control my fingers and toes again, then as the minutes passed, the feeling crept back up along my arms and legs, until I eventually felt the pain from my broken ribs and nose, my ruined side, and the million-and-one bruises covering seemingly every inch of my body. The healing tea that Ginko had served me had stopped working and even though I was able to move, I didn't. With every breath, it felt as though flames coursed down through my veins and muscles, setting fire to my limbs.

I finally reached up and pulled the four needles from my shoulder, and then carefully eased myself to a sitting position.

Of the three dead Shinobi scattered around me, two of them had glowing wisps above their bodies, and, after a few more minutes, I got to my feet uneasily and went to inspect the loot.

The messy remains of the clawed Shinobi held '*Shinobi's Tekkō-kagi*', which didn't weight much, so I stored it in my inventory.

'Shinobi's Tekkō-kagi'

-Melee Weapon-

Gauntlet > Claw

"A simple-but-effective weapon utilised by the Shinobi, who always strike when they are close enough to their target that they cannot miss."

Equip

Discard

Weight: 0.6 kilos

The weapon was of the '*Claw*' category, but I dismissed it as a possible back-up to my sword, due to its obvious range disadvantage and what seemed like a very vulnerable moveset.

The other wisp floated above the sickle-wielding Shinobi, and offered me a '*Rice-Straw Hat*'.

'Rice-Straw Hat'

-Armour-
Armour > Hat
Armour Type: Light

*“A rice-straw hat worn by the farmers of the Red Fields.
Offers decent protection against the elements.”*

Equip
Discard

Weight: 0.4 kilos

I ended up equipping it, as I figured it would help against the rain on the way back, though the sky seemed clear for the moment. I liked the way it looked, though I'd probably get rid of it as soon as I found a merchant to buy the various stuff I'd collected, such as the Menpō that I'd found the day before.

Besides the hat, I also picked up an *'Assassination Contract'*, the tooltip of which read:

'Assassination Contract'
-Quest Item-

“The Azure Dragon have recently employed a Rōnin of undoubtable strength. Whoever brings us their head first, will be paid well. When you succeed, bring your proof to Sakuyama in Kakon-shi.”

Weight: N/A

It seemed that someone had it out for me, but, unfortunately for them, I'd track them down and repay their kindness in full.

When there was nothing else left to loot, I continued on my way to the Lady's Village, though my body ached with a thousand pains. The steady drip of blood from my side left a trail in my wake, but, just as soon as the crimson hit the ground, it became indistinguishable from the puddles of rain.

I eventually arrived at the village, as the sun was making its journey to the horizon, my face no doubt devoid of colour, and my pool of stamina all but exhausted from the strain of the long journey. My body felt like it was turning to ice, and I'd completely lost the feeling in my feet and the tips of my fingers.

Before approaching the mansion at the end of the village, I scoured the few shops for any place that might fix up my broken cuirass or sell me the materials I needed to craft some healing potions. I found neither, but I did come across a general merchant who parted with two *'Modest Healing Potions'*

in exchange for the ‘*Shinobi’s Tekkō-kagi*’, ‘*Vermilion Bird Oni Menpō*’, and ‘*Rice-Straw Hat*’, as well as four square *Shu*¹³³ coins.

‘*Modest Healing Potion*’

-Consumable-

Drink > Potion

“*A modest healing concoction, which once imbibed grants instantaneous healing of deep wounds, but only moderately-fast healing of more serious wounds and limited regeneration of lost limbs.*”

Use

Discard

Weight: 0.15 kilos

I hadn’t even noticed, until I paid the merchant, that my currency had changed when I entered this World. I had no idea how the values translated to those in the Forlorn Kingdom, though I had two *Bu*, four *Shu*, and thirty-one *Mon* remaining after the transaction, which meant that my six gold and thirty-two silver from the first World had turned into three *Bu* and thirty-one *Mon* when I’d entered this World.¹³⁴

I immediately downed one of the flasks, and felt my vigour replenishing. Though I’d been gravely injured several times today, I hadn’t actually experienced the dreaded black edges along the corners of my vision, but that was likely more due to luck than anything else, especially in my last fight against the three *Shinobi*, since I hadn’t worn any body armour besides my tunic, which clearly didn’t do much, considering the four perfect holes that now adorned its side.

Even though I’d sold off everything I’d looted, my total weight was still half a kilo above my usual limit of 7.5 kgs, thanks to ‘*The Weeping Blade*’ that I’d yet to return to the Lady.

I made my way to the mansion, as the healing warmth flushed through my system, banishing the cold and restoring the feeling to my extremities, as well as knitting shut the four holes in my side, my countless broken ribs, and, not to mention, resetting and repairing my crooked nose.

Outside the mansion gate, leaning against the wall nonchalantly, was Hayato. He looked pretty beat-up himself, with fresh cuts and bruises on his face and hands, but he’d probably dealt ten times as much damage as he’d taken, and I no doubt had him to thank for the Vermilion army not interfering in my fight against the monstrous Widow.

“Did you complete your task?” he asked as soon as I drew near.

“I did,” I confirmed.

¹³³ Old Japanese currency. It worked something like this: 4000 *Mon* > 16 *Shu* > 4 *Bu* > 1 *Ryō*.

¹³⁴ Have fun figuring out the exchange rates...

He kicked off from the wall and pushed in front of me, opening the door set into the gate, before leading me to the main building inside the mansion complex. I wasn't accosted by the guards this time, thanks to Hayato I suppose. Just like the first time, I took off my boots and stored them in my inventory. Hayato gave me a look, but didn't seem to question it.

As I walked barefoot across the wooden floor, I heard the first few warning drops fall on the roof and moments later the *pitter-patter* of the rain echoed throughout the entire building. Just like the day before, there were no servants in sight.

Hayato got down on his knees in front of the sliding door to the room, which Hanada and I had rudely barged into the previous day. The blue Shinobi carefully pulled aside the door, then announced our presence.

"You may enter," the Lady told him.

Only two of the nine vassals I'd seen yesterday were seated within. The lady wore the exact same outfit and make-up, and so did her two vassals, ridiculous topknots and all. Her beautiful Naginata lay before her once again, forming a deadly barrier between her and her subordinates.

Her eyes settled on me immediately and her mouth curved in a smile that was disturbing and dangerous, and yet exquisite and alluring at the same time.

I opened up my inventory, then tossed the inert mirror blade before her feet. I felt my stamina pool increase, and it was like my lungs were filled with more air than before. I never seemed to get used to the feeling, no matter how many times I experienced it.

The mirror blade bounced once off the tatami with a *clunk*, before settling in a way that I could see the reflected faces of the two men before her. The men gasped at the sight, then quickly composed themselves. The Lady's smile widened, revealing her black teeth and stretching the red lipstick that was meant to make her mouth appear small.

"Good. Good." The way she stretched the one-syllable¹³⁵ word sounded almost orgasmic and turned her vassals' faces red with embarrassment. For a while, they all just stared at the inert Weeping Blade.

"My payment," I demanded, cutting through the awkward silence that permeated the room.

The Lady pursed her smile, but still seemed overcome with joy. I supposed I'd done her quite a service. I just hoped the payment reflected that.

"Hayato," she commanded.

The blue-grey Shinobi walked across the tatami to where the Lady was seated, knelt into a *Seiza* and received, with both hands, an embroidered pouch, which chinked with the sound of the metal within.

"Three *Ryō* for your service."

One of the vassals immediately stood up in outrage. "My Lady, you cannot—"

"I can," she interrupted him, fixing her devilish eyes on him. "It would have cost me three times *that* to employ an army to deal with this situation, not that any of you would lend me your forces to deal with it. So, the way I see it, I saved a headache and a fortune thanks to this *Rōnin*."

He quietly sat back down again, without any further complaints.

¹³⁵ One syllable in Japanese, that is.

The Lady then looked back to me and said, “Join our side. Rōnin always become squished between the conflicting forces, but, if you became an Azure Samurai, you’d flourish alongside us when we conquer the Vermilion army and reclaim our rightful seat at the head of Kakon-shi. As our Samurai, you would want for nothing, though that goes without saying.”

She didn’t mention what would happen to the White Tiger, which I found to be quite interesting. Perhaps the Azure Dragon would broker an alliance with the Tiger after proving their might by destroying the Vermilion clan. Part of me still wanted to fulfil the task set by Jirō and Genzō, but after meeting Hanada, Hayato, Mitsui, and the Lady, I kind of liked the idea of kicking it with this team instead. Besides, I still hadn’t met the leader of the White clan, and it wasn’t like Genzō or Jirō were all that trustworthy, what with their spies and manic laughter. Not to mention the complete lack of communication from them since we went our separate ways. The idea of eventually having to fight the White Wolves did make me hesitate for a short minute, but then I agreed to her deal.

“Alright,” I said. “I’ll be your Samurai.”

The Lady smiled a benign smile, as though I hadn’t seen her ludicrous grin earlier and knew that she could no doubt put up as much of a fight as the Monstrosity in the Sword if she decided to make sure I didn’t decline her gracious offer.

“Hayato,” she ordered again.

The Shinobi left the room and the four of us remained in silence. Neither of the vassals made a sound, as though even the tiniest shuffle of the pillows under their legs would offend their leader. It felt as though the way they glanced at me out of the corner of their eyes had changed by the simple declaration that I was now an Azure Samurai. I was still beneath them in terms of the hierarchical order of things, but instead of being one step above peasants, I was now only one step below the vassals.¹³⁶ Plus, I was now officially on their side, which no doubt eased any concerns they might have had about handing out a large sum of money to some random mercenary.

A moment later, the sliding door opened again and Hayato returned, bearing an azure chestpiece in his hands. He handed the armour to me, and a tooltip appeared:

‘Azure Dragon Dō’

-Armour-

Armour > Upper-body

Armour Type: Heavy

“A heavy upper-body chestpiece reinforced with iron-plates and resplendent with square shoulder plates to protect against arrows. On the back is the insignia of the Azure Dragon clan.”

Equip

Discard

¹³⁶ Technically I’d only advanced one step, as I was now two steps above peasantry, but it still meant a lot in this hierarchal society.

Weight: 3.2 kilos

It weighed twice what my ruined cuirass weighed, but was also replete with sleeves and shoulder protection, which would clearly be beneficial against the many archers I'd no doubt face. On its back it had the flower of the Azure clan, which was still unknown to me.

I wondered if they'd accidentally kill me in battle if I didn't wear it. I didn't really want to compromise my movement speed and stamina, since it'd nearly cost me my life during the Shinobi ambush, but I also didn't want to get shot in the back with an Azure arrow. Perhaps I could find a blacksmith who could rework my broken cuirass to make it look the same way or something. I deposited the chestpiece in my inventory and immediately felt a reverse change in my stamina, kind of like the additional air that had momentarily filled my lungs was sucked out and only partially refilled, except it was a feeling that permeated my entire body.

"Do you have any other tasks for me?" I asked, hoping they didn't.

"Not for the moment. You are free to do as you see fit. Though I implore you to stay within our village or Kakon-shi, so that my servants may find you easily, once need of your skills arises."

"Got it."

I didn't give her any chance to change her mind and left immediately, leaving the sliding door gaping open as I hurried down the hall and out into the courtyard. A servant was busy raking the gravel surrounding the stone path to the buildings, creating hills and valleys that made the entire courtyard look like a harmonious sea of pebbles.

"Hey, you," I called, while clumsily putting on my boots.

He froze mid-rake and turned slowly towards me.

"Yes, *you*. Do you know how I can get to Kakon-shi the fastest?"

"H-horse."

"And where do you keep the horses?"

"I shall find you one with the utmost haste," he mumbled politely and left his rake, then started walking very quickly towards the gate out of the complex, leaving me to chase after him with only one boot on my foot and the other in my hand.

"Hold on. You don't need to do that. Stop! Oh, for Gods' sake... Hold up!"

When I finally caught up to the servant, he held the reins to a knackered-looking mare.

"As you requested," he said eagerly, unless I mistook fear for enthusiasm.

"Thanks... but you really didn't need to do that." I pulled open my inventory and withdrew a coin. "Here, for your trouble." I flicked the square coin towards him and he only caught it partially, fumbling it around before he managed to trap it between both hands. When he opened his hands and gave the coin a proper look, he suddenly fell to his knees before me, forehead planted in the dirt.

"Whatever you request of me, it shall be done! With this much money I can get my family out of here safely, you cannot comprehend the immense—"

"Thanks for the horse," I interrupted abruptly.

"But, but..."

“See you later,” I said and leapt on the horse, setting off in a gallop before he had the chance to make me regret my impulsive altruism. All I’d given him was one Shu...

Though the horse was an old mare that had seen better days, or decades even, it made my trip from the hidden Azure village to the Capital quite a short one, compared to how long it’d have taken me on foot.

Despite the soothing effects of the healing potion from earlier, I felt pain ripple through my body with every rhythmic jolt transmitted through the horse’s powerful legs and up through the saddle. Not to mention, my bottom half quickly lost all feeling and tingled uncomfortably the entire way.

Although I’d prepared myself for another ambush when I travelled across the crimson hills, no one challenged my passing, and the few peasants tending the fields did their best to seek cover when they heard the sound of my thunderous hooves. That is to say, all was as ‘usual’.

I was first going to find a blacksmith to repair my armour, then I’d go shopping for an alchemist, and then I’d track down the bastard who’d put a bounty on my head. The things I’d do to him would make even the bloodthirsty Reds tremble in their boots.

The mare ran with the wind, like an indomitable force pushing ever onwards, which made it all the more surprising when it collapsed, exhausted, before the Kakon-shi slums upon our arrival. As it fell away beneath me, I leapt from the saddle and slid a metre or two across the soft earth on landing. If there’d been a spectating crowd, they would’ve no doubt greeted me with a standing ovation, but the only audience I had here on the outskirts of the Slum was a tired-looking old man, who gave me an unimpressed look as though he’d already seen that trick before.

Before I made my way through the city, I swapped into my casual attire of a soft white shirt and a knee-length black skirt. As the Safe Zone banner popped into existence, I also put my sword away. It wasn’t that I expected to fit in with my outfit, but rather that the people of this World would just see me as an outsider, and not some Rōnin or Samurai, who’d perhaps cut them down for any offense taken. I also wasn’t sure whether any Shinobi resided within the city, so hopefully the change in clothes would keep them from noticing me. Lastly, if I happened to run into another player, I didn’t want them to know who I was, though I hadn’t seen any players this far, so I doubted this last concern was warranted. For now, anyway.

I moved through the Slums I’d only just escaped from the day before,¹³⁷ as the last embers of the sun painted the clouds in pink and orange hues. I half expected to see the remains of Mori’s corpse, but it seems that time had moved quickly, since, as I moved onwards through the district, no traces of the Vermilion and White Tiger’s battle in the Marketplace remained. The stalls were once more in their usual condition and people thronged the plaza, browsing through wares, haggling, and making merry. It was a bit jarring, to be honest, and I got the feeling that I wasn’t supposed to have returned here so soon. I had, after all, gone through three Stages in less than two days. It was possible that the Shinobi ambush was supposed to have been triggered as I made my way back to Kakon-shi, but I had perhaps circumvented that by taking an alternate route back to the Azure village instead.

Of all the stalls in the Market, the majority sold food of one sort or another, while only a scarce few sold jewellery, trinkets, charms, books, art, and such. The permanent stores, built from wood and

¹³⁷ When you think about it, I’d had quite a crazy time in this World already.

stone, with a proper roof above them, were housed in the buildings that surrounded the stalls in the courtyard. They sold armour, weapons, alchemical reagents, and materials for other types of crafting skills, such as Scribing, Needleworking, Cartography, Hunting, and so forth. Most of the stores were open to the air, their shutters and sliding panels flung wide, with the exception of the Alchemist's, the Blacksmith's, and the Scribe's.

I slid open the door to the Alchemy store and cast a sliver of sunlight into the dark interior. Its pungent and dank aroma flooded my nose as air rushed from the room, and I quickly closed the door behind me for the sake of the people outside. A sheen of condensation covered the walls and water droplets occasionally fell from the ceiling, one landing square on the top of my head as I made my way to the desk, behind which a man was busy mixing various reagents. The entire shop was at least ten degrees hotter than the outside, not to mention uncomfortably humid.

"I'm looking for Aloe Vera leaves. For healing potions," I told him.

The Alchemist turned around and looked at me with a sceptical glance. Part of me feared he was going to send me on some quest just for me to be allowed to browse his wares.

"I don't have any of *those*, but maybe you could use *these* instead," he replied, pulling some fresh herbs from a jar.

"Do they have healing properties?"

"They do. Give them a try. You can pay afterwards."

That was awfully friendly of him, I thought to myself. For some reason, I found this sort of kindness suspicious. But I went over and made use of the available alchemy table despite my apprehensions. Twenty minutes later I'd distilled a brown-ish-red '*Weak Healing Potion*' and had a new entry into my '*Known Ingredients*' list, called '*Akebia*'. In terms of effect, it seemed to be pretty much identical to the Aloe Vera plant I'd used in the past.

"Well done," the Alchemist congratulated me, somewhat condescendingly.

"I'll buy three more of these herbs and flasks to go with them."

"As you wish."

I paid him seven-hundred Mon and left the damp shop in a hurry.

For the next hour, as torches were lit all around me, I browsed through the stalls in the large courtyard, and bought a couple of meat-skewers to appease my growling stomach as I walked around. So far as I could tell, I was the only player here, but then again it wasn't always super easy to spot the difference between real and virtual, since I'd noticed that some players in the Forgotten Village dressed like the characters of the World.

At some point, I caught a glimpse of a Tailor's shop set into the courtyard wall, similar to the Alchemist's, and realised the disrepair my leather tunic was in: the frayed shoulder, where I'd taken a hit from the greatsword; the neat little puncture holes in the other shoulder, courtesy of the Shinobi's needles; and the four larger holes in its side, where the claw had punched through. It had been manageable when it was just the shoulder, but thanks to the ambush earlier, the tunic's structural integrity was utterly compromised. And it wasn't as though it had really protected me that much to begin with, so I decided it was time to replace it.

The Tailor gave me a bright look as I entered through the open front of the store and placed my broken tunic before him on the counter. A breeze flowed through the shop, ruffling my hair.

“I need something better than this,” I said.

He gave the tunic a solid inspection, and constantly had to brush his long dark hair away from his eyes, then he went to rummage through a box in the back of the store and returned a few minutes later bearing a folded dark-grey jacket with strange hexagonal shapes sewn into the torso, shoulder, and upper arm sections. Of all the armour I’d seen in this World until now, this was far more elaborate by comparison.

“This is a prototype armour I’d been working on for *Genbu-sama*’s men, but I suppose they have no use for it anymore...”

“Why not?” I asked, curiously. The mention of a ‘Lord Genbu’ was new to me. It was another name which fit into the animal theme of the clan names, as the name translated to “Black Tortoise”, and the fact that I hadn’t heard mention of him before was quite intriguing to say the least.

“You don’t know?” the Tailor asked, lowering his voice to a whisper as he leaned closer. “After his exile from the city and the other clans’ relentless hunt for his remaining heirs, he lost all the power he’d once wielded in the region, and his fortunes were seized on and split between the three ruling clans. They have no use for new and improved armour for their foot soldiers, so my prototypes have just been collecting dust.”

Interesting. I wondered if any supporters of the Black Tortoise clan still watched from the shadows, secretly hoping the three clans would tear themselves apart.

“You say this armour is better than what the foot soldiers wear?”

“Yes, far better. Though, it is costly to produce and also time-consuming to make. This particular prototype is made from imported wool, and mixed with silk for additional protection against arrows. Grids of tough, hexagonal leather plates have been sown into the fabric to create a sturdy mesh that will also protect against most weapons, while remaining lightweight enough to not slow down its wearer.”

“What about protection against spears?”

“For that, you’d want to wear something over it, like a *Dō*.”

“And how much is it?”

The Tailor paused, scratching the back of his head. “Erm... Three Bu.” The way he said it, made it sound like a lot of money, which it probably was. He didn’t seem confident that I’d want to buy it, so I decided to try and haggle with him.

“I’ll let you have *this*,” I said and pointed to the ruined tunic before him, “and two Bu.”

He looked at the tunic for a minute, but then said, “Alright, you have yourself a deal.”

As I handed him the coins and grabbed my new jacket, a tooltip appeared:

‘*Prototype Genbu Kikko Katabira*’¹³⁸

-Armour-

Armour > Torso > Arming Jacket

Armour Type: Medium

¹³⁸ Literally: “*Black Tortoise Shell Armour*”.

“A prototype arming jacket once commissioned by Lord Genbu of the now-extinct Black Tortoise clan. The lightweight jacket takes inspiration from the tortoise by having hexagonal plates of dense leather sown into the wool-and-silk fabric at critical points. Offers strong protection against arrows and other ranged projectiles.”

Equip
Discard

Weight: 0.3 kilos

It somehow weighed less than the tunic I’d given him in exchange, which made me a bit worried, but I was sure that its fabric and leather plates beneath would do far better at stopping arrows and shuriken.

Next, I went to the Blacksmith’s shop, just as he was about to close. I squeezed through the partially-open sliding door and almost collided with the man.

“We’re closed,” he said.

“I’ve got money to spend,” I bargained.

“How much?”

“Enough to make it worth your while.”

The Blacksmith wiped the back of his hand across his sweaty forehead, then pulled a dirty, white band from his pocket and tied it around his head.

“Alright, what do you need?”

I pulled my broken ‘*Blacksteel Cuirass*’ from my inventory, along with the Dō that the Lady had awarded me, and set them on a table in the middle of the shop that smelled of iron, smoke, and burnt coals.

“The Azure Dragon, ey?” he said as soon as he saw the symbol.

“You recognise it?”

“Everyone knows what the *Tsukikusa*¹³⁹ flower means,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Really?” Perhaps I should’ve asked someone about it before, since I clearly had a lot to learn.

“Why do you think they all wear blue? The Azure Dragon clan became wealthy thanks to the blue dye that they make from this flower. They wear it as a symbol on their armour to pay homage to their ancestors.”

“You seem to know a lot,” I replied.

“It’s common knowledge, *young lady*.” Well, *that* was a first, I certainly hadn’t been called ‘young lady’ before, but perhaps it’s a common occurrence when you don’t walk around looking like a killer-for-hire.

“What about the Spider Lily insignia that the Vermilion clan uses?”

¹³⁹ 月草, literally meaning “*Moongrass*”. In English it is referred to as the “*Asiatic Dayflower*”, and throughout time it has had many names, with *Tsuyukusa* (露草) “*Dewgrass*” being the most common name in modern Japan.

“That... that has an altogether different meaning. You wouldn’t know it from looking at them, but they have quite a strong connection with Buddha, especially the idea of an afterlife. But along the way their fixation became twisted, and they started believing the path to salvation lay at the end of a long and bloody road. I wouldn’t be surprised if this whole war was just a means to an end. They’re lunatics, the lot of them.” Though he hadn’t said it outright, he seemed to believe that the Vermilion clan had caused the war.

“Is that so...” I responded, intrigued. Who would’ve thought that a blacksmith, of all people, would be such a chatterbox?

“Anyway, I’m closing, so hurry up and tell me what I can do for you.”

“I need *this* repaired,” I said, pointing to the cuirass, which looked more like a stew pot than a functional piece of armour.

The Blacksmith tapped the metal with a hammer, then hummed to himself. “I’ll have to find something strong enough to bend it back into shape, which will take time and lots of coins—”

“That’s not a problem,” I interjected. “Can you have it done in two days?”

“That’d be a bit too—”

The *chink* of the golden, rectangular *Ryō* was like the chime of a dulled bellclock as it bounced off the table and settled right next to the Blacksmith’s hand after a succession of tiny hops back-and-forth.

The Blacksmith swallowed loud enough for me to hear, then he cleared his throat. “I, eh, I suppose that if I hire another hand, it can, eh... be done.”

“Good, thanks. I’ll see you at sundown in two days.” I turned around and made to leave. It was impossible to not feel smug about how easily my coin could alter someone’s will. To be fair, I still had no clue how much money I’d just given him.¹⁴⁰ He might have been able to retire in a castle with that kind of money, though it didn’t matter much to me. I couldn’t waste time hanging around in this World forever. Not if I were to make good on my promise to the Watcher. I’d carve a bloody swathe through every World put before me.

As I reached to the doorway, feeling my stamina pool increase from the lessened weight, he called after me. “What about this other armour?”

“You can keep it, though if you could copy its symbol onto the back of the black one, that’d be great.”

I didn’t hear his reply as I left, but I was sure he’d get it done. As I thought about it, perhaps asking to have an engraving made on the back of the cuirass wasn’t a good idea, considering how I normally wore a cloak that would cover it... *Oh well.*

¹⁴⁰ Spoiler alert: A lot.

The.Root.of.Evil

I handed the owner of Sakuyama a bundle of ten round Mon tied together with twine that looped through the square-shaped holes in the middle of each coin. With the money I still had left, I could afford to live here for the next two years if I wanted...

I'd come in search of the sponsor behind the bounty on my head. Though by the time I'd managed to find the damn place, thanks to its secluded location in the corner of the Slums, the exhaustion of the day had finally caught up to me, which, considering all that had happened, was long overdue.

My feet felt as heavy as boulders as I pulled myself up the stairs to the second floor. After finding my room at the end of one of two corridors, I slid the door shut behind me. There weren't any bolts on the door, but I didn't care. I was in a Safe Zone after all.

I lay down on the surprisingly-nice, thin mattress, which lay atop the somewhat-worn tatami flooring. After moving around all day, it felt as though my body started melt as soon as I stilled. I suddenly became aware of how much my body ached, and promised myself to find a nice hot bath the following day.

I was roused from my sleep by talking from another room, and sat up slowly. The soreness I'd felt the previous night was now ten times worse, and I still felt incredibly tired. I doubted it was something a potion could handle, so I just tried to ignore it as best I could as I walked across the hall and down the stairs.

In a room connected to the 'lobby' came three voices, talking very hushed, but, thanks to the thin walls, it was somewhat audible. From the titbits I could hear, it sounded like they were discussing payment of some sort. As nonchalantly as I could manage, I slid open the door to the room, revealing a sort of tavern-like seating area, with low tables and worn pillows to sit on.

As I entered, a banner appeared, "*Now entering Emergent Stage 'Sakuyama'.*"

Not another one of these...

A simple Koto melody filled the air as I found a table halfway across the room, from which I could watch the three men sitting in the corner, talking in hushed voices. At first, I assumed one of these men was the sponsor, but then I saw a fourth man sitting by himself only a few tables away from me, sipping on a cup of tea, with an expression on his face that didn't hide the fact that he was bored out of his mind. His clothes also didn't really fit in. It wasn't that he was well-dressed, but rather the fact that he didn't have that I-just-rolled-around-in-the-mud-outside look like the three men at the table in the corner. Besides those four and myself, the vast hall was empty, which wasn't surprising, considering the location and state of the place.

I immediately got up from my seat and sat down next to the lone man, eliciting a startled jump from him.

"What'd'ya want?" he grumbled.

I pulled out the contract I'd looted yesterday and put it on the table in front of him.

"I hear you're looking for me," I said.

To his credit he kept his surprise well-concealed. He quickly cleared his throat and said, "You don't have to kill me, I'm just a middle man! In fact! I'll pay you to not kill me!"

“Hmm,” I hummed. “How much are you going to be worth to me, I wonder?”

“Oh, quite a lot! I’ll give you what my Master left with me as bounty payment!”

“And who’s your Master?”

“I’ll tell you, but...”

“But?”

“Those three men in the corner...” I turned to look at them, noticing that they were all staring back at me. “They’ve been hired to guard me... and to make sure that I don’t run away with the bounty fee.”

“You need me to kill them for you?”

“Well... yes.”

“Alright,” I said.

I got up from my seat at the same time as the three men. All of them had short, easy-to-wield weapons in hand, either a dagger or shortsword. I pulled my obsidian edge from my inventory, drawing it from its scabbard at my side and brandishing it, displaying the instrument of their impending death. They froze for a split-second, but then barged across the room towards me, pushing aside tables and roaring at the top of their lungs, perhaps to dispel their own fear.

I held my blade at an equilibrium above my head, the tip almost piercing the ceiling. As the first guard came within range, I let my edge descend upon him, cutting through his upper arm, which was extended in a stab aimed at my unarmoured chest. My blade cleft through flesh and bone like an axe splitting firewood. The next attacker immediately followed behind his screaming comrade, who was spasming around on the floor, and I twisted my blade around and swung it upwards, catching him in the side, below the ribs, and tearing through his entire body, dividing him into two uneven pieces. My sword continued upwards with the momentum and got stuck in the ceiling, just as the third man went for me. I let go of my sword, which hung awkwardly above us, dripping droplets of crimson onto the scuffed wooden floor, and caught his arm before he could bring his shortsword to bear on me. He continued to struggle, putting both hands on the handle of his short *Uchigatana*, while I held his forearms. With as much force as I could manage, I kicked him in the chest, pushing him back just long enough for me to jump and put all my weight on the handle of my ‘*Passing Breeze*’, bringing the midnight-black sword down on his head, where it settled halfway through.

After withdrawing my blade, I jabbed it through the chest of the guy squirming on the floor, then performed a flourish of my blade, scattering two neat lines of blood around me. I quickly became aware of the fact that I needed a change of clothes, as my neat, white shirt was now stained beyond repair.

“Alright, cough it up,” I said.

“They weren’t kidding, you truly are a monster.” Though he’d managed to hide his fear before, it now shone on his face like a permanent mask.

“Maybe I should just retrieve my payment from your corpse...”

“No, please. Here! Take it!” He hurriedly handed me a sack that chinked eagerly with coins. As I took it from him, I realised it contained only two Bu...¹⁴¹

“Alright, who’s the guy that wants me dead?”

¹⁴¹ It was hard not to get offended over how little my enemies thought I was worth...

“They call him the *Spymaster*.”

Shit.

“... Is his name Genzō?”

The man gave me a surprised look, “How’d you know that?”

Shit, shit, shit. The people who’d hired me had already cast me aside and wanted me eliminated because I’d become a threat. Because of their own ignorance! Because they’d been uninformed and unprepared for the Vermilion strike! As if I’d even had a choice in what side to choose, considering how my crazy guide had just up and left at the first sign of a fight. Was the information I had really that volatile? Or was the old Spymaster just that insecure that he didn’t want the possibility of me interfering with his plans?

“When did he put out the bounty on me?”

“Right after the riots in the city.”

Oh, they’d pay. I’d kill that old Spymaster and his crazy son!

I tossed one of the coins from the bounty back to the guy. “You can keep that,” I said.

“For my silence?”

“I don’t care what you do, you can run and tell your Master, *if it pleases you*... I’ll be coming for his head soon.”

I left Sakuyama in a foul mood, stomping through the Slums, heading for the Marketplace, where I asked for directions to the best inn this city had to offer, which sent me on a course to the Residential District.

On the way to the inn, I walked past a tailor, which lay at the beginning of the district and looked quite a bit more expensive than the one I’d visited the day before. I didn’t need to take a look at my town clothes to know they were painted in a fresh coat of crimson.

The assistant greeted me as I entered the store, then froze upon seeing the state I was in.

“You’ll want a new set of clothes?” she inferred from my shoddy appearance.

“Yes, please.”

“Hakama-san will return shortly, if you do not mind waiting,” she informed me. I assumed the person in question was the Tailor.

“That’s fine,” I said, and started looking around the store, trying to figure out what kind of new outfit I’d want. The assistant tracked my progress through the store with a soft expression on her apple-cheeked and kind face. I couldn’t help but smile as she stared at me with those big brown eyes.

A man emerged from the backroom. “A customer?” he asked.

“Yes, she is in need of a new set of clothes, sir.”

He gave me a look up and down.

“Hmm. Yes, indeed. And what sort does the lady wish to wear?”

“A plain kimono, of sturdy, yet comfortable fabric.”

“Certainly.”

He gave me a discerning look, then turned to his assistant.

“*Airi*, could you take her measurements?”

“Of course. With me, please.”

I followed the assistant, Airi, into an adjacent room, where she measured my height, width, and so forth.¹⁴²

When we emerged back into the store, the Tailor, Hakama, was looking at various fabrics, and I ended up choosing the calming blue-grey fabric, which seemed to confuse him, perhaps because he'd expected me to choose a more feminine colour, but, honestly, I'd grown to like this calming shade of blue.¹⁴³

After a bit of searching, he located a kimono in my chosen colour that fit my measurements. When he presented it to me, I suddenly remembered an idea I'd had earlier, and asked the Tailor if they sold belts that allowed for carrying vials. He didn't. But he told me he could make one, and that I should come back the following day. So, after giving them my old town clothes, I put on my new blue-grey kimono and left him with the newly-acquired Bu for his trouble, which seemed to be more than ample payment, judging by the surprised expression on both his and his assistant's faces.

Though I bitterly wanted to seek out Genzō beneath the creepy dollmaker's shop, I continued on my way to what I'd been told was the best inn around. Unlike my first pass through the district, people actually thronged the streets and alleyways, most seemingly returning home after working at the market and elsewhere throughout the city.

On the corner of where the main road through the district was intersected by another wide road, stood the two-story inn. It'd been built in mixed style of wood and stone, and planted before it was the marvellous blooming splendour of orange Osmanthus, as well as white and pink Cherry-blossom and Plum trees. The sweet apricot scent from the Osmanthus hooked me by the nose and reeled me in, until I was suddenly in front of the door.

As though sensing me from within, a woman, clad in an elaborate kimono decorated with the scenery of a pond full of Koi fish and a heron flying overhead, gracefully slid the door aside.

"Welcome to *Koike Rakuen*.¹⁴⁴" Her voice was soft like velvet, and her face trained into an archaic smile that managed to appear warm, without being overly hospitable. After all, this was the sort of establishment where customers sought them out, not the other way around. I was sure I'd end up paying an arm and a leg to stay here a couple nights, though I felt I deserved luxury after the mess I'd gone through the last few days, plus, I needed something to distract me from the disturbing revelation that my employer had turned on me the instant I'd left his sight.

"Your best room, with a view of the sunset, please."

The well-practiced smile widened slightly at my request, betraying a flicker of the true persona beneath the hostess' mask. She gave me a look up-and-down, no doubt judging my appearance. "You may not be aware, but we insist that our guests pay upfront."

"How much?"

"How long do you plan to stay with us?"

"Probably two nights, maybe more."

"For two nights, it will be nine Shu."

I opened my inventory and withdrew the exact amount of coins to my hand, then handed them to her unceremoniously. "Here you go."

¹⁴² No, I'm not going to give you my three sizes.

¹⁴³ I wonder why...

¹⁴⁴ "Koi-Fish-Pond Paradise".

One of her eyes twitched slightly with some kind of restrained grimace or surprised expression. “Very good,” she then said. “Follow me.”

As she turned away from me, leading the way to a staircase and up to the second floor, part of me secretly hoped I’d run into another player here.

The second floor was, like the floor below, entirely constructed with wood, with the stone parts of the building being only for the exterior and a few structural pillars. The inn itself was built in the shape of a tall square with its centre cut out and turned into a small garden with a pond and open sky above. From the windows on the second floor, I saw that the pond was, according to the name of the establishment, brimming with Koi fish. Just like the first time I’d encountered a Koi pond within the Lady’s mansion, the fish were in a murderous frenzy and the water looked like that of a jacuzzi with its waterjets turned to max. Next to the pond stood the statue of a heron frozen mid-flight.

On the way to my room, we passed another one of the hostesses, who looked eerily similar to the woman walking in front of me. She had the exact same height and lithe build, the same tied-up silky black hair, the same white-powdered face, the same kimono with the Koi fish pond and heron mid-flight, and the same warm-but-not-overly-hospitable tight-lipped smile. The second hostess was in the middle of bringing an empty tray back downstairs, presumably after having delivered something to one of the rooms, which made my heart pound. I hadn’t talked normally to another player since I’d rudely talked to Jakob prior to leaving the Kingdom.¹⁴⁵

The hostess stopped in front of a door, and said, “This is the best room we currently have available. When you need something please ring the bell in your room. Dinner will be served at sunset and breakfast at sunup.”

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind having the bath filled immediately.”

“As you wish.” She opened the door and let me walk past her, then turned on the spot and shuffled down the hallway towards the staircase.

The room was quite spectacular indeed. At the far wall was a broad window that looked out across the city and the bright clear sky. The entrance to the room had a tiny wooden platform where you could place your shoes and hang your coat, and then a small step to the rest of the floor, which was covered in tatami. In the centre of the room was a low table with a legless cushioned chair next to it, and in one corner was a wooden box surrounding a bathtub-looking hole with two steps down, providing what was probably a comfortable seat while submerged in the water. At the other end lay a mattress with a small sausage-like pillow and fat duvet. The room was decorated with colourful and aromatic flowers, interesting ink paintings that looked almost abstract, and tiny Buddha and *Jizō* statues.

The *Jizō* statues were peculiar, I thought, sitting there with their red bibs atop some sort of dresser. *Jizō* was thought to be a God who served as a caretaker for the children who died before their parents and were therefore unable to pass to the afterlife, and, when I thought about it, I hadn’t seen a single child in this World. Perhaps the *Shigurui-no-Kumo* that plagued these lands was lethal to children, or maybe something else had spirited them away. It was a depressing thought. Suddenly, the desire to end this civil war was a lot more understandable. It wasn’t about pacifism or some ideal of a peaceful world, no, it was about the simplest, most crucial aspect of life: Survival. If the war didn’t end, the

¹⁴⁵ Though it wasn’t more than three days prior.

clans would literally kill each other until no one was left. I just hoped I could fix this World before it was too late for them.

A polite “*Excuse me*” from just beyond the door ripped me from my spaced-out, blank stare at the tiny statues.

“Come in,” I answered.

A woman, or rather, a young girl, in a plain brown kimono, burst into the room carrying a big bucket sloshing with steaming-hot water, which she dumped into the bathtub-like square in the corner of the room. She then bowed curtly and left the room, returning a few minutes later with a full bucket. This happened six times until the tub was full and the room was flushed with the water’s flower-scented steam.

I slowly peeled off my own kimono after making sure the door was properly closed, then lowered my sore body into the steaming tub, feeling an immediate sensation of pain, followed by a wave of comforting warmth that penetrated all the way to my core and left me sighing. As I steeped in the hot water, I felt the last few days’ worth of exhaustion overtake me.

I woke up a few hours later, with the sky outside orange from the setting sun, and spotted a tray of food on the table. I felt kind of creeped out that someone had entered the room while I was naked and asleep, but I was hungry, so I forgave the intrusion.

After crawling out of the square tub, I dried myself off with a short piece of cloth lying next to its edge, then put my clothes back on. I spent the next half hour eating my food, taking my time with every single mouthful. My body felt heavy and sluggish, and perhaps I was only eating this slowly, because my sore body would’ve hurt far more if I went any faster.

When not a single grain of rice remained, I stacked the plates, cups, and bowls on top of the tray, and blew out the bright candles that had been lit whenever the food had been brought in. I pulled off my kimono again, leaving just my underwear, then crawled under the heavy duvet and put my head on the sausage-shaped pillow. The pillow was filled with some kind of seed, which dispersed with the weight of my head, giving a comforting shape that supported my neck and pressed gently against the sides of my head. I blinked a few times, listening to the muffled sounds of the inn and my dark room, then—

—blinked again and awoke, finding the entire room awash in a pink, yellow, and orange light. Even though I knew I’d slept, I didn’t really feel it. My body was still sore, but maybe less so than the previous night, though it was hard to tell. It felt like I’d done a workout involving every single muscle in my body, and just the simple motion of pushing the duvet off my body and sitting up hurt a lot more than it should have.

I looked over to the table in the middle of the room, and, unsurprisingly, found the dinner tray removed and replaced with a smaller one, whereupon a bowl of rice with mushrooms, a bowl of soup, and a plate with a grilled fish were placed. Next to the plate was a cup of tea, from which curling tendrils of steam floated upwards and disappeared.

For a moment, I wondered if the servants of this inn were secretly trained Shinobi, since I doubted that I was a deep enough sleeper to not notice someone entering my room, while carrying trays back-and-forth, but perhaps I’d just been *that* exhausted.

I quickly devoured the entire meal after getting changed, and then left my room and made my way downstairs. One of the hostesses bowed as I passed by and I replied with a brief smile, before leaving the inn.

Outside, the sun was obscured behind an overcast sky that seemed to have no end in sight. People were milling about the area outside the inn, which seemed to be a hub of some sort, due to the different inns, eateries, and shops that lined the streets on either side of the large intersection.

For once I had no plans, so I took my time walking to the Tailor I'd visited the day before. As I arrived at the store, I heard voices within and through the shuttered window saw silhouettes move around inside. For some reason, I contemplated waiting outside until they were done, but then I changed my mind and pulled aside the door, immediately interrupting whatever conversation had taken place.

The proprietor looked at me and smiled. "Give me a moment," he said the customer in front of him and went into the back, quickly returning while holding a blue-grey sash in his hands. The sash had small loops made of sturdy string attached around the side and back, allowing for a total of eight flasks to be carried on it at the same time.

"I hope this satisfies your request," Hakama the Tailor said hopefully.

"Mind if I try it on before I decide?"

"Of course."

He handed me the sash, and a tooltip appeared:

'Alchemist's Sash'

-Crafting Utility Item-

Utility > Toolbelt

"A prototype arming jacket once commissioned by Lord Genu of the now-extinct Black Tortoise clan. The lightweight jacket takes inspiration from the tortoise by having hexagonal plates of dense leather sown into the wool-and-silk fabric at critical points. Offers strong protection against arrows and other ranged projectiles."

Equip

Discard

Weight: N/A

It had no stats or weight, but also wasn't a 'Cosmetic' item or 'Town Clothes', rather something called 'Crafting Utility' which I found interesting, given the implications. As I pressed 'Equip', it appeared around my waist, immediately blending in with the kimono I was wearing. I pulled out the poison I'd made two days earlier and attached it to one of the loops, then I proceeded to jump and run awkwardly around the store, testing out the grip of the simplistic loops. I had to hand it to him, it was

a simple but effective design, though I wished I'd asked for it to be made with black fabric, since the blue would look odd when I wore it in battle.¹⁴⁶

"It's perfect," I said. Besides the colour, of course, but I didn't think it was worth mentioning.

"I am glad to hear that," the Tailor admitted.

I stuffed the sash away in my inventory, said my thanks, and left the shop, then headed for the marketplace beyond the Residential District.

Gravel and dirt crunched beneath my boots as I passed under the marketplace archway and the thronging stalls greeted me with their smells and sounds. It was busier than my last visit and I swore I caught the glimpse of people who seemed to not fit into the surroundings. But, as I tracked their progress through the crowd they just suddenly vanished and I was left standing there staring vacantly into space, wondering if it had just been a trick of the mind. Was I *that* starved for real company?

Suddenly someone bumped against me with such force that it almost knocked me to the ground.

"Hey!" I yelled after the guy, who didn't stop running.

I sighed loudly and turned my attention to the spot where I thought I'd seen someone, and decided to try going over to that side of the market, but, as I took one step forward, something crunched underfoot, something with a crispier sound to it than dirt or gravel. I looked down and saw that I was standing on top of a folded-up roll of white paper. I picked it up and dusted most of the dirt off of it, before undoing the cord coiled around its centre. The letter unfurled itself almost like a banner, with large, boldly-written and elaborate characters on it, reading: "*Mercenary Dog of the Azure Dragon, I, Suzaku Nobushige, challenge you to a duel. Meet me on the hill that separates the Vermilion and Azure lands, when the sun has passed its zenith.*"¹⁴⁷

Honestly, I was flattered. He at least had more courage than the Spymaster. And I had to admit that I was itching to spill someone's guts onto the ground, so this Nobushige might as well be the target of my bloodlust. I wondered if this was the man whom I'd heard the Lady describe as "Suzaku", though I doubted the head of the Vermilion clan would want to face me in a duel. It was possible the author was a servant or high-ranking lieutenant of the clan, similar to Hayato, though I wasn't sure if Hayato actually was part of the Azure family or not, but, by the way he was treated by the Lady, it seemed unlikely.

If this Nobushige fella was expecting me past noon, it seemed that I didn't have much time to waste looking for phantoms in the marketplace, so I instead turned on the spot and headed for the blacksmith, where my cuirass would be waiting.

I made it only ten steps, before someone called out to me.

"Hey, you!"

Here we go again, I thought, although I hadn't seen a Stage banner pop up, so I didn't know what to expect.

A guy of about the same height as me, with strong cheekbones and suntanned skin, a slender yet muscular frame, a light-grey yukata, and the craziest hair I'd ever seen, stopped in front of me. His

¹⁴⁶ I know, *veeery* important...

¹⁴⁷ I found it somewhat ironic that so much time had been spent on this letter of challenge. Wasn't it just easier to send a messenger to tell me directly? Or better yet, hire a band of assassins to do your dirty work? Perhaps the author took pride in this kind of display of arrogant penmanship.

hair was like blue frost and orange-red fire swirled in a tornado and curled wildly on top of his head. I would've laughed if it hadn't been for his kind frost-blue eyes, and slightly mischievous smile.

"You're a player, right?" he asked.

"Yeah, that's right. What's with the crazy hair?"

He grabbed a bit of his hair in-between three fingers, laughed, and said, "A lot of people ask about that."

"So, what do you want? I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"I saw. You're about to begin the Duel Stage, right?"

"I guess."

"Who are you fighting?"

"Nobushige," I replied.

He made a sound that seemed to indicate I'd have a rough time.

"What, is he *that* hard?"

"That's what I hear. I joined the Vermilion clan, so I had to fight Hayato. He wasn't easy, let me tell you, but at least he only has a *Shinobigatana*¹⁴⁸, whereas Nobushige has a *Jūmonji Yari*¹⁴⁹."

"That makes sense, I guess, but I'm sure he won't be too bad."

"What kind of weapons do you use?"

"This is an awful lot of questions."

"Sorry, I'm just a bit excited, I guess. I've been hanging out with the same two guys for the last ten days and I miss talking *Builds* with other players."

"You're the first player I've seen in this World," I admitted. "I didn't think there was anyone else here."

"Yeah, I don't know what happened. After I entered this World, people just seemed to stop progressing and catching up to me. I actually had a few friends who were supposed to meet me here, but I haven't heard from them in like a month."

"It might have had something to do with the PKer who was guarding the Forlorn Castle," I explained.

"Fuck... really?"

"Yeah, but she was killed recently,¹⁵⁰ so we should start seeing more people here soon, I hope." I didn't, actually. I honestly had kind of liked that the city wasn't brimming with players. Granted, I wasn't a huge fan of a ghost town only inhabited by virtual characters, but it still beat being chased around by stalkers, whenever I forgot to take my cloak off.

"I sure hope so. My team and I have been looking for a fourth player for a while, we're trying to beat the final Stage on its *Alt-Mode*. Plus, I'm so freaking tired of talking to *NPCs*, I must've spoken to every single one in this city twice. Most of them just repeat the same lines over-and-over."

"Sorry, I'm not really sure I follow. What is an 'NPC'? And 'Alt-Mode'? And you mentioned 'Build' earlier too. I don't know what any of that means." As I said the words, they felt almost

¹⁴⁸ "Shinobi Katana", shorter than a normal Uchigatana and completely straight.

¹⁴⁹ "Cross-shaped spear".

¹⁵⁰ I didn't mention that I'd killed her, since I still felt bad about it, and I wasn't sure how his opinion of me would change. I mean, it's not like I cared, since he was just a stranger, but most people will probably treat you differently if you introduce yourself by essentially saying, "Hi, I just killed another player a few days ago, how do you do?"

nostalgic in my mouth, like the word ‘PKer’ had when Kerebor first explained it to me, but I couldn’t for the life of me remember what they meant.

“Oh, really? I guess you haven’t hung around taverns trading information much?”

“Yeah, not really.”

“I see, that’s pretty *Vanilla*, going solo like that. Basically, NPC means *Non-Player Character*, i.e. any character that isn’t a player is considered an NPC, even the enemies you fight. It’s a term people started using alongside ‘Player’, since this realm is basically one big game.”

“Hmm, that makes sense I guess.”

“As for Alt-Mode, it basically just refers to an Alternate way to fight a boss, usually for a better reward, but also a much harder fight.”

“Oh, I actually did that in the Forlorn Castle.”

“Wait, really? Holy shit. People have been speculating on how to do *that* for ages! That kind of information is worth like a thousand gold, easy! How did you do it?”

“I don’t really want to share, to be honest.” Though it was good to know that some information was worth a lot to some people. It made me wonder if I should write things down, just in case.

“Oh. I get it.”

“It’s not like *that*, but, you know that Player-Killer I mentioned? Well, she used the reward from the boss to kill a bunch of players.”

“You think it made her a PKer?”

“Probably. It was kind of like the Weeping Blade,” I explained, comparing it to something in this World that he might’ve experienced, even if he’d picked the Vermillion clan.

“No shit? That’s pretty nuts. I see why you don’t want that information to fall into the wrong hands.”

“I just realised I don’t even know what to call you,” I said.

He laughed and replied, “I was just about say the same thing.”

“You can call me... Aiko.”

“*FrozenFury*.”

“That’s your name?” I asked sceptically.

“Yeah? You don’t like it?”

“I suppose it explains the hair,” I commented sarcastically.

He laughed again. “Yeah. Oh, and FYI, I’m fine with just being called *Fury*.”

Suddenly a name like Kerebor didn’t seem so silly after all, but then again, I could’ve named myself something awesome as well, instead of just ‘Aiko’...¹⁵¹

“So, Aiko, what kind of weapons are you running?”

“I’ll tell you if you tell me what ‘Build’ means.”

“Oh, that one’s easy. It just means whatever weapons, armour, and skills you have.” I’ll be honest, the word was pretty self-explanatory if I’d just thought about it for a bit.

“I use a Katana.”

“Interesting choice, I hear they’re pretty powerful if you have good timing and aim. I use dual-daggers, for now.”

¹⁵¹ Imagine this: “Hi, my name is *Darkness, the Bringer of Damnation!*” No? Too much? Pfff, whatever...

“Like Red Rian?”

“Kind of, yeah.”

“Well, thanks for the info, but I really should go.”

“Ah, right, sorry to keep you.”

“Maybe I’ll catch up to you and be that fourth player you’ve been looking for.”

“I can’t wait,” he replied honestly and smiled.

“See you around... Fury,” I said, and tried a smile.¹⁵²

“I’ll be here from sunrise to sundown every day,” Fury said hurriedly.

“Got it,” I replied and went inside the Blacksmith’s shop. It felt kind of nice to suddenly have something to work towards. It made me want to do my best to beat the next few Stages so I could have someone else to fight alongside. Someone who didn’t know who I was. Someone a bit like Jakob. Granted, Fury would recognise me when he saw me in my armour, but then again, I could just stop using the cape for a while. I mean, it wasn’t like I needed to wear it, although it made me feel whole somehow, as though I couldn’t imagine getting rid of it.

The Blacksmith smiled proudly when our eyes met.

“Have you finished?”

“We have indeed. It was tough work, but your armour is as good as new.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

He hurried into the back of the shop and I heard muttered words, before he re-emerged with an assistant in tow and my ‘*Blacksteel Cuirass*’ held in his powerful and calloused hands. The chestpiece was placed before me on the table with a metallic *clunk*, and I felt the smooth surface with my hands, inspecting it for any potential shortcuts or structural weak points, but the Blacksmith had indeed fixed it up and made it as good as new. I spun it around and checked the back where an exquisitely-rendered carving of the Tsukikusa could now be found.

“Good job,” I said and stashed the cuirass in my inventory. “I hope my previous payment was sufficient.”

“Oh, more than,” the Blacksmith said. He didn’t try to squeeze more coins out me, which I respected, but then again, perhaps I’d paid him too much.

The Smith and his assistant both bowed deeply as I left the store and returned to the crowded marketplace.

Before trying to figure out how to get to the next Stage, I decided to return to the Alchemist’s shop to brew some more potions, and, after spending close to an hour in the damp and humid store, I’d finished distilling three more ‘*Weak Healing Potions*’.

I finally felt prepared and set out to find a horse that could carry me across the lands in a hurry, as the sun was fast approaching its peak.

Given my unfamiliarity with the city, I decided to go back to the place I was staying to ask the owner for advice.

¹⁵² Emphasis on *tried*. The end result was something between the face you make when constipated and a I’m-going-to-kill-you-in-your-sleep kind of grin.

As I came within sight of Koike Rakuen's façade, I saw a person emerging from within. She too locked eyes with me, and we both just stood there awkwardly for a while, staring at one-another. She wore a red-and-white kimono with the white serving as the background and the red overlaying it in various shapes, such as birds and random swirls. Her hair was done up in a top-bun with two bone-white chopsticks skewering it and her face was mostly round, with large green eyes and plump apple-cheeks. If it hadn't been for the green eyes, I probably would've thought she was just another NPC.

"Are you staying here?" she asked.

"I just got a room yesterday," I answered.

"I thought I heard someone else enter!" she then replied excitedly. "I'm *Sunflower*, what's your name?"

Two encounters with other players in one day... what are the odds?

"I'm Aiko," I replied.

She suddenly got closer to me, and we both ended up standing partly in the middle of the wide road, with the traffic of carts and people diverging around us as though we were boulders in a stream.

"Aiko, can you help me?"

Uh oh... "What with?"

"I'm stuck on the Duel Stage and can't beat it by myself."

This smells like a trap. Don't fall for it!

"I... uh... I prefer to fight alone," I lied.

'Sunflower' looked very dejected at my answer and I suddenly felt really bad. "Okay, fine, I'll help you, but only because I just unlocked that Stage myself."

She suddenly perked up, and I couldn't help but feel like I'd just been duped. Considering what I'd been told about PKers joining other people's party to kill them, I decided that I needed to ensure she was legit.

"I would like to invite you to my group, do you agree to join?"

"I agree," Sunflower responded, with the same kind of robotic cadence I'd used. We both then bowed at each other, and a chime sounded in my ear to let me know I'd entered a party.

Just like when I'd teamed up with Jakob and Patrik, I saw that Sunflower was listed in my team, although this time I had the crown next to my name, since I'd created the party. Where it showed our progress, both of us had '*Duel on the Hill*'.

So far so good.

"Before we go anywhere, I need you to show me I can trust you."

She looked up at me,¹⁵³ her big green eyes swallowing up my view. "I'll tell you anything you want to know! You can trust me, Aiko!"

This girl sounds sketchy as hell!

"Tell me what ability the Watcher gave you when you beat the first World."

"...Oh," she said. My request had given her pause, but that was my intention, since I knew from my own experience that the Watcher ability was made to make a mockery of a player's life and experiences.

¹⁵³ I was at least a head above her in height.

Eventually, Sunflower came to a decision. “Do you mind if we talk about this inside?” she asked, pointing back to the inn.

Internally, I was stressing out about missing the deadline for the Duel Stage, but I relented and followed her into the cool interior of the luxurious establishment.

We ended up finding a seat in the centre section next to the pond, where one Koi fish had emerged victorious and the water had calmed. Part of me felt slightly paranoid, since we were surrounded by windows on every side, and anyone within, whether on the first or second floor, could watch us.

“It’s called ‘*Alienation*’, my Watcher skill,” she started. “*For ten seconds, everyone around you ignores your presence and you can move unseen.*,” she continued, reading its description aloud.

I ran a hand down my face in exasperation. “That’s horrible,” I replied.

“Yea... I think it was given to me because I was bullied in high school in this exact same way. I also grew up as a middle child in a family of five children, so being ignored was pretty common for me...”

“Sorry I made you recount that,” I replied. “I feel kind of like an asshole now. I can tell you what mine does, if it makes you feel better.”

In the pond, the remaining Koi fish was prodding the remains of its mate, who lay turned upside-down, its flippers shredded. *Man... this world is fucked...*

“That’s okay, Aiko. You don’t have to.”

“Alright then, let’s go to this Duel Stage. By the way, you wouldn’t happen to know where it takes place, would you?”

Sunflower laughed, but I saw tears in the corners of her eyes.

After finding us a horse, which I paid for, Sunflower guided us to a section of this World I hadn’t yet visited, which lay to the west of the Lady’s hidden village, almost directly opposite the Namida-jinja in the east. On my map overview, the great expanse of the Nijigahara forest lay as a barrier before the area, and I was unable to see past it.

I rode in front and she clung to me as we made our way out the city. While riding towards the crimson fields, she told me that she’d only survived the previous Stage by using her unique Alienation skill and she’d failed in her objective to neutralise the Weeping Blade, because Ginko had died. As a result, the Duel for her was a way to make amends with the Lady. It was interesting to me that despite us being given the same Stage, our motives behind them were vastly different. It made me wonder just how many different paths one could take through the Stages.

When she told me that she used a shortbow, I hoped that she’d be able to provide the same kind of back-up that Hanada had during the first Stage of this World. However, given her self-deprecating nature, I seriously doubted her abilities.

My heart started pounding with the anticipation of a fight when we reached the crimson fields, and I kept an eye out for any farmer who seemed overly interested in my passing. Although I’d dealt with Genzō’s strawman for the bounty, I doubted that any would-be assassins were that easily deterred, and, for all I knew, there might’ve been other bounty sponsors.

As the end to the scarlet fields came into view, I breathed a sigh of relief. The duel, to which we were heading, was sure to be a challenge enough by itself, and fighting off another ambush would’ve

been an unwelcome waste of my stamina and time. I wanted to show up fully prepared and in peak condition, so that the chances of me sustaining another serious injury¹⁵⁴ would be slimmer.

Open ground covered the few metres between the waving fields and the wall of trees belonging to the Nijigahara forest. As though triggered by a switch, rain fell in thick drops as soon as our horse reached the edge of the forest, and the journey westward was accompanied by the familiar Shakuhachi flute and the sound of rain showering the canopies above. Occasionally, the red droplets found their way into the forest proper, splattering dramatically onto the understory around me in tiny explosions of water.

I pinned my focus on the back of my mount's head, where the mane flowed in its galloping frenzy, and time seemed to pass by in an instant, as my blurred rainbow-coloured surroundings flew past. I distantly noticed that Sunflower's grip on me tightened as well. It seemed it wasn't just me who this forest oppressed with its radiant rainbow splendour.

When light broke through the endless trees in the distance, I snapped to attention and surveyed my map. In what had felt like only a few minutes, we'd cleared the forest and reached a vast open field, where once trees had stood, but now only stumps and tiny sprigs dotted the grassy earth nearest the treeline. Leftover charred husks of trees and houses, as well as scorched earth, occupied a large portion of the space, with a field of red Higanbana at the far western end and an expansive azure Tsukikusa field carpeting most of the eastern section. Possibly natural or perhaps man-made, a hill stood in the midst of these two opposing colours, the only highpoint amidst a mostly-barren No Man's Land. At its crest, a tall, pale, and gnarled tree cast its limbs into the air like twisted fingers on a hand, all reaching for the sun that hid behind sombre grey clouds. The rain, which had been a constant companion throughout our journey through the forest, was now gratefully absent.

As we neared the hill, I spotted a large scar, where the pale wood had darkened as though black sap had oozed from the wound and become a permanent fixture, and I got the impression that it was an old scar, but perhaps not older than the civil war.

Only a few metres from the rising slope, I dismounted and helped Sunflower down, then we left our horse untied at the foot of the hill, praying that the duel wouldn't scare it away.

"*Now entering Stage 'Duel on the Hill'.*" A rising beat of Taiko drums started building, growing louder and more fervent with my progress up the hill. Before long, my heart was matching its powerful rhythm.

Sunflower hung back, having switched into a light-armoured version of the Azure Samurai's armour, which made it easier for her to operate the shortbow in her hands. From its design, I could tell it was something she'd found in the previous World. It, unfortunately, looked to be a completely bog-standard shortbow, lacking any traits whatsoever. She hadn't said anything when I donned my armour and cloak, which I was simultaneously grateful for, but also perplexed by.

Beneath the twisted branches stood a crimson man, and *crimson* was truly the only way to describe him. Cold, serious eyes tracked my approach up the hillside from beneath a wide-rimmed red helmet with large antlers and a neck-guard attached to it. Unlike the first Vermilion Samurai I'd fought, he did not wear a demonic mask, and his battle-hardened face and muscle-lined throat were fully exposed beneath the rim of his helm. He wore a loose red coat over his Samurai Dō, its peaked

¹⁵⁴ ...or several.

shoulders partially covering the wide shoulder plates. His gauntlets, greaves, and lower-body armour were all the same spotless red lacquer on top and no doubt backed by a leather and iron mesh beneath, which I knew from experience was difficult to penetrate, despite the wicked sharpness of my blade. The fact that this man wore all red, despite the black countenance of his faction, showed that he was either brave¹⁵⁵ enough to single himself out on the battlefield or skilled enough to have earned the right to wear his bloodred suit. One might have thought that this man was an overly-decorated mercenary, if not for the black Higanbana insignia that marked his armour on every available surface, as though part of some cursed ritual.

Although his appearance was foreboding enough by itself, it didn't unsettle me quite as much as the incredibly-tall Jūmonji Yari planted in the ground next to him: a veritable banner of death if he knew how to use it. The cross-like blades that formed its spearpoint had long red-glowing grooves running along their cutting edges and seemed to pulsate in sync with the drum of my heart. I understood now why Fury had warned me about this boss. It seemed prudent to avoid his blade at all cost, which unfortunately meant that I couldn't put my newest skill to the test against him lest I had my stamina sapped away.

"It seems you have some sense of honour, despite being a mercenary dog..." he said, ignoring Sunflower altogether.

"I wouldn't let down one of my admirers," I replied mockingly, while hastily attaching two of my four healing potions to my new sash, from which my *'Passing Breeze'* already hung.

"I admire one such as you, as much as a peasant admires the meal he consumes every day." To be honest, I hadn't expected a proper response from this guy, but it seemed his range of replies was far broader than the average NPC's.

"How about we just start killing each other already?"

"Indeed, let our blades do the talking."

Nobushige lifted the enormous spear from the ground and spun it around twice before levelling the point at me. It seemed he'd let me make the first move, as though some sort of courtesy. So, I cleared my blade of its scabbard and held it angled towards him.

When I took my first step forward, he suddenly fired his spear at me, letting its length glide through his grip as it shot towards me. As though I'd predicted it, I jumped back, just barely out of reach, and he caught the shaft in his hand and swung the spear around himself as he charged me, immediately returning his grip to its centre point with such efficiency that it briefly made me self-aware of how rough and messy my own style was. I weaved my body under his spear, leapt over it on the next pass, then closed the distance and stabbed my own blade at his abdomen. A quick spin with the non-stop momentum of his spear had him slapping my blade out and away before I could even adjust, and I was forced to retreat backwards as he fired a series of jabs at first my legs, then torso, and finally my head. As soon as there was an opening I pushed again, without even really considering why, and that was when I realised. I'd fallen into that battle trance of mine without even noticing. I was dancing the Dance of Death, with the sword in my hand as my partner.

¹⁵⁵ Read: foolish.

In the back of my mind I wondered where Sunflower was, but figured she was probably just watching from a safe distance and waiting for a moment to fire her bow, no doubt afraid of hitting me.

I managed to strike a glancing blow along his flank, scoring a shallow cut into the lacquered top layer, but then his spear slammed into my cuirass, knocking me back and off-balance. Before I could regain my composure and move out of the way, the butt of his staff hit me in the head with such force that my whole world reeled and my vision turned black for a second. Without missing a beat, the tip of his spear stabbed me in the shoulder, but was caught by the protective scales of my Katabira jacket. I blindly fumbled for the shaft and managed to wrench it away from shoulder with my free hand, while also pulling him forwards. I let go and moved towards him as I returned my katana to its scabbard and immediately performed a devastating Quick Draw that cut through his entire side as he fell past me. Lacquer, leather, iron, and skin was torn apart, and yet none of his blood splattered the earth beneath the pale tree.

I stumbled away from him as I beheld the damage I'd inflicted, feeling suddenly very nauseous, dangerously-woozy, and out of breath.

“Not... bad,” he acknowledged, breathing heavily. “But we are just getting started!”

Nobushige spun his blade in an elaborate show of skill and with each spin and flourish, the cross became redder as the glow from the crimson grooves spilled over onto the rest of the weapon. His eyes too became crimson with the glow, and I had a brief flashback to my fight with the Forlorn Intruder in the arena.

I dodged sideways as his spear thrust towards me all of a sudden, my body once again predicting his movements. The next set of strikes, swings, jabs, and thrusts I avoided flawlessly, while somehow not exhausting the last of my stamina, which in fact seemed to bloom and replenish ever so slightly. It seriously made me wonder how many times I'd fought this boss in the past. How many times had my body been speared through before I'd learnt how to perfectly sidestep and dodge his attacks while not overexerting myself? For this kind of muscle memory to exist, it had to be quite a lot I imagined.

My attention snapped back to reality¹⁵⁶ as I tripped on a stone while trying to sidestep another frenzied spear combo, and I only barely managed to avoid receiving a permanent face rearrangement from the cross-shaped blade by somersaulting sideways and sending forth a minimally-charged Quick Draw mid-air to counter his follow-up sideswipe. The impact of my blade and the metal-reinforced shaft of his spear reverberated through the air like the sound of a hollow bell and, before it ended, I had turned on the spot and fired towards him, while he was still struggling to regain his composure. I drove my katana into his stomach all the way through to the hilt, so that only my handle was visible.

Nobushige looked down at me with an odd kind of expression, kind of like he wasn't all there. He let go of his spear and grabbed my shoulders, and I quickly performed my Lacerate, freeing my blade and cutting him in half... or so I thought. His grip on my shoulders tightened and he picked me up off my feet and threw me down the side of the hill.

My sword flew out of my hands as I tumbled down the patchy dirt, rolling head over heels, over and over, until I eventually settled at the bottom. I tried to stand, but I was so dizzy that I just sort of fell over onto my side. In my discombobulated state, I scanned the ground for any sight of my blade,

¹⁵⁶ 'Reality'.

and found it lying ten-or-fifteen metres away. I briefly turned back to look at the top of the hill, and, to my heart-dropping dismay, saw that the Crimson Warrior was steadily making his way down towards me. With adrenaline pumping through my veins, I scrambled upright and started sprinting towards my sword that lay waiting nearby. I looked back again, with panic forming a knot in my stomach, and saw that Nobushige had reached the foot of the hill and was now in a full sprint. Not looking where I was stepping, I tripped on a loose rock, but I managed to catch myself and continued frantically running towards my weapon. The rhythmic clatter of his armour became louder and louder as the Crimson Warrior neared, and I sprang towards my weapon, grabbing it with one hand and using the other to push myself forward with the momentum, somersaulting my body and landing on my feet.

I twisted around just as him and his cross-shaped spear passed by, scoring a shallow groove across his flank with my reactionary strike, then spun around and sliced him down his back, managing to rend a thin line through his armour. Nobushige spun and flung his spear wide. I dodged under it, the trail of the red-glowing blade passing just above my face, then rolled away out of reach as he stabbed it towards me in a series of thrusts. On the last jab I dodged left of the blade and pushed towards him, aiming a Quick Draw right at his exposed face, which he blocked with his left hand, where the armour was thin enough for my blade to cut right through.

The Crimson Man kicked me in the chest with an angry yell, and as I was pushed away, I saw that I'd completely destroyed his left arm, severing it down its length into two useless flaps, one with two fingers attached, and three on the other.¹⁵⁷ Strangely, no blood spilled forth from the grievous wound, and when I thought about it, none of his other wounds seemed to bleed either, perhaps owing to the mysterious power of the red spear.

The Crimson glow in his eyes, and the one on his weapon, flared with a sudden fury, but before he could leap for a me, a shaft suddenly sprouted from the side of his neck. He swivelled his head and regarded Sunflower who stood at the foot of the hill, several metres away. I quickly tried to exploit this distraction, but as I charged for him, he easily slapped his spearhead into my stomach and sent me tumbling backwards, a significant portion of my stamina suddenly robbed from me.

I watched in horror as he sprinted towards Sunflower, while easily dodging her frantic arrows fired his way. It seemed to me as though she was using every ability in her arsenal to try and stop him, as she constantly changed stance and the arrows fired from her shortbow made different sounds and followed alternating trajectories. At the last possible moment, she fired something that looked like a shotgun blast of thin arrows, but it only halted him for a second, and then he simple swung his spear through the air and cleaved open her armour and sprayed her blood to the air.

“NO! STOP!” I shouted, as I tried to run towards him.

Sunflower fell backwards, a distant look in her eyes. Part of me knew that I could still save her, but the realist in me knew that I'd never make it in time.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

“Blood Raven!” I shouted.

¹⁵⁷ Imagine splitting a bamboo stem unevenly down its length, except this piece of bamboo has fingers...

To cast the spell '*Blood Raven*', you have sacrificed a memory.

A Sigil of the Watcher has manifested on your body as an indicator of the memory you have sacrificed.

You are unable to cast any Watcher-granted Spells for the next:

—12 days 23 hours 59 minutes 59 seconds—

A crimson light flowed down my outstretched left arm, and then from my wrist shot forth a raven of my own blood, its emergence sending a shuddering ripple of pain up through my arm. Alongside the pain also came the dreadful feeling of something being ripped out of my brain, but it was far more pronounced than the two times I'd experienced it before.

The raven soared across the ground between us and exploded dramatically against the back of Nobushige, who suddenly froze, his cross-shaped spear mid-jab.

Five seconds! I yelled at myself internally.

With as much speed as I could manage, I thundered across the soft earth. In the distance, our borrowed horse was determined to eradicate the last few resilient patches of grass, so focused on its task that it remained oblivious to the violence nearby.

I came up behind Nobushige, who was just about to regain control of his body, and hammered my sword down in a Helm-Splitter strike, cracking through the back of his helmet's immaculate crimson finish and settling itself in his skull, producing an odd sigh of relief from his lips. Before his body could collapse down upon itself, I withdrew my blade and charged a Quick Draw with the remnants of my stamina and parted Nobushige's head from the rest of his body with my cleave. The background drums ended in an explosive finish the moment his head bounced off the ground and settled a few metres away.

For a moment, the headless Crimson Warrior stood petrified like a statue, but then as the glow retreated away from the shaft of his spear and back into the red groove, his body collapsed in on itself, jettisoning blood from the severed neck and various wounds all over his body, as though the floodgates had been flung wide. Blood blossomed out of his body in a fountain of red rain that showered the earth around him, while his head watched from where it'd landed.

I stumbled backwards, away from the gruesome display, and landed solidly on my ass when my legs gave out. The world tilted and spun, while the uncomfortable wooziness of exhaustion weighed heavily on my body like an invisible blanket. I tried to stand, but immediately fell back down, the sudden motion combined with the dizziness making me heave my guts out, leaving a puddle of foul-smelling sick next to the crimson pool that had formed around the body of Nobushige.

Just before his body, Sunflower was herself sitting back up, a potion already in her trembling hands.

For the next few minutes, I sat with my ass planted on the ground and wondered if I'd ever be able to stand again. Then, as my stamina replenished little-by-little, I tried once more, and fell on my knees just like the first time...

My head just didn't feel right, and when the adrenaline had faded from my body, I sensed a dull pain just above my right temple. I lightly prodded the area with my hand and felt hard, blood-crusting hair between my fingers, as well as the sticky sensation of blood coating my skin. It was possible I'd sustained a concussion from the blow to my head, although I wasn't certain. I tried standing again, and, as if stuck in some kind of nightmarish loop, I collapsed to the ground just like before. How I'd managed to stay upright during the fight was a mystery to me, but one thing was for sure, I'd be stuck here unless Sunflower could somehow carry me onto the horse. Thankfully, two 'solutions' hung tied to my waist, their bloodred contents sloshing about inside their translucent containers.

I detached one of the flasks from the loop that secured it and wrenched the cork stopper from its neck with what little strength I could muster. In my eagerness to gulp it all down, some of the liquid ran down the wrong pipe and triggered a coughing fit, but once that passed, I felt the nourishing sensation of the healing liquid permeating itself throughout my body in waves that one-by-one cleared my head and dispelled the dull, throbbing pain.

Although my legs shook violently as I tried to stand, I didn't immediately drop to the ground. It took a few shaky steps to regain my balance, but then it was as if nothing had ever happened.

When I noticed the sun was nearing the horizon, I suddenly felt a sense of urgency. I wanted to return to the hidden village and report my victory to the Lady, in the hopes that it would trigger the next Stage, but I also didn't want to leave until I'd searched the floating wisp above Nobushige's body.

"Are you okay?" Sunflower asked.

I felt embarrassed that I'd forgotten her existence for a minute, but then responded, "I'm better now. How about you?"

She nodded. Her face was still a mask of fear. I didn't judge her for it. After all, she'd been one second away from death.

"I had to use my Watcher ability," I commented.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. At least you're still alive. But I do hope I didn't lose an important memory."

"It's weird how my ability is one made to flee, while yours seemed more like it was created for offense."

"I suppose that's the unique nature of them," I replied. "After all, if they are moulded on our personalities, then it makes sense."

Sunflower looked down at her lap. Her blood still stained her armour and a hideous rend in it exposed her pale skin from shoulder to navel.

Considering the one memory I'd gained, I suddenly realised that I hadn't actually been the offensive type in the real world, instead I'd been the quiet obedient daughter, not the person I was now, who charged headfirst into danger or self-sacrificed a memory to save someone else.

I helped Sunflower stand and then went over to the body. When I passed my hand through the wisp, it revealed only one item to me, however, it was an item of quite some worth I thought.

'Yari of the Crimson Demon'

-Melee Weapon-

Spear > Jūmonji Yari

“Nobushige was believed by many to be one of the strongest warriors in the land, and it was said that his skill with the spear was unparalleled. When the bloody struggle for power gripped the region and the rains turned crimson, the people no longer hailed his skill, but instead feared it, knowing that if they stood in his way, his blade would one day come for them.”

Trait(s):

‘Bloodlust’

‘Blood-soaked’¹⁵⁸

‘Corrupted Blade’

Equip

Discard

Weight: 1.9 kilos

The item art showed the spear with its red-lacquered wooden shaft, which had three golden rings attached along its length at evenly-spaced intervals, with one situated directly below its cross-like blade with the unusual red fullers. It had three unique traits, which read in their respective order: *“The wielder becomes faster with each kill”*; *“The more blood the blade spills, the sharper it becomes”*; and *“Any strike from this blade, whether successful, blocked, or deflected, siphons stamina from the opponent to the wielder”*. All around, it seemed a very powerful weapon, though I wasn’t too keen on switching from a sword to a spear.

After reading the flavour text, I wondered what this World would’ve looked like had peace reigned instead of war, but I suppose that in a time of peace, those who live by the blade are not as appreciated as in a time of war, and for people like Nobushige, or heck, even myself, the battlefield is where we make our name and earn our bloody glory. The trick, however, is to avoid becoming a blood-lusting demon like the spear’s former owner.

Although the spear weighed nearly 2 kilos, I put it in my inventory, as I was sure it could fetch a pretty penny if sold to the right buyer. Sunflower assured me that she didn’t need it, so I tried not to feel bad about taking the only reward.

The additional weight once again pushed me over the weight limit of 7.5 kgs, reducing my stamina pool and movement speed. Part of me was a bit annoyed that all I ever found were weapons, but perhaps that was just how this place worked, though I wouldn’t have minded looting his crimson Dō. After all, it was pretty terrifying to behold. Unfortunately, it wasn’t possible to wrench the armour off his body.

¹⁵⁸ It was pretty obvious what the theme of this weapon was...

Blissfully unaware, our horse was still parked at the foot of the hill, opposite from where Nobushige's blood now coloured the earth. Though my head was clear again, I didn't want to take any chances, and so, with painfully slow steps, I made my way back to my mount, hoping the wind would bring me swiftly on my way back to the hidden village.

But then I stopped.

How do I prove I killed him? I suddenly thought to myself. Sure, I had his spear, but I could've stolen that. I needed undeniable proof of my deed. Fortunately,¹⁵⁹ concrete proof lay spectating the bloodred warrior in his crimson pond. The kind of proof that no one in *this* World would be able to scoff at.

Sunflower watched in horrified fascination as I picked up the severed head and attached it to the horse's saddle. A distant part of myself wondered if I was doing this because of the blood-hungry Mushi's influence on me or if this was who I had become.

When I put my hand on the saddle and made to mount up, I had a realisation, a bad one.

I turned towards Sunflower who was standing next to me, waiting.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have no idea how to ride this *thing*..."

"What do you mean? You rode it on the way—" she started, but then suddenly cut herself off. "Oh my god... did you seriously forget how to ride a horse??"

"It would seem so," I replied.

"That's really bad! Memories sacrificed to the Watcher don't return, don't you know?"

"I'm sorry, what!?"

With the 'proof' dangling from our saddle by its long black hair, we set off from the No Man's Land, heading towards the Azure fields of flowers that ebbed and flowed with the hills, looking just like I imagined the waves in the sea far beyond the vast mountain range would.

The trophy left a crimson trail in our wake, which was particularly noticeable in its stark contrast to the blue flowers underfoot¹⁶⁰, and it continued dripping from the neck as though supplied by an endless fountain of blood from within.

What a sight this must be... I thought. Although, this was perhaps customary in these lands during times of war. "*Bring me the head of my enemy,*" was probably a common enough phrase that I wasn't considered a grotesque monster for my obvious display of who I'd slain. Though it was safe to say that the wrong eyes were best kept away from this particular face, lest I wanted to incite a thousand bloody oaths of vengeance from this man's brothers-in-arms.

It felt strangely humiliating as I clung to Sunflower's waist, trying my best not to slide off the back of the saddle. After a few fledgeling attempts, it had become quite obvious that I'd utterly lost the ability to control the horse, no matter how insistently I tugged on the reins or yelled at the animal. I'd also fallen off the saddle about a half-dozen times, before Sunflower's patience eventually expired and she told me to let her ride.

¹⁵⁹ Note the ironic use...

¹⁶⁰ Or rather, 'Underhoof'.

For some reason, I didn't like the idea that I was now beholden to her, which I figured was some kind of internalisation of my own insecurity and need to feel independent from others. As a result, our entire journey away from the No Man's Land felt incredible awkward to me.

As we were riding, I suddenly noticed something on the back of Sunflower's neck. It looked like two twin tattoos. Each was an upside-down triangle, with a circle inside. Within the circle itself was a horizontal line, like the pupil of a goat.

"Why do you have tattoos on the back of your neck?" I asked.

Sunflower, who'd been immersed in her task of guiding us to the Hidden Village, suddenly jumped in her seat out of surprise. Granted, I'd also spoken directly into her ear.

"Is it a triangle with an eye inside?" she asked.

"Yeah..." I wondered how she even knew what it looked like, considering it was on the nape of her neck.

"That's the symbol of the Watcher. It shows up after you use a Watcher ability. There should be two of them, right?"

"That's right. Does that mean you've used your ability twice then?"

"Yea."

I looked at the tattoos again and noticed that one was directly in the centre of her neck and the other was to the right of it. If she used her Watcher abilities enough, eventually she would have a necklace of the things... Then realisation hit me.

I should have one of these marks too...

Without even having to look, I knew where it would be. I kept my right hand on Sunflower's waist and lifted my left wrist up before me, straining my eyes to see it clearly in the waning light. Sure enough, the 'Eye of the Watcher' sat directly in the middle of my wrist between the two arteries.

I already have an ugly scar on my shoulder, and now this too...?

"You know, I was wondering where my symbols would show up. I tried looking everywhere on my body, but I guess it makes sense why I never found them. I wonder why they're on my neck though."

I had an uncomfortable guess to her question, though I didn't voice it. She suddenly fell silent as she no doubt put two-and-two together herself.

This Watcher is a sadistic piece of shit...

When familiar territory came into view, I relaxed a bit. Sunflower deftly slowed the horse to a casual trot. Amusingly,¹⁶¹ the severed head of Nobushige still dripped thick droplets of blood with every few beats of the hoofs upon the dirt road. Anyone keen enough could easily track us down by simply following the red dotted line across the landscape.

People moved out of our way as we neared the Lady's mansion, and when the gate was the only thing blocking our path, Sunflower dismounted the borrowed horse and helped me down. Wanting to regain some of my authority, I released the severed head from the saddle and dragged it with me by its hair, walking in front and letting Sunflower scramble to keep up.

¹⁶¹ Darkly so.

At first, the Samurai guardsmen approached me, likely trying to halt my passage, but then they noticed who I was and what burden I was dragging with me. Without a word, nor as much as an exhale of air, they hauled open the gate and let us both pass on through.

Within the mansion compound, I released my burden on the white gravel and knelt down on the stone path, waiting. Sunflower mimicked my posture as well, though she seemed unsure as to what we were doing.

Perhaps thanks to a Shinobi spotting our arrival in the distance, the door opened shortly after my entrance into the compound, and Lady Seiryū, with Hayato at her side, emerged into the temperate air, where even the breeze seemed to slow to a halt at her presence.

“I come bearing gifts,” I announced sarcastically.

“I hear it is quite the gift you have brought me.”

Darkly, I grinned from ear to ear as I lifted Nobushige’s head from the gravel, so that the Lady herself could see. A moment later, her grin matched mine.

“Magnificent! The Crimson Demon himself! Said to be undefeatable, and yet, you have proven those rumours false. Finally, the main obstacle in our path has been cleared away, and our destined return to the City may finally commence.”

“What are my orders?”

“Tomorrow, at the first light of dawn, join our army as we take back Kakon-shi.”

“As you wish,” I obeyed, uncharacteristically. In this particular moment, I didn’t feel bad for following orders, as her ambitions were exactly the sort of thing I could understand. The Lady was someone who knew when to exploit an opportunity, and her ferocity would get me on my way to the next Stage in a hurry.

Afterwards, Hayato took the head of Nobushige and disappeared, though to what end I never found out. After selling Nobushige’s spear to a vendor in the village for the minor fortune of four Ryō, I made to return to the room I’d previously occupied in the mansion. However, on the way back, a chime in my ear alerted me to the fact that Sunflower had left my group.

I turned to look at her. She was wearing her kimono again.

“I’m gonna go back to Koike,” she announced.

Part of me had assumed she’d join me for the next Stage as well, but then I remembered that she’d only asked for help for the Duel.

Before I could say anything, she embraced me in a hug. I just stood there, slightly dumbfounded and my arms by my side.

“Thank you so much, Aiko. For everything.”

She started scrolled through her menus and then I suddenly heard a *ba-ding*¹⁶² in my inner ear. I looked at her, puzzled.

“What did you just do?”

“I added you to my *Friendlist*,” she replied.

I hadn’t seen any kind of menu for that, but when I performed the Menu Access Gesture, suddenly it was there.

“What does it do?”

¹⁶² I know, I know, but I’m doing my best to describe these sounds for you, so please bear with me.

“It makes it so you can always invite someone to your group and view them on the map, if they have enabled it and are in the same World as you. If they are in a different World, trying to view their map will only alert you of what World they are currently in.”

“That seems useful.” *I wish I’d known this earlier so I could have added Jakob. Maybe then I wouldn’t have forgotten he was my friend...*

When I opened the ‘*Friendlist*’ menu, a new window with a mostly-empty list appeared. Just one name appeared at the top: ‘*Sunflower*’. Like the Group menu, it told me what Stage she was on, and allowed me to: remove her using a Red button; view her location on the map using a Blue button; and invite her to a group using a Green button. Part of me was glad that Kerebor hadn’t gone through this section of the realm’s mechanics when he’d given me his tutorial after I awoke. I wondered why he hadn’t though, especially considering his eagerness and puppy-dog I-miss-who-you-used-to-be attitude.

I turned the ‘*View on Map*’ feature on within my ‘*Friendlist*’. I was fine with Sunflower knowing where I was, since she seemed trustworthy.

“Are you going to stay and do the next Stage?” she asked.

“That’s the plan, yep.”

“Well, good luck.”

“Thanks...” I felt an uncomfortable tightness in my chest. I wasn’t a fan of departures like this. It felt like I was being abandoned, tossed away once my purpose had expired.

“Do you mind if I take the horse back to the City?”

“You might as well,” I replied. “Not like I can get it to listen to me...”

I thought about what she’d said and how the memory of riding a horse was now permanently lost to me. It was possible I could teach myself how to ride again, but that’d be quite a lot of training I figured. *I’m sure this won’t come back to bite me in the ass...* I thought to myself darkly.

After waving goodbye to Sunflower, I spent the next few hours relaxing in the bath and all around just doing as little as possible, in order to give my body the rest it needed. Though I wasn’t proud of it, I spent half an hour or more just looking at her location on the map, using the feature within the Friendlist. Despite normally not being able to view the map outside my own ‘sphere of influence’, that restriction did not apply to spying on your friends.¹⁶³

After dinner, I went to sleep, anxious of what the dawn would bring.

It was dark when a gentle hand roused me from my sleep.

“Wake up,” the servant urged me.

Despite the incredible exhaustion that still suffocated me like a heavy blanket, I managed to sit upright, at which point the servant girl left, and I started getting dressed. A tray of food sat in the centre of the room and when I’d finished equipping the first few layers of armour, I emptied the bowls of soup and rice, and stripped the roasted fish of all its meat, then I equipped my newly-repaired cuirass, my raven cloak, and my obsidian sword.

¹⁶³ Quite a creepy feature, if I had to say so. Yes, I am aware this stance also means that I’m calling myself a creep... Self-awareness is a terrifying thing.

I emerged into the front courtyard of the mansion, where the gates had been flung wide and a band of finely-dressed azure-blue Samurai were waiting. Amongst them I spotted a few of the Lady's attendants, as well as the old Mitsui, who'd helped Hanada and I when the guard had given us a hard time. Despite his laidback demeanour, Mitsui was clearly an accomplished swordsman, and I could practically feel the commanding aura he exuded. From the looks the other Samurai were giving him, it was clear that he was a sort of leader or figurehead.

Beyond the courtyard, crowding the spaces between the village houses, were a minor host of soldiers, dressed in the same blue tabards I'd seen Hanada wear when I'd first met him and his group. A few of the soldiers held large blue banners decorated with the strange symbol that I now knew to be a Tsukikusa flower.

At once, the assembled host and Samurai turned their attention to where I was standing, or rather, behind where I stood. I too turned around, and saw the magnificent Lady Seiryū, wearing the same elegant kimono she always wore, but this time with an enormous stringless longbow that seemed to have been carved from the strangest gnarled and twisted white wood. In fact, the pallor of the wood and its odd deformed visage wasn't too dissimilar from the tree that crested the hill between the Vermilion and Azure territories, the very same tree which Nobushige had waited under. I was sure it wasn't a mere coincidence that the tree had lacked a branch. Unlike traditional Japanese longbows, its limbs were thicker and wider, but it was still fashioned in the style of one short limb and one long, creating an uneven stress-load when pulled taut, and requiring a fairly unique stance when used, wherein the wielder's eyeline was fixated on the bottom of the hand which held the bow, and not above the hand like with an English longbow. Once again, I had to marvel at my apparent insight into archery, though at this point, I'd started to take it for granted that the knowledge injection of this realm enabled me to comprehend the variances in the weapons I had access to, so that I could make informed decisions on the things that would alter my fighting style.

The Lady took her time walking to the front of the walkway, soaking-in the attention. It was at this time I realised that I couldn't find Hayato anywhere. I wondered what he was up to. When she stopped, she surveyed her Samurai and the footmen beyond the courtyard, and then spoke.

“Gather the horses! We march on Kakon-shi to reclaim what is ours by right! By night, the White Wolves shall have been repainted in a crimson hue more befitting of those demons! By tomorrow, our banner shall fly above the Palace!”

The assembled host, down to every single man, roared loudly in approval. It was both an awe-striking and terrifying thing. A war like this: where every single soldier would fight with their brains addled by a supernatural bloodlust; where every man and woman would revel in the act of murdering their countrymen; and where blood would be imbibed and corrupt their souls beyond salvation, that... *that* was a scary thing. Scarier yet, was my own excitement, my own loud roar that disappeared into the even louder combined chorus. I couldn't wait to shower in a red rain of my own making. The rational part of my mind was already helplessly shoved into the farthest recesses of my brain, the Voracity was the only ruler of my thoughts. Indeed, its insatiable hunger ruled me and my fellows.

“Now entering Stage ‘The Root of Evil’.”

At some point I must have gotten to piggyback on a horse and followed the army to Kakon-shi, though my recollection of the events were fuzzy at best. It felt as though I'd blinked, and now I stood over the body of a guard in white and black, with flames roaring around me and screams echoing in the far reaches of the city. In the background, an orchestral melody of strings, flutes, and a Koto serving as the 'voice', followed the slow beat of a deep drum.

Someone put their hand on my back, and I looked up slowly to see the face of Mitsui glancing back at me.

"Impressive work, but we cannot stop yet."

I nodded lamely.

What's happening to me? I wondered. *What would Ginko say if he saw me now?* Would he remark on the frightful size of the so-described parasitic spider that clung to me and every denizen of these lands? In my own hubris I'd assumed I was stronger than this *thing*, but even in my current moment of clarity, I felt my veins throb with a single desire: *Kill!*

Alongside Lord Mitsui and his detachment of footmen, I continued down the street, killing every man and woman who stood in our way, bearing little regard for what their intentions were, whether they were paralysed in fear or poised to defend their city. It mattered not.

By the time we reached the marketplace, flames guttering and roaring on either side of us, the dread horn sounded across the city.

"Secure our position! Use whatever cover you can find and beg whatever Gods love you that we outnumber them more than three-to-one!" Mitsui yelled to his men.

"What's coming?" asked a terrified boy, far too young to be on any battlefield such as this.

"The White Wolves," I answered before Mitsui could. Panic gripped the boy, as all the frightful stories he'd no doubt heard swirled through his noggin.

"If you want to live, then hurry up and help your comrades," Mitsui responded harshly, though to his credit, the boy went to work immediately, working twice as fast as any of his fellows.

"Have you fought them before, *Kuro*¹⁶⁴?"

"No, but I have seen them in battle."

"They are vicious and never show mercy. They are intoxicated with their *hemolatriy*¹⁶⁵, and live solely for the sake of slaughter." His words, while no doubt true, were quite ironic, considering how we were no different.

"You really hate them, don't you?"

"Three years ago, their commander killed my only son..." Mitsui flashed me a bitter smile. "If you happen to see him before I have the chance, give him my regards." Even if the words were nonchalant, the tone was anything but.

Then the horn sounded again, much closer this time. Our fortifications amounted to a few wagons on either side of the market's opening, creating a funnel for the enemy to push through, which in turn would make our defence much more effective. Past that barricade were stalls we'd overturned to create shields behind which we could escape the enemy arrows for however long we needed to. In

¹⁶⁴ Since he couldn't really call me "Rōnin" or "Outsider" anymore, he'd instead chosen to use my appearance as a nickname, calling me *Kuro*: meaning "Black" in Japanese.

¹⁶⁵ From Latin: *Hemo* meaning "Blood" and *Latry* meaning "Worship". Granted, the actual word he used in Japanese was a bit different, but basically meant the same.

terms of makeshift defences this one wasn't too shabby, though I wondered if it mattered against the Wolves.

“Brace for arrows!” Mitsui ordered, and we all took cover.

Nothing happened for a minute or two, and I started wondering why he'd issued the order, but then suddenly the sound of tiny objects piercing the air sounded from above, followed by the *clink* of arrows hitting the pavement, then immediately overshadowed by a cascade many more slamming into our covers with enough force to splinter the wood, though lacking the power to fully penetrate.

“Report!” Mitsui demanded.

“Two injured here!” one man yelled to our right. “One over here!” another yelled to our left. As our party numbered eighty strong, these were insignificant numbers, and we were still fully fit for battle, but then came volley number two. It was more eager than the first, and somehow more precise as well, honing in on our defences with ease and finding every unexposed arm and leg, and managing to injure seven more.

“This is what they do,” Mitsui said from his protective corner of the overturned stall that ten of us huddled under. “They dwindle their enemies down until they outnumber them, and with no archer unit of our own, we can only wait for their inevitable charge.”

Maybe ten seconds passed before the third rain of arrows showered us. This time three people died straight off the bat and eleven men were injured, some for the second and third time. Our unit was faltering, as panic slowly gripped the men. And who could blame them? The White Wolves seemed capable of locating any opening in our defences, as though their arrows had a mind of their own, all the while remaining far out of sight... It was like magic... But then I thought about it. They were just men, and weren't actually capable of hitting something they couldn't see, which meant there had to be someone relaying our location to them.

“I think they have one or two spotters close by,” I whispered to Lord Mitsui. His eyes narrowed as he contemplated this.

“What do you plan to do about it?” he asked me, genuinely curious.

“I'll brave the storm and kill him, before taking on their archers. They shouldn't see me coming.”

“Your suicidal plan might give us the break we need to win this fight, but I have a better idea.”

Just then the fourth volley began and Mitsui took a step backwards, retreating further under the cover, seconds before an arrow pierced through the roof directly above where he'd stood. He flashed me an innocent grin, then turned to a man at his side.

“Run east and find Hanada's unit, tell them we need covering fire. He should only be a few streets away.”

The man chosen as messenger swallowed nervously, but then made a one-syllable sound of acknowledgement and set off as soon as the last arrow had fallen.

“When Hanada's unit launch their counter-assault, you push out and find their spotters, then group up with Hanada. When we are no longer being bombarded with arrows, my men and I will follow suit.”

I'd greatly underestimated Mitsui, as he clearly knew how to rule a battlefield. Despite his personality, he'd earned the admiration of his fellows no doubt thanks to his strategic skill. Part of me was eager to see how he fought, since the way he wore his armour like an effortless burden and casually leaned on his sword-hilt, made it seem like he'd been born for battle.

The next few minutes of waiting for backup felt excruciatingly long, as the rain of arrows seemed never-ending. Then, suddenly, fifteen seconds passed in complete silence, with only a few pained whimpers and terrified sobs filling the void left by the disappearance of the deadly swarm.

My heart kicked into overdrive as adrenaline surged through my veins, and I ducked out of the cover and spurted across the marketplace square towards the enemy, guessing that their spotters would be somewhere between us and them.

I almost missed the cowering form in the midst of two buildings that had a clear view of the market, but then doubled back and looked down at the young man. Because I didn't want to kill someone curled up so pathetically, I told him, "Stand," and, to his credit, he did, albeit on shaky legs. My sword immediately left its home and tore its way across his throat. I performed a flourish of my blade and returned it to its scabbard, then left the spotter to die by himself, gurgling and choking on his own blood. I would like to imagine that it was the supernatural bloodlust that made me capable of killing someone coldheartedly like this, but I couldn't rule out the fact that I was simply taking my revenge on him after having been under fire for so long.

Further down the street was an intersection where a wide street crossed the one I was following. As I dipped right around the corner, following the sound of fighting, I almost collided with a White Wolf, who on reflex nearly tore my head off with his sword. He was helmless, his white-specked hair tied back into a ponytail just like his fellows, and he wore the fur-lined white-and-grey armour of his murderous band. Despite being part of an archer unit, he was still equipped with a sword and shield, which likely meant that one part of these soldiers' strength was their ability to adapt, truly like wolves in nature, using claw, fang, and devious strategy to take down prey much bigger than themselves.

I pulled my sword from its scabbard in a wide slash aimed at his head, but my edge met with his metal-reinforced shield, which suffered thanks to the sharpness of my blade, but held together nonetheless. Before I had the chance to consider how to counter his shield, an arrow suddenly sprouted from his neck and I saw the whole unit of White Wolves behind him buckle and regroup further up the street.

"Fire!" I heard a familiar voice yell, and another volley of arrows showered the Wolves, who covered themselves with their shields as much as possible, though a few arrows did strike true.

Before a second volley could be fired, the Wolves charged the archers and I ran towards their flank, trying to relieve Hanada's unit. Before I could reach the Wolves, who were making quick work of the footmen trying to protect the archers, Mitsui and the remaining men under his command arrived to even the odds. However, the White Wolves quickly formed two fronts to fight both of our units, proving themselves true veterans of war, whereas many of the Azure soldiers clearly showed their inexperience and died as a result.

With a Quick Draw, my edge carved cleanly through the shields of two Wolves next to each other and continued into the men holding them, unfazed by their armour and protective layers of cloth beneath. I also found good use for my newly-acquired ability, as deflecting the shield-bearers' strikes proved to be the most effective way to create an opening and didn't involve brute-forcing my way through their shields like some kind of barbarian, which also made it easier to conserve my stamina.

Though the White Wolves were fierce, our combined forces descended on them until finally their lines buckled completely and the skirmish turned into an all-out slaughter. Mitsui, his most veteran soldiers, and myself, formed the core of the Azure whirlwind, which slowly-but-surely cut the White

Wolves to smithereens. To their credit, the Wolves never faltered in spirit, and fought bitterly to the last man, as though retreat never even entered into the equation.

When naught but corpses barred our way, Mitsui did a head-count. With how many we'd lost during the defence of the marketplace, and the subsequent battle, Mitsui's party numbered only twenty-seven, excluding me, and Hanada's archers were down to a pitiful twelve, with their friends scattered across the large street. Those archers who were left, looked upon their fallen brethren with darkness in their eyes, the cups that had filled with sorrow and hate for months-and-years finally spilling over. They no doubt wished a thousand curses upon the White clan, and they would fight with twice the fury to compensate for their heavy losses. Mitsui's men mostly just looked tired and worn-out. Being veterans of such a long civil war they'd probably lost most of the people they'd ever cared for and no longer knew how to grieve. It was like they weren't even concerned with what fate had in store for them, all of them just dead stares and forsaken humanity.

Mitsui looked around at his men, then cleared his throat with an old-man¹⁶⁶ cough. "Tomorrow, this city will know peace! The red rains will pass and our people will flourish again! Three generations from now, they will think of us as the heroes who lifted the yoke of oppression from the necks of their ancestors!"

A few of the men smiled, and most seemed somewhat content now. They believed their cause was just, and that, in the end, those they'd fought for all along would be thankful.¹⁶⁷ They had to believe that the ends justified the means, the few remaining shreds of their sanity depended on it. I didn't begrudge Mitsui for abusing their hope in order to keep them willing to continue fighting, because it was either *that* or leaving them to their despair, even though this tiny flame of hope he'd sparked within them would doubtlessly lead them to their deaths.

When wounds had been bandaged and a few trophies¹⁶⁸ collected from the Wolves, we continued our march through the city, feeling boldened despite our severely-reduced numbers, thanks to Hanada's group of highly skilled archers at our backs. Sadly, his demeanour, when we talked, was serious and lacked any of the personality from when we'd first met. It seemed that he was a slave to the hierarchical order of things, and because I'd become an Azure Samurai, I now outranked him. But I wasn't really *that* upset about it. He wasn't real, so what did it matter how he treated me? Or that's what I told myself anyway...

Before I realised it, we were passing by a building in the Residential District that I remembered well. Though its wooden façade was innocuous, and a quaint sign above the door plainly read "*Dollmaker's Workshop*", I knew that I was staring at the mouth of a Spider's nest.

"Mitsui," I said curtly, not using the proper suffix as was demanded when speaking to someone of a higher stature.

The Samurai Lord looked at me with a clever glint in his eyes. "Do what you have to. We will wait here for your return."

"Thank you," I replied, and made for the door.

¹⁶⁶ He was long past his prime after all, but he was oathbound to his duty, and the most experienced person in this party. After all, there is no cushy retirement plan for a warrior, only death.

¹⁶⁷ Nothing beats fighting for a 'just' cause after all, regardless of its oftentimes imagined righteousness.

¹⁶⁸ Although none for me...

“Let that old *Tanuki*¹⁶⁹ know that him and his bastard son will be united in Hell before dusk is due.”

I stopped with my hand on the door and turned to look at Lord Mitsui, who was smiling at me innocently. *That sneaky devil!* I thought to myself. *He knows exactly where we are and who lurks below this shop.*

I flashed him a fiendish grin, “Better yet, I’ll tell him that their blood will be united on the edge of my blade.”

Mitsui laughed in response, and I could still hear his laughter as I slid the door closed behind me and strode across the dark shop, while trying to avoid the dolls that hung from the ceiling and crowded the shelves and tables.

Two steps down the staircase, my Sight kicked in and amber lights crawled across every surface like hungry little worms devouring the darkness. A few seconds later, when the darkness had become a perceptible grey and all contours were visible to me, I spotted the decrepit old man huddled over a book in the back, just like the first time I’d come here.

“Not many willingly enter a den of wolves,” he said, his voice echoing off the basement’s stone walls.

“I know you’re by yourself,” I replied, as I made my way down the last few steps.

He cackled. It wasn’t a nice sound.

When I started advancing across the floor, he spun around in an instant and flung a knife at me, but I easily deflected it.

“Nice try,” I jeered.

An exhale, possibly one of annoyance.

Only five metres lay between us.

“Don’t you want to know why?”

“I already know,” I replied.

“It’s not too late to change your mind.”

“I’d believe you if you hadn’t put a bounty on me.”

“It was simply a precaution. It can be undone.”

The wounds cannot, I thought, but didn’t say.

“If money will sway you, we can—”

I’d heard enough. I lunged forward and impaled Genzō by his throat, straight through his wrinkled Adam’s apple as though I was an archer trying to score the most points possible. The momentum carried my blade into the stone wall behind him, where it got stuck. A startled and guttural sound emerged from him. The old bastard was still trying to speak even now.

“What do you think your adoptive psychopath of a son will say when he finds out you’re dead? Do you think he will smile?”¹⁷⁰

I exhaled through my mouth slowly, then inhaled through my nose. I let tension build in my muscles, and then, in one fluid motion, sheared through Genzō’s windpipe and jugular as I ripped my

¹⁶⁹ The Japanese word for “Raccoon Dog”. Thanks to Japanese folklore, “Tanuki” has become a word for anyone who is deemed a trickster. Depending on its use, it can be both an insult or a compliment, though I assumed it to be the former in this case.

¹⁷⁰ I don’t know why I was taunting the guy, to be honest. It wasn’t like he could answer me anyway...

blade through him and the stone it'd gotten stuck in. Maybe as a result of his frail body, or perhaps due to my lack of restraint, his head snapped off cleanly when he fell face-first on the dirty basement floor. The amber lights of my Sight clung to the dismembered head as it made its way across the room in a lazy and lopsided roll, and the only thought that struck me in that moment was: *I never did find out how he saw so well in the dark...* and of all the things I'd done today and the last many days, this was the only thing that really bothered me. Something so utterly mundane. Was it a side-effect of the Shigurui-no-Kumo that I didn't care? Or had I already become entirely desensitised to murder?

I didn't have the time to properly contemplate these questions, as sounds of clashing blades from above pulled me from my thoughts.

In a frantic sprint, I bounded up the stairs, taking three steps at a time, which proved to be a bad idea as I missed a step just before reaching the top, and nearly left a perfect indentation of my teeth on one of the wooden boards, but I thankfully caught myself and only lightly bruised my forehead.

I knocked over a couple of dolls on my way out, but still took the time to slide the door open, instead of kicking it apart, which wouldn't have been difficult considering its flimsy construction. Outside, Mitsui's unit was fighting another group of relentless Wolves, though they were holding their own, thanks in large part to the support from Hanada's archers, who seemed capable of exploiting every possible opening, and Hanada himself even managing to hit someone in the eye by deflecting an arrow off the rim of his shield. I was glad there wasn't any immediate danger, and Lord Mitsui even had enough of an oversight to greet me upon my return.

The Samurai Lord took a look at my blade, and upon seeing the blood, smiled gratefully. I guessed he was relieved he didn't have to kill the old man himself, after all, it wasn't a very honourable deed, but I wasn't as beholden to the ideal of honour as him, nor were our enemies in white it would seem, as they fought tooth-and-nail, jumping onto blades just to take someone down with them, though after five minutes had passed, we'd cut them all apart.

"It seems we won't get much time to relax," Mitsui observed.

"Tell me abo—"

A three-note horn sounded from just up the street,¹⁷¹ freezing everyone in their tracks, and as one we looked at the incoming group, which was several times larger than the two we'd fought already.

"Brace for arrows!" Mitsui yelled, and those of us with the quickest reflexes grabbed either the shields or the bodies scattered around us and covered ourselves. I heard a groan from the White Wolf, whose torso I was currently borrowing, as an arrow lanced him through the shoulder. Several of the men around me fell, and even Mitsui caught an arrow through his calf.

"Come closer you fucking cowards!" I yelled from beneath my blood-dripping meat-shield, and, surprisingly, a second volley never came, instead the ground shook with the disciplined march of the group of probably a-hundred-and-twenty Wolves descending upon us.

We all prepared to face a battle we'd no doubt lose, but then they suddenly stopped only a few metres from us. It was kind of bizarre to be honest, but I quickly realised the cause.

"You should introduce me to your new friends," he said, his voice muffled by his mask and distorted in that weird way that made me think he was speaking through clenched teeth.

"Hear its blissful laughter. Let it complete you," the voice in my ring suddenly announced

¹⁷¹ Seriously...

“Long time no see,” I quickly replied to Jirō, wondering if anyone else had heard the strange voice. Its presence meant that someone, most likely the Masked Psycho, was carrying a cursed object like the Weeping Blade or the Claw of the Forlorn Shadow.

“I wish you would’ve told me you preferred the colour blue,” Jirō said, feigning indignity.

“And I wish you wouldn’t have tossed me to the wolves the first chance you got... and yet, here we are.”

“What do you say we make this a bit more interesting? You and I will have a little duel, and the losing team will *surrender*.” Jirō basically spat out the word ‘surrender’, and, judging by the looks on his men’s faces, it was clearly the most humiliating and disgraceful thing they could imagine. But I noticed that one of the soldiers, a White Wolf located somewhat in the middle of the group, wasn’t scowling like his fellows. In fact, the entire middle of their column was just staring blankly at me and Lord Mitsui. The weirdest part was that I could’ve sworn that I’d seen some of those faces before.

Then one of them whistled a tune and the entire White Wolf unit began devouring itself from within, as its core turned on their fellow soldiers, chopping and stabbing as many of those around them as possible, before they had the chance to defend themselves or get out of the way.

Jirō turned around, and despite his face being obscured, I could tell he was surprised, I mean, heck, even I was.

What the fuck is going on? I thought to myself. Then the Lunatic started laughing, steadying his mask with a hand to keep it from falling off.

“Hayato! If you wanted to play... YOU SHOULD’VE JUST SAID SO!”

The Masked Man jumped into the fray and Mitsui quickly gave the order for us to exploit the opportunity given to us.

The White Wolves, although outnumbering us more than five-to-one, were fighting a battle from both within and without, and it was clear that they didn’t quite know which of their friends to target and which to ignore, making them very easy pickings for us. Before a minute had passed, the unit was completely torn apart, with less than half remaining, and a large chunk of that half seemingly on our side.

“It always surprises me...” Mitsui said in-between chopping a guy in half with his Uchigatana and repelling an eager Wolf to his right, “...what the *Seiryū Shinobi* are capable of.”

That’s when it finally clicked for me. I had a brief flashback to the time when I’d seen two of Mori’s Shinobi don the armour of the Vermilion soldiers we’d slain. This was Hayato’s and the Azure Shinobi’s speciality: Infiltration. I never knew a skill such as this could be so effective, but it was clear that it required a lot of knowledge to pull off effectively, especially considering how Hayato and his men had replaced at least twenty of the White Wolves’, though perhaps they were vulnerable to this kind of strategy in some way, since I found it unlikely that most people wouldn’t notice that twenty-odd men suddenly were suddenly replaced.

The battlefield had changed significantly, as the remaining Wolves were fighting mostly each other, letting Mitsui’s unit and Hayato’s Shinobi quickly tear them down, leaving only Jirō. Although, using the word ‘only’ to describe the whirlwind of death that the Laughing Swordsman had become, was truly an injustice. Before Mitsui or I could step in to help, Jirō leapt on one of the disguised Shinobi, who put up his shield to save himself, but the Laughing Manic simply leapt onto the shield while stabbing his sword straight through it, killing the man beneath it, and then kicking off the shield

and pulling his blade with him in an impressive front-flip that carried his blade down onto another Shinobi, tearing through his shoulder and separating it from the rest of his body. From there, Jirō ducked under an incoming blade, pushing himself into an incredible low stance, from which he sprang up and stabbed his attacker through the gut, before whirling around and drawing his blade outwards at an odd angle, cleaving bone and flesh with incredible strength. In fact, it seemed as though he became stronger with every kill, because, by the time he'd killed eight of the Shinobi, he was capable of splitting a man's skull in half with his blade... which is the gruesome way that Shinobi number nine went. By now, Mitsui, Hayato, Hanada, and I, as well as the remaining archers and footmen, were all focused on the lone Killing Machine, but it seemed futile, as he cut down anyone who came too close, feeding on their strength and becoming even stronger. Arrows that hit him penetrated only a few centimetres deep, barely even drawing blood, and some didn't even manage to stick despite hitting him head-on.

Then suddenly Hayato pushed one of the Shinobi into Jirō's way, ducking left just as the Laughing Swordsman seized on the bait. As Jirō lanced his Dao through the ribcage of the man, Hayato surged up from down low and buried a knife deep into his flank, making the Masked Man scream in pain. But before the rest of us could seize on the opportunity, Jirō simply let go of his sword and spun around, smashing Hayato's skull into a pulp with his fist and sending him flying into a nearby building, where he collapsed, all broken and mangled. The Great Shinobi was dead, his face a shattered, unrecognisable mess.

"No!" I screamed and flung myself at the Lunatic Swordsman. Jirō retrieved his blade swiftly and swung it at me, and I was surprised at how easily I performed a Deflect in response, almost like I was falling into my Dance of Death. But then, as our blades met, the bones in my wrist were shattered by the force of the impact, and though his blade was deflected away and opened him up for a brief instant, I had to back away.

After backing behind the line of footmen and Shinobi that still remained, I quickly pulled one of the two '*Weak Healing Potions*' free from its loop on my sash and gulped down its contents as fast as possible, nearly spitting it all back out when my over-eagerness triggered a cough.

I heard Mitsui shout something, and, in response, every last one of the footmen and Shinobi charged alongside their leader, perhaps betting on the chance that their numbers could overwhelm the Demon. About that time is when I noticed that Jirō's movements had become sluggish and stuttering, which the clever Lord Mitsui had most likely picked up on as well, deciding to test his luck.

When my wrist was fully healed, I returned just as Mitsui managed a slice across the Laughing Swordsman's left arm in a spectacular show of skill and speed, the sword in hand flowing gracefully in-between each cut and thrust. In his youth, Mitsui would no doubt have been capable of matching Jirō's speed, though as it stood, he wasn't capable of keeping up with the Laughing Monster, who immediately adapted, blocking and countering every single attack afterwards, forcing the old Samurai to repeatedly back away.

A couple of overeager footmen followed me as I ran to reinforce Mitsui, but before they could even bring their swords to bear on the Laughing Man, he'd regained his speed and lunged for them, slicing the two men apart in three quick strokes.

"I have a plan," Mitsui said briefly when I drew near. "I will hold his attention, and then you jump from out of my shadow and deal the killing blow before he can react."

I wasn't given the chance to ask any questions, as Jirō immediately seized on us. I dodged left and Mitsui leapt backwards. As I bounded through the air, my eyes caught on the blade in the Maniac's hand. It was glowing. Like an orange one-hundred-percent-cursed-weapon-guaranteed kind of glow.

My feet carried me forward as soon as I landed behind Jirō, who was fully focused on Lord Mitsui. In a moment of inspiration, I came on a plan in which Mitsui's strategy could be deployed.

"Hey Jirō, did you hear? Did you hear the pathetic screams of your father as I cut him down?"

As soon as I knew he'd caught on the bait, I charged straight at him, and just as he spun on his heel and swung his deadly blade at me, I jumped far into the air, with the kind of agility not possible anywhere else than in a fabricated world like this. Mid-air, as I passed above him, I let loose a Quick Draw, which slashed him across his face at a lopsided angle, cleaving his mask in two and sending hair from his white wig flying everywhere. In that same moment, Mitsui returned his blade to its sheath and fired off a vertical Quick Draw of his own, which carved a deep, bloody groove down the back of the man, who only cackled insanely in response to the pain.

I landed behind Mitsui, but, by the time I'd regained my balance on the uneven road, Jirō was already turned towards us. None of us moved as the shorn mask-and-wig fell away from Jirō's face, and the most repulsive grin I'd ever seen stared back at us, the mouth pulled so far into the grin that his skin was ripped and every last tooth exposed, which, coupled with his dark, concave eyes made him look like a Jolly Roger.¹⁷²

Mitsui moved directly in front of me and thrust his sword into Jirō's gut, at which point my body moved on its own, carrying me right around the Samurai Lord and, in a leap, I hammered my obsidian blade tip-first down through the Laughing Swordsman's neck, the blade graving a line in his clavicle and piercing so deep that it ruptured all the way through his most vital organs, killing him in an instant. I let my sword rest in his flesh and walked a few steps away, letting my stamina replenish, while the adrenaline dissipated.

Then I noticed. The bastard was still standing. Actually, it almost looked like he was leaning on Mitsui, who also hadn't moved. When I went to shake the Samurai out of it, I saw that Jirō's Dao had punched through his chest and that Lord Mitsui was just as dead as the Monster whom his own blade rested in.

"You idiot," I said quietly. *What's the point of defeating someone if you have to sacrifice yourself to do so?*

"We have to keep going," Hanada suddenly said, breaking the spaced-out stare that I might have held for ten minutes undisturbed.

"What about Lord Mitsui?"

"My men will deal with the bodies," Hanada answered, as though it wasn't anything significant. For someone as loyal as him, the loss of two high-ranking Azure members should surely have had a more pronounced effect on him, and yet, it was like nothing had happened. Perhaps it was simply his way of dealing with loss: to shove it away and minimise it.

I looked at the sorry bunch of archers, footmen, and Shinobi that were left. In total they numbered only eleven. We had lost more than what we had gained from this small victory. Perhaps this was a

¹⁷² Correction: A Jolly Roger ... but with the skin still attached...

good trade-off in the eyes of the White Tiger: One crazy lieutenant in exchange for an Azure Lord. Out of all the Lady's vassals, Mitsui was no doubt the strongest, and through his loss, the Lady herself had lost a lot of the reputation and power that having a man such as him in her service had garnered.

Before I followed Hanada, I retrieved my blade and looted the floating wisp next to Jirō. Though my ring had warned of a cursed weapon, the only item I looted from the Laughing Swordsman was his mask.

'Tatemaē'

-Armour-

Armour > Mask

Armour Type: Very Light

"Those who do not wish to reveal their true nature to the world often put up a façade, though some, like Jirō, put on a mask."

Trait(s):

'Manic Laughter'

'Possessive'

'Tatemaē'

Equip

Discard

Weight: 0.4 kilos

Its three traits read, in order: *"The wearer laughs maniacally during combat"*; *"Cannot be removed while other people can see you"*; and, *"Negates the hostile traits of other items while worn."* The first two traits seemed mostly like quirks associated with Jirō, but the third trait was one that really caught my attention. It meant that items, such as cursed weapons that might make the wielder hostile to other players or NPCs, could be completely negated, and whoever wore the mask could effectively blend in anywhere, despite the nefarious purposes that their cursed weapon imposed on them. If I spotted a player wearing this mask, or one like it, I'd definitely consider them a threat. Anyway... Besides the traits, the mask had very little armour and weighed only 400 grams, so I picked it up, thinking I could probably sell it later.

Together with Hanada, I headed for the Kakon-shi Palace, hoping to finally put an end to this Stage.

The sounds of fighting in the distance were the first indication that we were getting close. As we exited the mouth of the residential street we'd been following, a vast open space emerged before us, where the dirt was cobbled over with tiny square stones, which created an uncountable number of rings that progressively got smaller as they neared the centre of the open space. Three separate clashes between the White Tigers and Azure forces crowded the area around a very large temple-like building

at the heart of the ringed square, which, purely based on its elaborate and decadent design, had to be the palace of the White Tiger. A large pond surrounded the palace, and only a single crimson-dyed wooden bridge gave access to its gates. The pond itself was full of wilted flowers and rotten lily pads, and the water was red like blood. I wondered just how we were supposed to cross the water, as the bridge was heavily guarded, as well as the current hotspot for one of the three skirmishes, and the pond itself was overlooked by archers who'd already killed at least two dozen soldiers trying to swim across.

As I looked towards the palace, which was a mix of red-dyed wood, coal-black roof tiles, and white walls, I experienced a strong sense of *déjà vu*, reminding me of home. In Kyōto where I'd grown up and lived my whole life¹⁷³, there had been thousands of shrines and temples. The Palace reminded me of many of the larger temples around my childhood home. After I was kicked out, I'd lived within short walking distance of *Kinkaku-ji* and *Ryōan-ji*, the former being one of the most well-known temples in Kyōto, often referred to as the Golden Pavilion. Granted, the Palace here wasn't covered in gold, but the atmosphere was similar.

"Impressive, isn't it?" Hanada remarked.

"How do we get across?" I asked, just as the first drops of red rain began showering the city.

"You'll see," Hanada simply responded, and as I stared across the open space, the pond and the temple palace within, I noticed that several of those 'dead' bodies in the water on one specific side of the temple were slowly floating towards its shore. The archers on the shore and atop the second floor of the palace walls seemed blind to this, or rather, they seemed to allow it and no doubt their arrows had struck in places where not even a drop of blood had been drawn. As the Azure footmen crawled up onto the manmade island, which was comprised of a wilted garden that was tacked onto the side of the palace, the disguised archers relocated and started dealing with the real archers on the other sides of the compound, before returning and barraging the White Wolves guarding the bridge. Before long, the whole defence was falling apart and the main Azure force started advancing across the bridge. Once again, the Shinobi had infiltrated deep enough to be able to sabotage the White clan, and I had to wonder just how they'd even managed such a feat. It seemed quite possible that they could've ended this conflict long ago, and yet, mysteriously enough, they hadn't.

Hanada and I quickly ran to link up with the main force, which, it turned out, was led by none other than Lady Seiryū herself. As we advanced across the bridge, passing the halfway-point, a large group of White Wolves, perhaps numbering sixty or more, blocked the way. The entire Azure group, which easily outnumbered the Wolves two-to-one, halted, perhaps out of fear. A second later, I saw that it was not fear, rather, they were waiting for something. And then it came, flying over our heads, tiny arrows of light, crowding together like a swarm of bees and then splitting and each finding a target of their own, piercing straight through armour and shield, and followed by silence.

I turned to look at the source of the arrows, which surely belonged to a force of a hundred-or-more archers, and yet, there were no one there behind our lines. No one, except the Lady Seiryū and her wicked white bow. Even though she was barely taller than me, I felt her gaze look down at me, and I saw her hand raise towards the White Wolves, who were completely unfazed by this magical attack, and then her fist clenched and I heard the loud crash of sixty men in armour, as their bodies

¹⁷³ As far as I knew, anyway.

hit the wooden planks beneath their feet. The Lady smiled a gluttonous black-teethed smile in response.

Dreadful and yet exquisite, a strange part of my brain responded.

When we walked over the pile of Wolves, I saw no red, save the puddles, and heard no dying breath, just the *pitter-patter* and *plip-and-plop* of rain hitting the black tiles, the wooden bridge, and the crimson pond. Though all the bodies had one thing in common: completely white eyes, lacking both pupils and irises, as though snatched from them through fiendish spell. It seemed that the Vermilion clan were not the only ones who possessed disturbing magic.

We passed through the bridge gate, before proceeding into the palace proper, the courtyard around the main building, and its outer rooms with relative ease, only encountering small pockets of surviving Wolves. News quickly arrived of the two other skirmishes outside the pond, stating that they were concluded with victories to the Azure side, though at a great cost. The irony of the situation was noticeable to me and perhaps to those around.

They will hold the city for a single night before the Vermilion clan comes to their doorstep and takes it from them.

It was all the same to me though. What did I care? My only goal was leaving this World conquered, so that I might progress to the next and so on. And yet, maybe I did care, which was odd. I mean, how could I even grow attached to characters that weren't real? Characters whose thoughts and responses were predetermined, crafted by demigod Architects long before I set foot in this hellscape. It seemed strange to me that I'd even care the slightest bit about something I knew wasn't real, and yet I did, without being able to explain why. I wondered what Jakob thought about it.

Suddenly, our unit stopped in front of a large door. Occupied with my thoughts I hadn't even noticed the room we had entered. It was quite a large hall, where pillars held up the ceiling four metres above, and where evenly-spaced, elaborately-carved windows spilled the last shreds of sunlight into the room as the only source of light besides a few small lanterns here and there. In the centre of the massive hall was another room, perhaps a throne room, or maybe a room for prayer.

"*Byakko*¹⁷⁴ waits within," the Lady announced dramatically. The footmen and archers spread out across the hall, bows and swords held at the ready, as though a monster was waiting just beyond the gate. I'd already fought one monster today and didn't really want to have a second round. This wasn't even the final Stage of this World, for crying out loud!

"Newcomer¹⁷⁵, take ten of my men with you and face him."

Okay... that's weird, considering we've got way more men than that... I thought. Nevertheless, I picked ten footmen who looked tough enough, though they didn't seem too happy about being picked, which I thought was odd, but I just marked it down as them not really trusting me yet.

The smooth wooden floor beneath our feet barely made a noise, except the occasional squeak, as we advanced past the outer lines of footmen and archers, all of whom were watching the tall door. It took two men to pull open the great door, which, once open, we passed through and closed behind us, much to my own confusion. *We're being sealed in for some reason...*

¹⁷⁴ "White Tiger". No doubt she was referring to the head of the White Tiger clan though.

¹⁷⁵ Apparently, it was too much to ask to be called by my given name anywhere in this realm... but maybe it was to ensure that players with names like "Lord Butt Fart" didn't ruin the 'vibe' the Architects had tried so hard to create.

Within the sealed-off room was a shrine with incense burning and unfurling its cloying scent through the air, there were also a table for studying and one for eating opposite of it, as well as other necessities, such as a bed, dresser, and so on. It was all rather mundane, and yet, all of my chosen footmen were on edge, their swords vibrating in their hands with pent-up tension, ready to spring on the bald man in black-and-white monk robes, who sat with his back turned to us, deep in meditation. Though none of the men moved, instead they looked at me sidelong, expecting *something*.

Not wanting to disappoint, I cleared my throat, and said, “We’ve come for your head.”

“As expected,” replied Lord Byakko. “But do you have what it takes?”

What an odd question. “Of course,” I said confidently.

Byakko stood up, which made each of the footmen adjust their stances nervously, as though they expected him to strike. I truly hoped he wasn’t like Jirō, because I really didn’t have the energy to fight another half-immortal lunatic. He turned around and bent his neck forward, making himself an easy target. Then he looked up at us, and said, “Well?”

I drew my katana and placed both my hands on it, and then some kind of strange wind billowed my cape behind me and ruffled my hair gently.

“Become stone,” Byakko commanded. I would’ve laughed at the absurdity, but for some reason I couldn’t move, whatsoever. Not even my eyes would turn or blink.

Fuck...

I didn’t even know how such a thing was possible, and from what I could see, the ten men around me were all motionless as well. Not only did the Vermilion and Azure clans have their own kinds of magic, but so too did the White Tiger. If the Black Tortoise clan still existed, I wondered what their magic was about. Though from the looks of it, I probably wouldn’t find out. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to have prepared for this, after all, no one had told me this old man had the ability to freeze anyone by just using his voice. I mean, clearly *everyone* had known, considering the fact that all of the footmen, as well as the men outside the sealed-off room, were prepared for something major.

“What a shame,” the bald man said. He slowly advanced across the floor, and then withdrew a small dagger from within the large sleeve of his robe. Without being in much of a hurry he carved through the man next to me, severing his jugular veins and windpipe in one lazy cut, spilling the man’s blood onto the floor. Perhaps a second later, the footman fell lifelessly to the floor, the magic losing its power when he died.

Byakko then walked in front of me, and all I could think was, *I was sent in as the bait to distract this guy... I should’ve realised!*

As sweet relief was only a hair’s breadth away from my neck and the stench of iron flooded my nose, an arrow of light punched through the gate behind me and continued across the room unchallenged, before exiting through the back wall. Lord Byakko gurgled something, perhaps trying to issue another command, but his throat now had a hole through it and his vocal cords were obliterated. I felt the control of my body returning and immediately took a step back, before tightening my grip on my sword’s hilt and losing an angled Helm-Splitter that impacted with the side of his neck and sent his severed head to the floor with a hollow *thunk*, while his body tumbled backwards, crashing against one of the low tables, scattering parchment, inkwells, and calligraphy pens everywhere.

The gates were opened behind me and twenty men surged into the room, surrounding the body of Lord Byakko.

“You’re too late,” I said. “I already killed the bastard myself.”

“As expected,” I heard the Lady respond, as she too came into the room, the men parting to let her through.

“You used me as bait.”

“Can you blame me? That old man could’ve forced us to kill each other, if he hadn’t been more interested in prayer and meditation. He could’ve ended this war years ago. Unlike his predecessors, he didn’t utilise his power to its fullest extent. He brought all of this on himself.”

“What was *that* power he used on me?”

“*Domination*. The ability to control anyone through the use of his voice. His whole clan used to have the ability, but for some reason it faded with each generation until he was the only person capable of using it.”

“Every clan has their own power, isn’t that right?”

“Indeed. Since you’ve proven yourself, I’ll tell you. The White Tiger had the power of *Domination*, which you just experienced; the Vermilion Bird wield *the Blood Dance*, which allows them to control their own blood to make them near unkillable; the Black Tortoise held the power of *Equilibrium*, which made them capable of nullifying magic, but they were annihilated as it made them too strong; and we, the Azure Dragon, have *Dawnlight*.”

“And what does it do, your power?”

The Lady smiled dangerously, “Come dawn, you’ll see.” I didn’t like the sound of that...

“So, what now?” I asked.

“We fortify our grip and prepare to defend the city tomorrow, as the Vermilion Bird will wish to uproot us before we fully settle into our new soil.”

I didn’t dawdle too much at the temple, though I did look around for a bit, trying to spot any kind of items that might have dropped, though to no avail. So, I simply crossed the bridge and returned to the Koike Rakuen inn, where I paid for another two nights.

I had them draw a bath for me and spent a while soaking in it before using the leftover bathwater to cleanse my sword and armour, which, all things considered, had barely received a scratch. I felt pretty disappointed by the whole turn of events, considering that the two Azure members I liked the most had been brutally murdered, while I’d been exploited as bait by a crazy, power-hungry hellcat and hadn’t received even a dime for all the effort I’d put in. Of course, I was pretty happy that I for once hadn’t been horrendously injured, but just the thought of Byakko’s dagger by my throat made the hairs on my neck stand up. I wondered if that was the way every player experienced that Stage or if I’d perhaps been extremely unlucky. Maybe it would be different for Sunflower, since she’d mentioned screwing up the Weeping Blade Stage.

At any rate, I wondered what was to follow. The next Stage was likely the last one of this World, considering the looming battle between the Azure and Vermilion clan, which all of the previous events led up to, but it just felt kind of off, as though something was missing. After all, if the next Stage was to be the final one, then shouldn’t I have been much better informed about it? I mean, the

Forlorn Castle was presented as kind of a big deal, and yet I'd just been told to rest and wait for dawn, whatever the hell that meant.

It wasn't until the middle of the night that I fell asleep, when, finally, my exhaustion overwhelmed the maelstrom of thoughts spinning around inside my head.

The.Break.of.Dawn

Light cascaded through the window and onto the floor. The streets outside were alive with people, just like any other normal day. Their daily lives were resumed as though the events of the day before had never transpired, and their voices bled through the walls and filled my room.

“You sleep too much,” scolded a voice from opposite my bed. I was still too tired to fully open my eyes and thought that I was probably just hallucinating. After all, there was no way that *he* could be in here, because I’d seen him die yesterday...

Maybe half an hour later I finally opened my eyes and sat up. I looked towards the door and the window and saw that I was alone. *What a weird dream...* I thought to myself, wondering just how big of an impact this World was having on me. If I was seeing and hearing things, it would be very hard to know what was real and what wasn’t.¹⁷⁶

“Do you know much time I’ve wasted here, waiting on you?”

I quickly turned and looked towards the bathtub, where Hayato lounged on the edge, one leg over the other, watching me.

“H-how...?”

“Didn’t *she* already tell you? This is what we do. Die and die and die, becoming wiser with every life spent.”

“You’re immortal??”

“Not quite.”

I blinked, sleep still clouding my mind a bit, then I remembered the word the Lady had used: *Dawnlight*. “Is that your power? Undeath?”

“It’s not undeath... it’s more like, rebirth.”

“How many times have you died?”

“A lot,” he answered. “But that’s not why I’m here. The reason why I’m here is because of you. You might be in the good graces of our Lady, but I heard your exchange with the Laughing Swordsman. You two knew each other...” he said, alluding to the most obvious conclusion anyone would make based on that.

“He’s the reason why I’m here,” I replied, truthfully. “But he and his Master betrayed me, and put a bounty on my head.”

“So, you aren’t a spy working for the White Wolves?”

“If I was, I’d be a pretty terrible one, you know, killing their leaders like that...”

“Jirō and Genzō weren’t their leaders.”

“What do you mean?”

“Genzō was just a lowly spymaster swimming in waters too deep for him to understand, and Jirō was more like a substitute leader of the Wolves. The real leader of the White Wolves is still alive. I’m here, because I was hoping you knew how get into their fortress.”

“I didn’t even know they had a fortress,” I said.

¹⁷⁶ Paradoxically, nothing in this universe was real, and yet some things felt like they were, but, in truth, the hallucinations and nightmarish visions were just as real as everything else that I experienced here, and just as equally fabricated as the rest. Truly a mind-splitting conundrum.

“Time will tell whether you are lying or not, but enough talk, we shouldn’t waste any more daylight. Hurry up and get dressed, we’re leaving immediately.”

Two hours later, after going north from the city through the mountains, we suddenly found ourselves before a wide trail up through the pass.

On the side of the trail stood a person I hadn’t expected to ever see again.

“Do we need an exorcist for *this*?” I asked Hayato.

“I told you, I’m not an exorcist,” Ginko replied, nearly dropping the cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

“Our Lady told me to bring him along, it would seem his insights might be a boon.”

I looked to Ginko and he just shrugged in response, nonchalant as ever.

The temperature steadily dropped as we climbed higher and higher, until eventually we saw crimson snow here-and-there. With such excellent natural defences at the back of the city, it made it an ideal spot for a fortress, as it could quickly reinforce the city’s major areas, while also providing a safehouse for the ruling family in times of war. Granted, the ruling family, that is to say Lord Byakko, had stayed in the city for some reason.

“How come Jirō was leading the White Wolves if he wasn’t their leader?”

“The leader of the Wolves, *Magami*, had a falling out with Byakko-sama a few years back. I’m unsure of the specifics, but my spies tell me that it stemmed from when Byakko-sama used his magic to force Magami to send the White Wolves to a village where they slaughtered hundreds of civilians. Mitsui-sama’s son was amongst those who died. Several family members of the Vermilion clan were killed there as well, and it ended up uniting our clans, as we tried to work together, despite our differences. But our fragile alliance didn’t last long.”

“I see,” I just replied, not knowing what else to say.

We continued along the mountain trail, with Ginko trailing behind us, and I could feel the cold air scorch my throat and lungs like fire. The higher we climbed, the thinner the air became, which only worsened the feeling.

Probably noticing my pain, Hayato said, “The White Wolves are trained in these conditions. It makes them tough and relentless... if they survive. Once upon a time, the White Wolves were the symbol of our nation. Most young men aspired to become part of their ranks. It was deemed an honour. Now they have become a symbol of destruction.”

“I’ve been wondering,” I started. “How were you able to infiltrate their ranks so effectively? Surely that shouldn’t be possible.”

“Indeed, it shouldn’t, especially not in an army that is considered more organised and effective than all other, and yet, their army is hollow. None of the soldiers know each other, nor even care for one another. It is part of the reason why they can fight with all their might and never surrender.”

“And what is the other part?”

“Medicine, or rather, the drug they take. It makes them cold and apathetic, yet extremely malleable to commands. You might have noticed their white-spotted hair. It’s a side-effect of the drug they consume.”

“So, all you did to infiltrate their unit was dress up like them?”

“Yes.”

That sounds ridiculous, I thought.

“These wouldn’t happen to be ‘Wolf Pellets’ would they?” Ginko asked. I’d momentarily forgotten he was even there.

“That’s correct,” Hayato replied.

I’d wanted to ask another question, but before I had the chance, the fortress popped into view, and a sombre Shakuhachi melody swam through the air, just as crimson snow started falling from the dark sky above.

“Now entering Stage ‘The Last of the White Wolves’.”

Here we go, I told myself, anticipating another hectic fight, but then, nothing happened, and we just continued our approach to the fortress, albeit slower, as we stuck to the trees and bushes away from the road to avoid any watchmen.

“They won’t be expecting an attack on their fortress,” Hayato whispered. “But we should still try not to raise the alarm, as they likely have more than a hundred men within their walls. Our target is Magami. Once he’s dead and the gates are flung wide, I’ll signal Mitsui-sama’s unit, who will charge the fortress and kill the remaining soldiers.”

“Mitsui is alive???”

“Yes, were you not listening to what I told you earlier—”

“His men too?”

Hayato sighed, as though I was being unreasonable. “Yes, they are all alive.”

“Wait,” I said. “What about Mori?”

“Who?”

“Hanada’s master.”

“He’s still dead.”

“I don’t understand.”

“There are limits to our Lady’s power. Most of those who were living as spies within the city hadn’t been blessed by it, which means they weren’t revived by the light of dawn.”

“I still don’t understand,” I said.

“When we’re done here, I’ll explain it in more detail,” Hayato promised.

“Fine.” I wondered what exactly the limit was. Perhaps it was dependent on some kind of timer, although that seemed a bit too logical for this World. A world of magic such as this wasn’t likely to revolve around concepts that were easily explained.

A sharp wind brushed against us and for once I was actually glad to be wearing so many layers of armour, as it helped ward off the cold significantly. Hayato was still wearing his blue-grey suit, and whatever paint had been used to make his black hair match the Wolves’ still clung to it. On his hip hung his short katana, and I absently wondered how many men it must’ve slain. Ginko, like the Shinobi Master, was utterly unphased by both the altitude and temperature.

As we came around the side of the fortress, where trees and bushes were left carelessly overgrown, we started hearing pained sounds from within the stone walls, coupled with muffled yelling. A few metres further up, we found a section of the wall that was entirely destroyed, revealing a rotted wooden cell within.

How convenient... I thought, preparing myself for what might be a trap.

It seemed as though something, or someone, had broken through the wall and escaped, though by what means was impossible to tell.

“Do you wanna go through here?” I asked.

Hayato looked around, making sure the coast was clear and then jumped through the hole and into the cell.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” I said to myself.

Ginko hung back outside the hole as I climbed through. He seemed to be looking at something in the air that I couldn’t see.

The sources of agonised whimpering and struggling were immediately revealed after I entered. Within the prison building were easily twenty-or-thirty tiny wooden cells, most of them occupied by men, who, aside from their white-spotted or, in some cases, entirely-white hair, were indistinguishable from ordinary citizens. Most were writhing in agony on the floor, some were scratching at their throats and faces, and a few more aggressive prisoners were tied up with ropes and gagged with cloth, perhaps to keep them from gnawing at their bonds.

“I suspect this is where they keep those who become too dependent on their battle drug, as well as those who fail their training or prove weak to the stimulant.”

I had no reply. It was a horrific sight, and once more showed me the ruthless nature of the White Wolves, who it seemed had no qualms about leaving their own to rot in this damp and frozen prison. The cold edge of a blade would be far more merciful an end for these men, who, judging by the few emaciated and rotten bodies further down the hall, were going to stay here until they starved to death.

“How do we get out?” I whispered.

Hayato didn’t respond, but just walked up to the rotten wooden bars and put his weight on them with his shoulder. It budged quite a bit from just a gentle push, so he stepped back and in two swift and efficient cuts with his sword scored deep grooves in the top and bottom of the bars. He then pushed them again and this time they came loose without much resistance, and all of it without making any sounds that weren’t drowned out in the anguished chorus of the prisoners.

“Their emotions have been robbed,” Ginko suddenly commented, startling me. I hadn’t heard him follow us in.

“What do you mean?” Hayato asked.

“The air is thick with shed emotions. They are like tiny wisps or flies. If not for their nature, they would be quite splendid to behold.” As he spoke, he held his hand in the air as though a butterfly had landed on it and he stared at his finger in the blank stare that I’d come to associate him and his flat, apathetic speech.

I looked back to the Master Shinobi, who seemed to be contemplating Ginko’s words.

“The Wolf Pellets certainly make their consumers pliable and void of empathy.”

“Is there a way to give them back their emotions? If they’re like flies, can’t you catch and put them back?”

Ginko shook his head.

“Let us find Magami,” Hayato urged us.

“I will stay here a while longer,” the Mushishi responded.

As I exited, I took one last look at the writhing forms and Ginko who crouched in front of the cells, watching the people within. I'd make sure no one else would experience their fate, and, hopefully, those that still lived would receive the mercy of Lord Mitsui.

Outside, Hayato was staring off into the distance. Something about his stance made me worried.

"What now?"

"This is strange," he remarked, ignoring my question.

"Yeah," I replied after looking around. "There aren't any guards. Where have all the Wolves gone?"

"My information says they number several hundred strong. For their fortress to be completely abandoned is impossible."

"Is it possible your information is wrong?" After all, we'd only fought about three-hundred the day before. So, why would over half of their numbers have been withheld from battle?

"It cannot be. I trust my men."

"What do we do then?"

"Continue with our objective. Maybe Mitsui-sama will know how to proceed."

I didn't argue, although I thought it was unlikely that Magami would be present, when all of his men were not. As we strode across the open courtyard, passing a barracks and a blacksmith, I realised that the architecture here was all wrong. The entire fortress was built of stone, and, aside from a few wooden structures here and there, looked completely unlike the rest of this World's buildings. In fact, it was almost like the White Wolves had taken over a small castle belonging to the Forlorn Kingdom.

We stopped before the main building, which likely housed a kitchen and a few chambers for official meetings and things along those lines. I turned to Hayato, who was looking around suspiciously.

"Who built this place?"

"No one knows," he replied. "Our nation is still young, and four generations ago, when our first ancestors came to this land, places such as these dotted the landscape. The Vermilion Bird occupy the largest castle in the region, and it too was built by foreign hands."

Perhaps the Forlorn Kingdom once extended this far, I secretly¹⁷⁷ speculated. It made me wonder if there was somehow a perceptible link between this World and the Forlorn Kingdom. It was possible that they both occupied the same universe, but across different time periods. Perhaps I would find a similar link when I went to the next World after this one. It also made me think that if I walked far enough in one direction, I would eventually reach Gothershall and the Forgotten Village, though I wasn't sure if the Worlds had been designed in a way that actually allowed you to do such a thing. Had I been the exploring type, I might've tested out this hypothesis, but as it stood, it was the least of my priorities.

The Shakuhachi melody in the air played a high-pitched note that fluttered dramatically. As if summoned by the flute, carefree footsteps approached from behind, crunching in the snow-covered earth. Hayato and I both turned at the same time, hands instinctively seeking the reassuring presence of our blades.

¹⁷⁷ Hayato didn't seem like he trusted me that much as it were, and revealing any knowledge that I shouldn't be able to know, would likely make matters even worse. Or it was possible he'd just blank out and ignore my words, as though I'd never said them.

“Magami,” Hayato said, contempt evident in his voice.

“In the flesh,” returned his gravelly voice. His face was a crisscross of strange white blemishes, scars, and wrinkles, and his hair was white like snow and tied back in the usual White Wolf fashion. The eyes that looked over each of us in turn were dark-blue and bottomless, like the sea during storm. The armour he wore was similar to that of the other Wolves I’d fought, though it lacked protection on his left shoulder, and had the top part of a real white wolf’s head on the right, teeth and all, though I was sure its eyes were glass. The leather and fur looked extremely scuffed and showed countless signs of battle.

“Where are the rest of your men?” I asked.

“You’ve already seen them,” he replied, inclining his head towards the prison we’d entered through. “I’m the last one capable of fighting. Those weaklings in there will be dead within a few days.”

“So, you’re *the Last of the White Wolves*...” Hayato murmured.¹⁷⁸ “That’s not what I’ve heard.”

“I am the King of Nothing. Whoever told you we have a thousand strong,” Magami said, and grinned, “they’re lying. Byakko-sama took control of my men over two years ago.”

“That’s not possible. *You* infiltrating *my* men!?”

“What did you expect? You’re not the only one skilled at spying, and once I got a few of your men hooked on our medicine, they became like clay for me to mould.”

“Why go through all of that if you weren’t part of the fight anymore?” I questioned.

“Because I knew that either Seiryū or Suzaku would eventually sever the head of the snake, leaving a void for me to fill. All the clans are like puppets following my lead.” He laughed. “It’s almost tragic how easily they trust each other. They have been eating out of my hand for years! How else do you think the thick-skulled Vermilion Samurai discovered all the Azure spies within the city? It was me! I’ve been stoking the flames all this time, and now, with that bald asshole dead, the light reveals the true puppet master!”

Hayato finally pulled his sword, and I followed suit. I could tell he was pissed. *The infiltrator became the infiltrated*, I considered. *What irony.*

“I expect you to put up a good fight,” was all he said before charging in with a thrust.

Magami sidestepped easily and punched the Shinobi in the jaw, staggering him. I leapt in with a thrust of my own, before the Wolf could draw his blade.

“Eager! Good, I like it better that way!”

Magami jumped at me and performed a spinning kick that caught me in the back of my head by surprise, sending me staggering forward, though I quickly recovered, just in time to see him pulling four small pellets from a wooden box and cracking them with his teeth. A roar escaped his lungs, and suddenly I got the feeling that we were no longer fighting a man, but a beast. A Great White Wolf taken human form.

At last, the Wolf drew his blade, short and straight like Hayato’s, and his shield, smaller than the kind I was now familiar with after the previous Stage, but still large enough to cover his torso. He whirled around in a disorienting pattern and then suddenly slammed his shield towards my head, which I instinctively dodged under, just as his blade sprang up from down low, anticipating my

¹⁷⁸ He said the name of the Stage!

movements. I stumbled backwards, and he jabbed his blade at me, while using the shield to cover his back from a slash Hayato tried to sneak in. Then he kicked off towards me with a sudden burst of speed, knocking all the air from my lungs when his shield connected with my stomach, but not managing to cut me open thanks to my reactionary strike at his head, which, although it missed, made him freeze in his steps. *There still remains a shred of the real fighter beneath*, I considered. *He is cognisant enough to not jump onto my blade like the Wolves did in their eagerness to kill, every single time I fought them...*

Despite feeling the urge to vomit my guts out, I drew in a shallow breath, thanks to the thin air, and pushed back at him with a Quick Draw, making him backpedal right onto Hayato's blade, which buried itself into his flank shallowly, though still deep enough to draw blood. Unfazed by the wound, Magami spun around on the spot with incredible speed, slamming his shield into Hayato's face, knocking him to the ground, but I quickly descended on the Wolf with a Helm-Splitter, which, as soon as he reacted to it, I changed into a Deflect to catch his thrust aimed at my exposed lower half, and I chained the momentum into a flawless Lacerate that took a deep bite into his breast armour and upper right arm, cutting deep enough through the leather and fur to dye the white-and-grey in a crimson hue.

Magami looked at his arm blankly, then eagerly pushed forward again. I fell back, but then surged forward with a Deflect, catching his thrust again, and this time using the opening to drive my sword through his gut with a swiftness that surprised even myself. I swung around his side and pulled him with me, as my blade wrenched itself free at a crude angle that spilled his blood and guts onto the ground.

The bastard didn't flinch or show even the slightest sign of being in pain. Instead, he threw his shield aside and used his free hand to shove his intestines back into place, covering the horrendous tear with his hand, as though that was an effective way of closing a wound. Turns out it wasn't.¹⁷⁹ Because, as soon he tried to charge at me with the same speed as before, the tear only widened and a disturbing amount of blood fell out and onto the ground.

“I—”

Hayato zoomed past him in an instant, reaching a halt a few metres away, flourishing his blade and returning it to its sheath. Magami sputtered a few ruined syllables, then his knees gave out and he collapsed onto his back, his hand falling away from his wound, releasing the tide of organs attempting to escape his body. Blood bubbled from the gash in his throat and from the corners of his mouth, mixing with foamy spit, as he tried to breathe but continued to choke on the blood flooding his windpipe.

A sudden gust ruffled my hair and cloak dramatically as I walked over to him. I leaned over the dying Wolf, the last of his kind, and said, “Mitsui sends his regards.”

Magami coughed a laugh, spraying a mist of blood into the air. Then the light faded from his eyes, while blood continued trickling from his neck and stomach. A red ice crystal settled on his cheek, as the snow fell from above, and, before long, the red snow covered the entire fortress, like a thin sheet of frozen blood.

I looked at Hayato, and smiled half-heartedly.

¹⁷⁹ Who would've thought...?

“I will open the gate, and signal Mitsui-sama,” he announced.

I didn’t respond.

Part of me wondered why this fight had been so much easier than the rest, but I also wasn’t sure whether or not I’d entered the Dance of Death. It was actually becoming quite hard to notice when it happened, though it was the only explanation I could come up with, considering how easily I’d managed to Deflect Magami’s attacks. A strange part of me was disappointed, I realised in terror. Shockingly, I craved the challenge that my fight with Nobushige and Jirō had offered. And, I mean, this man was supposed to have been the leader of the White Wolves and yet hadn’t even come close to the Laughing Swordsman in terms of strength...

A tiny wisp materialised in the air above Magami’s body and I put my hand through it.

‘Box of Wolf Pellets’

-Consumable-

Pill > Medicine

“A wooden box of tough pellets that, when chewed and digested, numbs all pain and puts the body in a state of pure ecstasy. Highly addictive. Side effects include rapid deterioration of the body, seen in the greying of one's hair and internal bleeding, as well as auditory hallucinations and apathy. It was once used as a pain-relieving medicine to numb patients before they underwent surgery, but it has long since then become monopolised by the White Wolves who use it to create fearless soldiers that are easily controlled.”

Use

Discard

Weight: 0.1 kilos

I opened the box and saw that it was nearly filled to the brim with tiny round pellets. I doubted I would ever use one, but, at the same time, it could be a useful item to have for when shit really hit the fan, and it only weighed 100 grams, so it wasn’t like carrying it was going to slow me down.

“Be careful with those,” Ginko commented, startling me again.

He looked around the fortress, barely registering the dead body in front of us, then continued, “This looks quite different from the city and the temple.”

“They’re built in the style of a faraway kingdom,” I replied, not having the same reservations with Ginko as I had with Hayato.

The Mushishi gave me a knowing smile, before saying, “The flow of time itself is convoluted, is it not?”

Then he walked away towards the opposite end of the fortress, leaving me staring at his back where his wooden box remained strapped.

What the hell does that mean? I wondered to myself. Had I just triggered some strange meta-commentary from the Mushishi that clearly didn't belong to this time period?

Four distinct notes sounded from a horn on the wall, pulling me from my thoughts and sending me into a sudden panic, as I expected a horde of White Wolves to descend on me, but then I saw its source.

So, that's what he meant by 'signal' ... damn near gave me a heart attack...

I joined Hayato on the wall next to the massive horn he'd used, and we waited for what felt like an eternity as the snow fell, but in reality was probably no more than ten minutes. Riding up the trail came Lord Mitsui at the head of a hundred men. The sight made pride swell in my chest and almost brought a tear to my eyes. It had a profound impact on me, and I supposed that seeing the resurrected Samurai Lord overwhelmed me with relief.

The White Wolf rejects in the cells were not taken as prisoners, but were instead granted a swift and merciful end, and despite their knowledge that the men before them were their executioners and not saviours, many of them seemed grateful, especially those who'd been starved for several days already. A few, particularly those with completely white hair, seemed to not even notice we were there, and just continually thrashed at their bonds until they met their end.

I watched as Mitsui chopped the head off of Magami's corpse and tied it to his saddle. Before Hayato and I followed him back to the city on horses¹⁸⁰ given to us, Ginko came up to me and told me that when I had time, I should return to the fortress, because he needed my help for something. It seemed the Mushishi had some kind of quest that diverged from the events of the main story I was following, but given my eagerness to quickly advance and link up with FrozenFury and his group, I declined to help him. Instead of relenting, he told me that he'd be waiting for me nonetheless. It seemed on track with the other time-irrelevant quests this World and the Forlorn Kingdom offered. Part of me wondered if he would act as though only a day had passed if I came back a year from now to complete his quest.

The return down the mountain pass was almost pleasant when compared to the climb up, and little-by-little, the temperature rose and snow was replaced by rain. At some point, I realised that I could take a full breath without my lungs setting on fire and it was the greatest feeling I'd ever experienced. It was like I'd been diving underwater for an eternity and finally breached the surface just before running out of oxygen.

On the horse beside me, Hayato looked to be in a foul mood, and, just as we reached the palace, it dawned on me that he was faced with the grim task of having to execute those of his men who'd betrayed him. These were men he'd trusted, men he'd probably trained since they were young. But he was obligated to do it, because who else but him had responsibility for their actions? I wondered

¹⁸⁰ I ended up having to need a 'driver', since, you know, I'd lost my ability to control horses... So much for the idea that muscle memory stayed behind, though perhaps the muscle memory had been the exact memory I'd lost, rather than the memory of what a horse was and how to ride it.

how many lives might have been lost thanks to all that misinformation. No doubt Hayato was already doing the math in his head, while staring absentmindedly into the distance.

“With the Wolves exterminated,” Mitsui started, “we are finally at a point where we can meet the Vermilion Bird with all our forces combined, without fear of being struck in the back. The twilight of this war is before us, and beyond its darkness shines the light of dawn.”

“What’d you like me to do?” I asked, hoping to expedite my ‘invitation’ to what certainly had to be the final Stage.

“Rest. You will be summoned a few days from now and together we will ride for the battlefield.”

I nodded, somewhat disappointed, and split from the group, making my driver take me to the inn. When we arrived before its façade, he dismounted and left me with a horse I had no way to control...

Before I had the chance to lie down on the bed, a soft *ping* sounded in my ear. I ignored it at first, until it became too much of a nuisance. It seemed I had another skill available to choose.

My choices this time were: ‘*Reactive Strike*’, ‘*Piercing Thrust*’, and ‘*Tempered Storm*’. In order, they read: “*Perform a powerful strike following a successful Deflect*”; “*Thrust the katana hard enough to pierce armour*”; and “*After standing still with the blade above your head long enough to achieve equilibrium, snap the katana forward in a lightning-fast strike, achieving maximum reach.*” The Reactive Strike was an evolution of the Deflect ability, just like the Triple Lacerate had been an upgraded version of Lacerate. Even though this ability sounded the most useful, my attention snagged on the Piercing Thrust ability, as I was sure that I’d somehow mimicked this skill when I’d stabbed Magami with my katana. The fact that I retained the muscle memory of this ability, made me think it was the best choice for me, especially considering that I had no other thrust abilities available to me.

As I clicked on the skill, new knowledge flooded into my body, and I felt confident that I was now able to pull off the skill effortless every time I tried. It was interesting that you were able to mimic skills you didn’t possess, but it required a tremendous amount of proficiency, and it only ever worked for me when I fell into my muscle-memory-driven Dance of Death. I wondered if there were any players who’d practiced enough to be able to mimic every skill available to their weapons, and even create new powerful ones. One thing that really intrigued me was the ability to chain skills together, which I currently wasn’t able to pull off super effectively, though occasionally it seemed to work. If I could master powerful combos, my damage potential would skyrocket for sure.

Before closing down the ‘*Skills & Weapon Progression*’ menu, I noticed that the bar indicating the Familiarity Level for my ‘*Passing Breeze*’ was over halfway full. I wondered what special ability I’d acquire when the bar was maxed out. I hoped it was something powerful.

At some point I got my nose out of the various menus and found my way to my pillow, which quickly lulled me to sleep in its comforting embrace.

The following day, after soaking in the tub for an hour, I left the inn in search of FrozenFury and his team. I hadn’t received word about the final Stage from Lord Mitsui yet, but I was sure that it wasn’t going to be a problem.

Walking down the street, my blue-grey kimono felt like wearing a cloud, when compared to my Katabira jacket and Blacksteel Cuirass combo, which squeezed my body uncomfortably in certain ‘regions’.

I didn't know if Fury and his friends knew who Raven-Black was. I mean, sure, Raven-Black seemed like a minor deity in the minds of those who never left the Forgotten Village, but surely that wasn't the norm, or at least I hoped not. Still, I'd decided to wear my kimono, just in case. They'd have to see me in my armour eventually, but I could always just ditch the cape, even if it pained me to do so. Besides, Sunflower had seen me with the cape and hadn't commented on it, so I was probably safe.

It was an extremely jarring experience walking through the Residential District and the Marketplace, and seeing all the damage from two days ago fully repaired, with not even a drop of blood to prove that hundreds of people had died there. The townspeople too seemed completely oblivious to what had transpired, as though I alone had been subjected to some kind of disturbed fever dream. And yet, part of me didn't mind. After all, if the city remained in ruins, the shops would be inaccessible, and the main convenience for my being here would disappear.

For a moment, I wondered if I should distil a few more potions, but then I inspected my inventory and realised that I still had one of the two '*Modest Healing Potion*' I'd bought in the Azure village, along with the two remaining Weak ones. I just had to be careful I didn't lose the Modest potion like I'd lost the Potent one in the Namida-jinja Stage. I still wasn't sure what the true difference between the Weak, Modest, and Potent variants were, but I got the feeling that it was a good idea to hold on to the stronger ones for something serious, especially considering I still wasn't able to craft them myself.

While I scoured the Market for any signs of Fury, I sold the '*Tatemaie*' mask and '*Weak Dizziness Poison*' for three Shu, which I used to buy another '*Modest Healing Potion*' just to be on the safe side.¹⁸¹ I also bought myself a meat skewer, which I gnawed on absentmindedly while browsing the stalls, hoping he'd be standing next to one of them. Though even after going past every stall at least twice, and looking inside the various shops, I never saw him.

Did they already find someone? I wondered fearfully. Despite myself, I'd been looking forward to joining him, so it was hard not to feel a bit disappointed.

Then I got an idea. I was sure he'd be in the area, but I just couldn't see him or his ridiculous hair. However, just knowing he was within earshot, meant that if I shouted loud enough he would notice.

"FURY!?" I yelled at the top of my lungs, hearing my voice echo across the city. Strangely, not a single one of the NPCs milling about the market even paused for a split-second or seemed to notice my insane behaviour. It almost felt like I was in some kind of dream, where nobody noticed my existence.

Then, before I had the chance to shout a second time, I saw the unmistakable visage of blue-and-orange-red tornado-swirled hair running around the corner into the Marketplace. He was breathing quickly as he stopped before me, and I was surprised at his ability to run in the yukata and sandals he was wearing. I looked down at my own feet and realised how ridiculous my black boots

¹⁸¹ I asked the vendor if they had a Potent one for sale as well, but was informed that it would need to be order-made and would cost me two Bu (i.e. eight Shu), which was quite a lot, considering that I'd just bought a Modest Potion for three Shu. Since I had no idea how big of a difference there was between Modest and Potent, I felt it was a waste of money and time to get a Potent one made.

and kimono combo probably looked, and for a minute I envied his sandals, wishing I'd bought some myself.

"You... called..." he heaved, in-between breaths.

"I want to join you," I said, assertively.

"How far... are you?"

"I just beat Magami yesterday."

Fury stopped for a minute and regained his breath. "You're kidding, right?"

"I'm serious."

"But, but just the other day you were on the Duel Stage... It took me twelve days to beat those three stages, and you want me to believe that you did it in three??"

I sighed and pulled an item from my inventory. It was undeniable proof.

"The Wolf Pellets..." Fury replied dumbfoundedly. He fixed me with his eyes and asked, seriously, "Who are you?"

I hadn't wanted to tell him who I *really* was, and I still didn't, so I decided to tell him something in-between the truth and retaining my anonymity, hoping it would suffice. "I was part of the Frontier before I died."

Whether intentionally or not, Fury took a step backwards. He seemed very surprised, which, ironically, surprised me. I hadn't realised it was such a big deal, but he seemed to think it was.

"When did you *Awake*?" he asked, and the emphasis he put on the final word made it clear that he was referring to when I awoke on the green hills, right after being killed.

"I haven't been counting the days," I said, scratching my scalp, "but maybe two weeks ago, give or take."

"Wow," was all he said.

"Is that not normal?"

"No. It's not. Most players, who don't reset in the process, usually spend a month just to train and beat the Forlorn Kingdom, and about a month-and-a-half to beat *this* World. I've never heard of anyone doing it that fast... unless..."

Uh oh.

"No, you can't be her..."

"Who can't I be?" I asked, hoping he wouldn't say the name he was about to say.

"Well, there's this famous duo team that's part of the Frontier. They basically carved the path that all others follow. Nova and Raven-Black they're called. They're legendary players who—"

All the sound seemed to disappear, as though I was suddenly submerged underwater, and I think my heart skipped a beat. I'd heard about Nova, but I hadn't known that we'd once been a team. He was the one who Jakob had called the Storyteller. The one responsible for spreading information about me, and the rest of the players at the Frontier. A distant voice called my name, and I remembered the vision I'd seen when holding the '*Glass Heart*'. Part of me knew that I had to find Nova, somehow. Meeting him would restore something I'd lost. I was sure of that. Maybe he could even help me remember my previous lives within this ruthless realm.

Fury stopped talking and looked at me, concern in his eyes. "Are you okay? You look a bit pale."

I wiped the sweat on my forehead with my long sleeve and replied, "It's nothing."

He put his hand on my arm. “Listen, even if you were Raven-Black, I wouldn’t try to hurt you, and I certainly wouldn’t tell people about you.”

“What do you mean you wouldn’t hurt her?” I hadn’t even considered the fact that someone might want to hurt me because of who I was...

“Well, you know—”

“I don’t,” I interrupted.

“Okay... well, there are certain *Guilds* that target famous players. I think they want to stay in this mad realm, and they’re probably afraid that if someone beats it, they’ll all be released. It’s pretty crazy.”

“What do you mean ‘Guilds’?”

“You know... erm... it’s like a group of people. They’re usually led by a *Scribe*, a player who has the ability to write, and they all wear the same kind of clothes or signature items to show they’re a team. They usually work together to progress, like sharing information, teaming up for difficult boss fights, stuff like that.”

“And there are Guilds full of Player-Killers?”

Fury gave me a lopsided frown.¹⁸² “It’s horrible, right? I don’t get why those kinds of players even exist. It’s like they don’t care if we’re stuck in this nightmare forever.”

“So, they intentionally target strong players, like Raven-Black?” It felt weird talking about myself in the third person, but at the same time I didn’t fully recognise the title as belonging to me, but rather belonging to the person I’d once been.

“Yeah, that’s what I heard. Most people assume that’s why she died recently. The rumour is that she and Nova split up, although I don’t believe that for a second. Those two are inseparable.”

I frowned. I didn’t have a choice. I felt like I had to tell him the truth, even if it’d shatter his hopes, after all, he seemed like he would be a good ally to team up with, at least until I knew what kind of threat I’d be facing from other players. I entered my inventory and equipped my armour and cape, as well as my sword.

Fury’s eyes and mouth widened as my cuirass and katana materialised on my body and the impressive cape, with its raven feathers around my neck, unfurled itself.

“Holy shit! Holy shit! Holy shit!” he swore on repeat, as if stuck in a loop.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Before you mentioned it, I had no idea that Nova and I used to be a team.”

Fury gripped his head as though it would keep him steady on his feet.

“This explains so much...” he mumbled to himself after regaining his composure a few minutes later.

“What do you mean?”

“The Frontier, they’ve been stuck for months, without progressing past the first two Stages of *Merriddia*.”

“You know all that from the Storyteller?”

“Yeah, Nova always reports on the Frontier’s progress the first day of each month. Last time was—”

“Just before I awoke,” I replied, remembering what Jakob had told me.

¹⁸² It looked like a logarithmic curve that has reached a plateau, if that helps you picture it.

“You really need to get back to the Frontier,” Fury said.¹⁸³

“That’s what I’m trying to do.”

“Yeah, but you can’t do it like *that*.”

“Like what?”

“In such a hurry, I mean.”

“Why?”

“Because it’ll kill you.”

I wanted to say, “None of your fucking business!”, but I settled for, “How do you mean?”¹⁸⁴

“If you die because you’re in too much of a hurry, you’ll just have to start over.”

“But you just said it’s important that I get back to the Frontier...”

“Yeah, but you have to find a middle-ground. It’s not a bad idea letting other players scout ahead and buy information from them. That’s what most people do.”

“I feel like I’m more of the scouting-ahead-and-selling-information type of person than the waiting-around type.”

Fury smiled, “Yeah, I guess that’s what you’re known for. But at least try not to be too reckless.”

“Yes, mom,” I replied sarcastically. “So, can I join your team or what?”

“I think they’d be happy to have you. They’ve been pretty adamant that I don’t just fill the last spot with the first person I see, but knowing it’s *you*, they’ll probably be more than satisfied.”

Again with the expectations just because of what I’ve once accomplished... I complained internally, though really, this was perhaps for the best. I could just flash my cape to open any door. I just had to make sure that I didn’t do it in public, considering that those nefarious Guilds might have eyes everywhere.¹⁸⁵

Because I felt uncomfortable wearing my armour and since it’d served its purpose, I quickly stowed it away and re-equipped my kimono.

“So, when do we start?” I asked, getting straight to the point.

“I’ll have to talk to the guys first, but we should be able to start today. But it’s important we start with a few hours before dusk, otherwise all of it will have been for nothing.” I wasn’t really sure what he was talking about, but I trusted that he had all the specifics under control.

“Where should I meet you?”

“Do you know the place where the Red Fields give way to the Nijigahara forest?”

“I know it,” I replied. *I know it all too well...*

“Oh, I should probably invite you to the group, that would make it easier for you to find us.”

“Okay.”

Fury looked at me intently, then said, as if following a manuscript, “I would like to invite you to my group, do you agree to join?”

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

“Welcome to the group,” he announced, and bowed formally.

¹⁸³ No shit, Sherlock...

¹⁸⁴ See... I can make concessions and be nice, even if it pains me to do so.

¹⁸⁵ I know what you might say: “But you’re in public right now, flashing your cape!” But in my defence, Fury and Sunflower had been the only two players I’d encountered in the city. Granted, I didn’t know if anyone else was hiding nearby.

The familiar-sounding *bu-bu-buuu!* filled in my inner ear, and I instinctively opened my menu and looked at the ‘*Group Functions*’ menu. When I clicked on it, a list of four names emerged, with a toggleable button next to each of them saying, ‘*Show on map*’. All of them, except my own, were set to ‘*On*’. On the list of names were: ‘*FrozenFury*’, who had the crown next to his name; ‘*Aiko*’, i.e., me; ‘*Unheard Ismael*’; and ‘*Verdugo*’. All of us were on the same Stage: ‘*The Fight for Succession*’. Like Sunflower had after parting ways with me, I clicked on the Green button next to Fury’s name. It produced a satisfying *bing* sound, and he looked up at me and smiled. It seemed he too had been nose-deep in his menus when I sent it.

A sound returned in response to my earlier one, like a *ba-ding*. I opened up my Friendlist and above Sunflower’s name was a new entry: ‘*FrozenFury*’.

After closing down the menus, I looked at him again.

“So, I just meet you at the end of the Red Fields near the forest?”

“Yeah. If you leave from here when the sun is at its highest, that’d be perfect timing.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know how to ride a horse, would you?” I asked.

Fury seemed to choke on a laugh, but quickly regained his composure when he realised I was serious. “Did you lose the ability to ride one?”

I held up my wrist to show him the symbol. “Not only did I lose it, I gave it away forever...”

For a moment, it seemed as if he was about to scold me for being dumb enough to use a Watcher Ability, but then he just nodded in understanding.

“That’s a troublesome thing to lose,” he started. “If you don’t mind, I can take you there. I don’t have a horse yet but—”

“I have a horse!” I sputtered out loud.

He stopped, then burst out laughing.

After wiping a tear from the corner of his eye, he continued, “Where am I meeting you then?”

“Do you know Koike Rakuen?”

“The crazy-expensive inn? Yeah, everybody knows it. Don’t tell me you actually live there.”

I shrugged and smiled.

After momentarily parting ways with Fury, I returned to the inn. I’ll admit, the excitement got to me, and I basically ran the entire way back. I suppose that my starvation for company must have reached a critical mass for me to act this out of character, especially considering how lonely I’d felt after Sunflower left me just when we’d started to get to know each other.

The negative part of my mind kept telling me they would find a way to let me down, but I pushed it away and tried to focus on being positive. Fury’s apparent interest with myself and Nova was kind of troubling, as it mirrored the obsession I’d experienced in the Forgotten Village, but he seemed like his heart was in the right place, and he wasn’t all touchy-feely, which was always a plus.

I paid the servant a few coins which made his eyes glow and he eagerly handed me the reins. The matron tracked me as I passed by the open front door, the horse trailing behind me obediently.

“Shall we expect you back by sundown tonight, miss?”

“Probably not. I doubt I’ll be back by then.”

“Very well. We shall await your return.”

Sheesh, it's quite obvious how money can sway people here, especially when someone like me is being referred to as 'Miss', but... I don't hate it.

As I was walking the reluctant horse with me across the large intersection of the two wide roads, Fury came running from across the way. He was clad in bright-red Samurai armour from head to toe, like the type I'd seen on the Vermilion Samurai Nobushige, though his helmet was a bit different, as it was smaller and had a single horn on the left side of his temple, kind of like a demon's. Similarly to Nobushige, he didn't have a mask that covered his face, which would make him easy enough to recognise in battle, well, *that* and his colourful hair poking out under the helmet.

"You actually weren't joking," he commented when he saw me. I quickly passed him the reins before the horse tore it out of my grip. It seemed that not only had I lost the ability to ride a horse, but horses now also hated my guts... *Amazing*.

"How much is it per night?" he then asked.

"It's nine Shu for two nights, so... four Shu and one-hundred-and-twenty-five Mon for a single night."

He shook his head, making his helmet wiggle around comically. "I suppose if you speed through every World, you may as well spend your money on the frivolous."

Since I was still wearing my kimono, I quickly swapped back into my armour and cape.

Fury took one look at me, then asked, "Don't you have a helmet?"

"No, should I get one?"

"There's no time for it now, but for the future, yeah, definitely. A blow or strike to the head can kill you instantly."

I immediately thought back to how Nobushige had given me a concussion with a blow to the head. *I should've thought of this...* I scolded myself.

After Fury awkwardly helped me onto the back of the horse and then climbed up himself, we immediately set off towards the Red Fields.

Before reaching the Slums, the sun above was nearing its zenith and the red rain was making its debut for the day, as though the clouds above were afraid to miss a single afternoon where they didn't terrorise the lands below.

Wind rushed through my hair and my cape fluttered behind me like a sail ready to unfurl and catch the wind. Despite the wind, Fury's tornado swirl seemed immovable, as though a gallon of hairspray had been poured onto it. The horse galloped relentlessly, as though my excitement had spread and infected its mind. And though I was sure that the trip lasted over an hour, time passed in an instant and I soon saw the crimson sea of wheat and rice before me, swaying back and forth like gentle waves.

I was ready for the banner to appear and warn me of another 'Emergent' Stage, but it never came, and as I neared the end of the Red Fields, where the ground before the forest remained untouched by farmers, I saw two horses and their riders standing in front.

In front was a tall thirty-something-looking guy with a yellow-tinted light-brown complexion, reminiscent of the people native to Middle and Southern America. His hair was dark, almost coal-black, and his thick eyebrows matched the moustache on his upper lip and the beard that framed his chin dramatically. Based on his grim attire of a darkened breastplate, forearm-guard, and greaves, as

well as the dark clothes underneath, I immediately assumed this was Verdugo, which was Spanish for “Executioner”. He was helmless, and I thought his swept-back hair almost made him look like an Italian mobster. For some reason, I knew what a mobster looked like, which surprised me, considering the many things I apparently didn’t know. On his back was a long bronze-tipped spear, and the edges of a round, bronze-faced, hard-leather shield poked out. The spear-and-shield combo was peculiar, as that wasn’t something I’d encountered in either of the two Worlds yet, and seemed more like it belonged to some kind of Greek or Roman inspired World.

Maybe he bought those from another player? I wondered to myself, since I knew there were craft-skills that allowed people to produce armour and weapons.

The other was a young guy, perhaps late teens or early twenties, with a mix of Middle-Eastern and South-Eastern Asian complexion. His face, even though it was sullen and bored, had bright eyes, and his big ears made him seem charming and youthful, especially compared to the brooding dark tower next to him. His armour was medium-weight soldier’s gear originating from the Forlorn Kingdom. It consisted of a blue tabard and chainmail over a thick woollen shirt, with the chainmail extending down in a sort of triangle to cover his waist and upper legs. He wore greaves and metal boots, which reflected the sun like a mirror in their pristine polish. Of the three of them, he was in the middle in terms of armour class, whereas Mister Darkness¹⁸⁶ was light-weight and Fury was heavy, though not as heavy as Kerebor had been in his silvery platemail. The last guy, who I assumed was Ismail, though that was only based on my assumption that the sinister man next to him was Verdugo, had a large Yari spear on his back, and, although there was a clear mix of themes going on, it wasn’t an unknown weapon at least.

When Fury dismounted, it surprised me to see that he was equipped with two swords, in the true Samurai Daishō style of one long and one short Uchigatana. He was truly acting the role of a Samurai, whereas the rest of us were a scattered mix of various origins.

“We’re all finally here,” Fury announced cheerfully. I wondered just how long they’d been looking for a fourth person. After I clumsily got off the horse, who almost brained me with a backwards kick, Fury pointed to the man in black next to him, “This is Verdugo,¹⁸⁷ and that’s Unheard Ismail.”

“How do you do?” I greeted the both of them.

They were both speechless.

“D-d-d-d-d,” Ismail stuttered incredulously, “Do you know *who* that is??”

Verdugo just stared at me with his dark foreboding eyes.

“You can call me Aiko.”

“But everyone knows her as Raven-Black,” Fury said, proudly.

I should’ve dumped the cape...

“I can’t believe the rumours were true,” Ismail finally said, his eyes were glued to my cape as it waved around carelessly in the easy wind.

“You found someone strong,” Verdugo stated. He’d clearly been the one demanding that not just anyone joined their team, which immediately made me assume that he was the overbearing type, you

¹⁸⁶ Pot calling the kettle black...

¹⁸⁷ Knew it!

know, the kind of person that holds everyone to very high standard. We'd just have to see whether he held himself to that standard as well.

"Is everyone ready?" Fury asked democratically. He was the leader, so he could just decide that we were, but I was glad to see that he remained amiable and easy-going.

Everyone nodded in agreement and once the two of them had mounted their horses and Fury helped me up on mine, we started our journey into the Nijigahara forest. It was slow going at first, as if the three of us were all trying to match each other's speed, but then Verdugo pulled ahead and we sort of just fell in behind him.

The trees and plants passed by in a disorienting blur of rainbow hues that quickly swirled together before my eyes and made my head spin. Before I lost my balance and fell off my horse, I fixed my eyes on the back of Fury's bright-red Dō, which almost seemed to cast a trail behind it while the surroundings melted and deformed in the corners of my eyes, as if I was trapped inside some kind of possessed kaleidoscope and his burning trail led to freedom.

"I hate this forest," I heard Verdugo grumble from the fore of our small train of horses, while clutching his head.

As I'd experienced before, time inside the forest seemed to pass much quicker than expected, and soon we found ourselves reaching the point where trees gave way to open land, which, as soon as my eyes took in the view, set my heart pounding in an excited flutter. Where the land was divided with the pale tree as its middle-point, Vermilion and Azure camps had been erected on either side, and already now the sounds of fighting in the distance were audible from where we watched. The pale twisted tree on its solitary hill was like a guardian that observed the death all around it, as neither army currently had the upper hand in battle.

For a moment, I panicked when we began veering left towards the eastern Vermillion camp, but then I realised that we were in Fury's version of this World, where the events I'd witnessed and taken part in were no longer real, and where he'd shaped the story in a completely different way. In his World, the Vermilion had dealt with the Weeping Blade, conquered Kakon-shi, and ended the threat of the White Wolves. Part of me was sad that I wouldn't be able to join Lord Mitsui and Hayato in battle, and a tiny part of me was afraid of what would happen if I met them face-to-face. Would I hesitate to deal the killing blow?

I was pulled from my reverie by the sound of a thousand arrows taking to the air, and we all witnessed the golden swarm of lights flying from within the Azure camp and raining down on the Vermilion army. For a moment, the battle froze as both Red and Blue fighters waited for what came next, and then, like the clap of thunder, a hundred men fell and the Azure soldiers flooded past the middle-point and pushed the Vermilion footmen back towards their camp.

"Holy shit, what was *that*!?" Ismail and Fury exclaimed almost simultaneously.

"Lady Seiryū," I responded.

They both twisted in their saddles to look at me¹⁸⁸, and it was clear to me that Ismail had also teamed up with the Vermilion Bird. Verdugo showed no interest, as though it wasn't anything noteworthy, and he just kept on galloping towards the camp with its black banners and bloodred insignia.

¹⁸⁸ This was awkward, because I was gripping Fury's waist, so, when he turned, I feared I might fall off the horse.

“Now entering Stage ‘The Fight for Succession’.” A melody of drawn-out low-octave horns coupled with some manner of string instrument, perhaps a violin, and the lazy beat of drums in the background, created a tense feeling in my body that made my chest tighten itself into knots and caused adrenaline to rush into my bloodstream.

The camp was a makeshift thing, consisting of small embankments for the few archers the Vermilion force could muster, as well as portable wooden walls with carved-out slits to look through, which, at the fore of the camp, looked like pincushions thanks to the ceaseless Azure barrage. Currently, those of the Vermilion footmen not already holding the frontlines were hiding behind several of these wooden shields, perhaps hoping that they’d never be asked to join the melee. Beyond the shields, spikes surrounded the outer edges of the camp in case enemy cavalry attempted a direct charge, and, at seemingly-random locations throughout the Vermilion territory, the ground had been opened up and filled with spikes, providing an effective way to funnel the enemy troops in case they ever managed to overwhelm the frontline and go all-out on the offensive.

At the sight of us, the footmen in black-and-red parted in an orderly fashion, and within minutes we’d passed through the outer environs of the camp and reached the heart of it, where, within a square wooden structure covered with the Vermilion banners, which created a sort of roofless tent, the Lord Suzaku himself awaited us. Before entering, we dismounted our horses and Fury led our group, as he was in charge and would be the player the characters of his World were familiar with.

“You are late, *Deshi*¹⁸⁹,” Lord Suzaku reproved, though his tone was pleasant and familiar.

“Apologies, my Lord. I have brought reinforcements with me,” Fury responded, acting the obedient subject. At the sound of his words, Lord Suzaku finally seemed to notice us, as though we’d suddenly materialised before his eyes. The Lord was clad in deeply-crimson armour, more pristine and intricate than what Fury wore, and, surprisingly, he was helmless, his hair tied back in a warrior’s knot, similar, yet slightly different, to that of the now-extinct White Wolves. His face seemed old, marking him as in his forties or fifties, and yet, I got the feeling that he was the same age as the Lady. Of all the people I’d encountered in this World, the skin around his eyes were the darkest I’d seen, perhaps due to the countless deaths wrought by his hands, after all, he and the Lady had caused this war, and where the Lady employed her vassals to do most of the killing, Lord Suzaku was perhaps someone often seen at the fore of his army. A pair of swords hung from his waist, similar to what Fury used, though again, the scabbards and hilts were far more intricate and these were probably imbued with the same bloody magic that Nobushige’s Yari had utilised to grant him supernatural resilience. Surprisingly, the Lord was alone within this roofless tent, and I wondered where Nobushige was in this version of the World.

“Excellent. Make haste and carve a bloody swathe to the Azure camp. Once within their base, wipe out their archers so that our troops can push forth unopposed. Make sure to eliminate Seiryū-sama, lest her arrows spoil our advance. When you have slain her, bring me a lock of her ebony-black hair as proof.” His voice was resolute, though had a pleasant edge to it, which contrasted the Lady’s chillingly-evil tone. I wondered if I’d chosen the wrong side, as this man seemed quite unlike what

¹⁸⁹ Japanese for “Follower”, “Pupil”, or “Disciple”. It has a lot of ways to be interpreted, but in this context, considering what I knew about the Vermilion Bird’s religious fervour, the most accurate translation was probably “Disciple”.

I'd imagined and was perhaps a more fitting leader than the Lady, but then again, appearances often deceived.

"Anything else you wish of me?" Fury inquired.

The Lord seemed hesitant for a moment, but then said, "Leave Seiryū-sama's body where it falls, with all the respect that the dead deserve. Take nothing from her but a lock of hair."

Isn't that counterintuitive? I wondered. *If we just leave her body, she'll be reborn once dawn comes and make her escape... but, perhaps the plan is not to kill her permanently, unless he doesn't know about her magic.*

"As you wish," Fury acknowledged and ushered us out of the camp's inner sanctum.

"That won't kill her," I said, as soon as we'd left the inner camp. Ismail looked at me, confused.

"I know," Fury replied and smiled confidently, "I have it all under control."

"What now?" Ismail asked.

"For now, we make our way to the Azure camp, deal with the archers, and then face Seiryū-sama in battle."

"Let's go," Verdugo urged impatiently.

The four of us made our way to the frontline, where we were steadily losing ground in favour of the blue footmen and their relentless archers. By the time we saw the first flash of Azure, we'd drawn our weapons and charged in head-first.

I felt the same bloodlust that I'd experienced in the fight for Kakon-shi and knew that the supernatural influence of the Shigurui-no-Kumo still held sway over me.

Verdugo struck the first killing blow, lancing an unlucky footman through the neck with expert precision, and then slamming his shield into the man's chest while wrenching the bronze blade free in the same movement, nearly separating his head from his shoulders. I followed behind him with a forward leap chained into a Quick Draw that killed three men who'd been neatly stacked shoulder-to-shoulder. Fury and Ismail both scored their own first kills shortly thereafter, and though the going was slow at first, we quickly found a way to cover each other, while still maintaining our own separate killing fields as we pressed deeper into the enemy lines.

The Azure fighters seemed emboldened and, even in the face of our might, didn't stop coming. They no doubt trusted that their Lady's magic would save them from this death, and that it was more important to keep pushing than to give any ground. The archers likewise shared this insane recklessness and fired into their own ranks, in an attempt to halt our cruel progress. More often than not, the arrows found a home in their comrades, though a few slapped me across my armoured front and bruised my skin, though never drawing any blood. Ismail and Verdugo were not as lucky, as an arrow caught Verdugo in the upper arm and one scored a line across the side of Ismail's face, clipping his ear. Fury on the other hand was like a rock wall, repelling countless arrows with his helm, shoulder-guards, and Dō, while remaining completely unfazed by it all. The blades in his hands were deadly things that cut every one of his opponents to ribbons, though his style was cautious, despite the imperviousness of his armour.

I noticed that my movements started to flow more easily and that every strike, stab, and slash all found their intended marks effortlessly. Before long, my muscle memory had taken over and I became a whirlwind of steel, pushing deeper-and-deeper into enemy lines, until I was surrounded on all sides by Azure footmen with murder in their eyes. I left behind me a long bloody trail and didn't notice

how far I'd pushed until I heard Fury's voice in the distance, imploring me to slow down, though I paid him no mind and simply let my body lead, while the background melody perfectly accompanied every death that I wrought with its sombre tones.

"Wait!" Fury yelled again, distantly, but I was in too deep to be able to fall back, and, really, I didn't need their help taking down these low-rank footmen, who fell on my blade one-by-one as though this had all been choreographed in advance.

A moment later, I realised I hadn't been the only one Fury called out to, as Verdugo suddenly joined into the killing circle I'd carved with my blade, and where footmen constantly flooded in from all sides, just to be slain before they could lift their blades. He quickly proved he hadn't been all talk, as his spear was a fearsome thing that moved with a mind of its own, spinning in his hand and finding every weak point on the enemies before him, slaying them with pinpoint precision, as though he was intricately familiar with human anatomy. There was a clear difference between us. I moved mostly by instinct and muscle memory, whereas he moved with precision and an efficiency borne of long practise. It was hard to believe that he was supposed to only have defeated the same Stages as me, but perhaps he'd just worked hard to reach this point early on.

In my distractedness, I overextended carelessly and an opportunistic footman almost chopped my arm off, but before his katana descended on me, Verdugo's spear passed by my neck and pierced my attacker through his solar plexus. Unless I misinterpreted his dangerous rescue, I'd think he was trying to prove how easily he could kill me... but, odds were that he was just being an overbearing douchebag trying to prove a point. Still, the spearhead passing by my neck made gooseflesh ripple across my skin. I quickly regained my composure and finished off the speared guy with a horizontal slash at his throat, severing his head amidst a crimson spray.

When the enemy numbers were starting to dwindle, and Fury and Ismail finally caught up, we had to wade through a field sown with severed limbs and drenched in blood and the crimson rain. We were all soaked through and caked with guts, blood, and everything else horrible you could imagine. Verdugo and I led the group as we reached the archery embankments, but, by now, most of them had already switched to swords and died amongst their fellow men, and those few that still remained were too out of their mind with fear that they simply ran away as we drew near.

We passed through the outer perimeter of anti-cavalry spikes and traps, the design of which seemed to almost mirror the Vermilion camp's setup, and though pockets of footmen still remained, they were relatively few, though a few Samurai were among them. Most of these gave us no trouble, except for one...

Right as the camp's inner sanctum came within view, an arrow cleft the air with a *whoosh* and hammered straight into Verdugo's shoulder, right above where the arrow had hit him in the arm earlier. Then came a shower of arrows, and I quickly moved in front of our group, my sword waiting in its scabbard. I charged a powerful Quick Draw and, as soon as the arrows were within range, let it loose, crushing the wooden shafts and scattering their trajectories with the wind of my strike. Without pausing, I pushed towards the group ahead of us, where footmen and a lone Samurai were guarding an archery unit. The Samurai yelled something and the footmen charged alongside him enthusiastically. I saw a brief glimpse of his face beneath the wide brim of his helmet. It was Lord Mitsui.

Part of me expected him to recognise me as the distance between us shrank, but his eyes shone bright with hate and none of the man I knew was visible within their dark, treacherous depths.

Four footmen moved quickly to intercept me and I deflected the first attacker's sword, dragged my blade across his abdomen, then carried the blade into the next guy before he was prepared, twisting my grip on the hilt and swinging the blade at an upwards angle to cleave through his neck. I dropped to my knees while spinning around, just as the third's blade passed above me, and fired off a Quick Draw from down low with a rising motion, cutting straight through the guy and continuing into the fourth, where it settled in his side, below his armpit, but I continued moving, pulling the blade with me as I spun around him, leaving a long and cruel cut all along his upper torso that sheared through his armour, front-to-back, completely disabling him, though not killing him immediately.

I couldn't get to Mitsui before he reached Verdugo, and I saw the black-clad player raise his shield against the Lord's vertical Quick Draw, which shredded through it with the ruinous force of the attack and knocked Verdugo onto his ass. Before Mitsui could push forward and strike a final blow, Fury zoomed past him with a flurry of his twin swords, dealing a dozen shallow cuts that forced Mitsui on the defensive. A moment later, as I ran to back them up, Ismail charged in, piercing the Azure Samurai through a weak point in his armour, though he quickly wrestled the grip from Ismail and pulled him forwards. I thought Fury would strike the Samurai from the back, but he was now engaged with a group of three footmen that were giving him no opening to strike at their leader.

Just as it seemed like the defenceless Ismail was about to be struck by the Samurai's katana, Verdugo leapt forward, past the fallen Ismail, and with a single lightning-fast thrust, jabbed the tip of his spear into Lord Mitsui's exposed neck, digging deep enough to immediately drop the Samurai to his knees, with blood rushing from his body in thick waves.

By now, most of the footmen and archers were upon us, though these archers weren't firing with the same reckless abandon that had seized the archers at the front of the camp, and instead they took their time picking their targets, while avoiding their fellow men.

I'll admit, I felt bad for Mitsui, as he lay dying at the feet of Verdugo. I'd wanted to be the one to fight him, and deal a merciful strike that'd instantly kill him, instead of leaving him to bleed out. Death would come quickly for him regardless, but his final minutes would be spent in agony.

A flame roared in my chest and I surged through the footmen with as much speed as I could muster, carving through them before they could react to my presence, and continuing towards the archers in the back that were forcing my teammates to use the dead Azure footmen as cover.

I made quick work of the archers, who were unable to hit me at point-blank as I shot out from the group of footmen that were falling in my wake, and, within minutes, every last one of Mitsui's men were dead, while blood still rushed from his neck and trickled down the easy slope towards the No Man's land, where the pale tree waited like the white Reaper of Souls.

All of a sudden, I felt as though the wind was knocked from my lungs and the colour drained from my vision. Without warning I dropped to my knees, and I saw Verdugo make his way to me, but Ismail grabbed him by the shoulder, stopping him.

"Thank you for saving me," he expressed sincerely.

“Don’t make me do it twice,” Verdugo replied harshly, though perhaps it was just his way of being modest or maybe he was just not great at social interactions.¹⁹⁰

Fury came over to me and squatted down in the soft earth next to a crimson puddle that was either blood, red rain, or a mixture of both.

“You okay?” he asked me, with concern in his eyes.

“I’m... good...” I replied in-between breaths. I’d clearly overexerted myself, which I hadn’t experienced in a while, but perhaps that’d been the point of this Stage, after all, there’d been a ridiculous number of footmen to go through and no backup from the Vermilion troops whatsoever... though maybe that was due to the fact that we were now four players, since combined we were like a small army.

Verdugo was standing in the back next to Ismail, as he pulled out a healing potion and downed its contents in a single gulp. Out of all of us, he was the only one with any wounds worthy of healing, which, considering how we’d killed over a hundred footmen and archers combined, was a pretty solid outcome, granted, we’d yet to fight the boss. I suddenly realised something. I’d equipped my Alchemist’s Sash but had completely forgotten to actually tie any potions to it. I quickly remedied this by equipping my two ‘*Weak Healing Potions*’, though the Modest ones I kept in my inventory where they would be safe until I needed them.

After a minute or so, I felt like I was able to stand again and Ismail came over to join us, as Fury helped me to my feet.

“How did you learn to hit arrows mid-flight like that?” he asked, no doubt referring to my Quick Draw earlier.

I scratched my head. I didn’t actually know, truth be told. After all, it was just a reflex to me.¹⁹¹ “Practice, I guess,” I responded, blatantly.

He didn’t seem satisfied with that answer, but Fury quickly cut in before he could ask anything else. “Does everyone remember Lady Seiryū’s *moveset*?”

“Her what?” I asked.

“Moveset,” Verdugo repeated, as though that was any help.

“You don’t know her moves??” Ismail replied, almost outraged at my ignorance.¹⁹²

“Was I supposed to learn that somewhere?”

“Well, no, but it’s common sense to buy that kind of information before trying to beat a Stage, especially one as difficult as this,” Fury answered condescendingly, though I doubted it was on purpose.

“And where, pray tell, do I buy such information?” I replied, somewhat irritated.

“We all went back to the Forgotten Village and bought it from players who’ve already cleared this World.”

“That sounds dull,” I said honestly.

“Beats dying,” Ismail replied rudely.

His words had a chilling effect on Fury, who seemed to greatly disapprove, perhaps for my sake, though he didn’t verbally reproach the comment.

¹⁹⁰ That certainly would explain a lot...

¹⁹¹ Imagine trying to explain to someone how you are able to balance on a one-wheeled bicycle or a tightrope.

¹⁹² Kind of ironic, wouldn’t you say?

“So, anyone care to share this info?”

Ismail and Fury traded glances, as though it was supposed to be some big secret, or maybe they thought they could squeeze money from me. Before either of them made up their minds, Verdugo pushed past them.

“It’s simple,” he said. “Seiryū has only one attack you must avoid, the rest of the attacks can be dodged or blocked. The *telegraph* for that move is that she pulls a petal from her bowstring and turns it into a golden arrow. Anyone that attack hits will be gravely injured.”

“That seems simple,” I agreed.

“The only difficult thing is getting to her, because of Hayato. He will try and keep us at bay, and killing him is ineffective as Seiryū will just revive him with a special arrow.”

“Wait, Hayato is still alive??” Ismail suddenly questioned.

“You didn’t know?” Fury replied with an eyebrow raised. “Where did *you* get your info from.”

“Alright, enough debating,” Verdugo demanded, pointing to the horizon, where the sun was perhaps half-an-hour away from disappearing.

“Shit! We have to hurry!”

“What happens when the sun sets?” I asked.

“The Lady retreats, and though that completes the Stage, it gives us the worst result, not to mention, it makes the Alt-Mode impossible.”

“Let’s go then,” I urged.

As soon as we pushed towards the inner camp, where the Lady resided, a hundred-or-so footmen immediately charged us from all sides, though before we were set upon, two hundred-or-more Vermilion footmen and Samurai surged up through the way we’d cleared, distracting the Azure fighters and letting us slip past the frantic skirmish and into the confines of the square, roofless tent that perfectly matched Lord Suzaku’s except for the difference in what banners made up its walls.

The Lady lounged in a chair before us, her longbow leaned against its side, and Hayato kneeling before her.

“Hayato. Deal with them.”

“*Gyoi!*” Hayato responded¹⁹³ and arose, pulling his Shinobigatana from its horizontal scabbard across his lower back.

The music in the background grew in intensity and the four of us charged straight for the Lady, who remained seated for now. Before we could even get close, Hayato sprang towards us with a flurry of quick-and-efficient stabs and slashes of his blade. Verdugo attempted to strike the Shinobi, but I could tell he was more on guard, perhaps due to lacking a shield, and his cautious movements meant that not only did he fail to skewer Hayato with his spear, but he was also cut all along his exposed left arm. As he fell back, Fury got in Hayato’s face, their blades clashing though none of them managing to strike each other.

I seized the opportunity to charge for the Lady, but Hayato immediately disengaged from his fight and sent three dart-like shuriken my way, all of which found their marks in the weak points of my cuirass, though thankfully didn’t pierce through the Katabira jacket beneath. I pulled the projectiles from the fabric just in time to see the Lady rise and aim the wicked, white bow in my

¹⁹³ Japanese for: “As you wish” or “Your will be done”.

direction. Time seemed to slow as she pulled a petal from the string made of intertwined Tsukikusa and it formed itself into an arrow of golden light. She nocked the magical arrow on the string and just as she pulled back, I yelled something to my team who were busy trying to kill Hayato, while I ran in the opposite direction, hoping to draw her attention with me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the Lady lift the bow towards the sky and let it loose, sending that golden arrow far into the air, before it suddenly stopped and started falling rapidly, splitting into what seemed like an endless amount of flechettes that obscured the dark rainy clouds above with their bright splendour. I briefly looked around me for anything to use as cover and saw that the ground was filled with tiny golden rings that seemed to touch everywhere except for a handful of places. Simply because I had no better idea, I ran to one of the few places where there were no rings on the ground, and not even a second later, the golden rain of arrows descended and I was blinded by the explosion of light. I heard a terrified scream from somewhere, and immediately recognised it as Ismail's.

The light faded shortly thereafter, leaving behind a world that seemed much darker than before. I saw the Lady smile her vicious smile, and then she lifted her hand, and closed it into a fist. My eyes immediately flew to where Ismail was cowering somewhere in the other side of the roofless tent, and I witnessed the horror on his face as the tiny golden arrow lodged in his shoulder suddenly surged into his body and blew all light from his eyes.

Fury and Verdugo were still fending off Hayato, who, despite both of them seeming to know his attack patterns, were giving them a hard time. I abandoned my plan of attacking the Lady while the Shinobi Master was occupied, and instead ran to where Ismail had fallen. My first thought was that he'd died, but then I felt how warm his skin still was and felt his shallow breath tickle the tiny hairs on my hand, as I tried to lift him to a sitting position. I tilted his head back and with my other hand pulled open my inventory and withdrew a '*Modest Healing Potion*'. I had the feeling that a Weak one wouldn't cut it, and, since I had two, I didn't consider it a waste, besides, this was his only chance of survival. After pulling free the cork stopper with my teeth I brought the lip of the flask to his mouth and made sure he drank the entire thing. A sputter and a few coughs ensued, but I felt the life return to him almost instantaneously.

Ismail coughed a few more times, but then started rising on his own, using his Yari spear to lean on, while the last dregs of the potion healed his body. "Thank you," he said, shame and guilt evident on his face. I wondered if he regretted being rude to me earlier.

"Don't make me do it twice," I replied, mimicking Verdugo's words.

A moment later, I saw Verdugo spear Hayato through his throat, right above his Adam's Apple, followed by Fury digging his shortsword up under his ribs, likely piercing one of the Shinobi's lungs, perhaps even his heart.

They pulled their weapons free and the Azure Shinobi Master collapsed to the ground, the sight of which was almost too much for me to bear. I'd already seen him die once before, and, as with Lord Mitsui, I felt shameful that I hadn't been the one to deliver the killing blow.

"Your service has not yet ended," the Lady suddenly announced, and Verdugo, Fury, and I ran towards her, just as she drew another magical arrow and fired it into the corpse of Hayato. Fury skidded to a halt and turned around, running back towards the man he'd just slain.

"Ismail and I will deal with the Shinobi, you two stop the Lady!" Fury ordered.

Verdugo and I didn't argue and continued towards the Lady, who threw aside her wicked bow and with a foot kicked the Naginata at her feet into the air, where she grabbed it deftly, as though she'd practiced the move a thousand times. The Naginata's blade glowed in the light of the setting sun as it spun in her hands, and though she wore only her elaborate kimono, she seemed formidable.

Verdugo leapt at her with a jab of his spear, but in one quick swing of her Naginata it was deflected and the Lady stepped forward in that same moment, hammering the butt of her polearm into the side of his head, knocking him to the ground. I moved in-between the two of them, before she had the chance to strike him, and fired off a Quick Draw that forced her back. I immediately followed it up with a Piercing Thrust, but she was surprisingly nimble on her feet and sidestepped it, while swiping the polearm at my legs. I leapt over the blade and pushed in closer, but she immediately jumped back, thrusting her Naginata at my chest, which, although it only scraped against the blacksteel uselessly, pushed me off-balance.

I heard a cry of triumph from Ismail as he struck the killing blow on Hayato for a second time, and the Lady, who'd been prepared to cleave off my head, suddenly sprang towards her bow that lay a few metres away. Once in hand, she fired off an arrow towards the fallen Shinobi, just as she'd done before, but this time I reached her before she was able to grab hold of the Naginata. I sent forth another Piercing Thrust, but she blocked it with the wide limb of her wicked bow and then grabbed the short end and swung it at me like a club. As I backed away, she quickly pulled three large arrows from within the recesses of her kimono and fired them in a quick succession towards me. Two slammed against my cuirass, punching me backwards, and the last struck me in the right thigh, just below my waist. I gasped in pain, and I knew that moving was impossible, while it remained lodged within my flesh, siphoning blood in a thick stream. The Lady grabbed her Naginata and just before she was able to cut me into bits, Fury went for her, managing to bury one of his blades into her side, while she was still focused on me. In return the Lady slammed the butt of her weapon into his stomach with tremendous force, sending him flying backwards into the wooden banner-covered wall behind him.

By the time she looked to me again, I'd secured my grip on the shaft of the arrow and tore it from my leg with a loud, furious yell of agony, immediately chasing it with one of the '*Weak Healing Potions*' attached to my sash and tossing the empty flask at her, trying to buy myself enough time for the healing to take effect. The Lady caught the flask in her free hand and let it drop to the ground harmlessly, then leapt for me with a thrust of her Naginata, leaving me no choice but to drop awkwardly to the side, while the healing continued to do its thing.

I saw Ismail fighting off Hayato in the background, though he was losing ground and receiving a lot of hits, though none resulted in serious injury. The Lady stood above me, spun the polearm in her hands, and then aimed a stab right at my neck.

The head of her polearm froze bare centimetres from me, and I quickly crawled backwards out of the way as I took in what had happened. Blood was spilling from her stomach where the blade of Fury's second sword had pierced through her. I saw her move even then, with both of Fury's weapons resting inside her, and I quickly stumbled upright and charged my Quick Draw, just as I saw her twist around towards him, and then I stepped forward as I let it loose, achieving maximum range and watching my '*Passing Breeze*' carve its way through the air and falling raindrops, before connecting with the nape of her neck and splitting the skin without resistance, then continuing onwards through

her flesh, muscles, arteries, and windpipe, and releasing her head from her body in a scatter of blood and long strands ebony of hair that were severed in the process.

A cry sounded from Hayato, like a dying shriek and a raging demon combined into one, and he took off towards me, the killer of his Master, but made it only two steps before Verdugo suddenly caught him by the hollow of his neck with his spearpoint, which buried itself deep thanks to the Shinobi's momentum. A flicker of bronze and Hayato's artery was opened and sprayed a crimson mist into the air. As he fell, he reached a hand out towards her headless body.

When nothing moved, neither Lady nor Master Shinobi, we all collapsed exhaustedly onto the ground.

"Did we make it?" Fury asked, perhaps too scared to check for himself.

I looked to the sky, the sun was gone and dusk had settled on the battlefield. Suddenly, I noticed all the torches that had been lit around the camp, as well as the Vermilion base in the distance. I wondered if this mass grave looked pretty from the edge of the forest, far away from the acrid stench of iron, blood, and death.

"Barely," I replied, as I watched Verdugo down another potion, while trying to steady himself.

"Thank the Gods," Ismail sighed, relief in his voice.

"What happens next?" I asked.

"We bring Seiryū's head to Suzaku," Fury answered.

"Didn't he just want a lock of hair?"

"That's the whole point of this, we bring him her head instead of her hair, as solid proof that she is dead and will never return to life."

"Why?"

"Yeah, why?" Ismail chimed in.

"Seriously, have you not noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

"Suzaku and Seiryū love each other, or they used to at least."

"...Seriously?" Verdugo replied sceptically from the side-lines.

"Why else would they have kept the war going for this long? They could've killed each other years ago and ended the struggle then. Plus, Suzaku didn't want Seiryū dead, he just wanted a lock of her hair. There are limits to her magic, and he knows it. If she is killed and decapitated during dusk, she cannot revive herself. We could've killed her before the sun set and then decapitated her during dusk, but I think this'll work as well. The most important thing is just that we wait here until dawn, to make sure. Once dawn comes, we return to Suzaku with her severed head and that will trigger the actual Alt-Mode."

"Do you know his moveset for that?" Ismail asked.

"Nope. I wasn't able to find anyone in the Village who knew."

"That means you'll be able to make a killing off of selling this information," Ismail said, excited but also visibly envious.

Fury smiled. "I'm counting on that, but maybe I'll tell you guys a bit about how I discovered the Alt-Mode after we're done with this Stage."

Both Ismail and Verdugo seemed quite interested in that.

While I was sitting on the ground next to the Lady's corpse and letting my stamina replenish, I noticed a floating wisp above her beheaded body. I got up and poked my hand through it, seeing the reward she'd dropped. For some reason I couldn't take it.

"What is it?" Ismail asked eagerly from where he lounged in the Lady's chair. *Insolent brat!* I could imagine the Lady rebuking his behaviour.

"It's her bow," I responded.

"Oh," was all he said.

"Does anyone mind if I take it?" I asked.

Fury came over and held his hand above the wisp, then, after reading through the tooltip, said, "Go for it."

Ismail shrugged and Verdugo seemed completely uninterested. It seemed bows weren't very popular, which, considering the difficulty Sunflower had with hers, made sense. It's one thing knowing how to use a bow, but it's a wholly different beast putting it to effective use in as dynamic a setting as live combat.

I stuck my hand inside the wisp again, and read its name to myself:

'Tsukikusa Longbow'

-Ranged Weapon-

Bow > Longbow > Japanese

"Seiryū Ran was said to be as dainty as a dayflower, but after the death of her father and the long bloody years of the War, her colour faded and shrivelled like her namesake flower after dusk has settled."

Trait(s):

'Dayflower'

'Greater Precision'

'Unbreakable'

Equip

Discard

Weight: 1.4 kilos

The traits read: *"This bow can only be fired during the day"*; *"Arrows fired from this bow can fly twice the distance of normal longbows"*; and *"This weapon cannot be destroyed"*. Though I was no expert, I could tell that it was a powerful bow, but the fact that it could only be used when the sun was out might become an issue.

The information in its flavour text was interesting, I thought, because it mentioned the Lady's first name, *Ran*¹⁹⁴, which, up until this point, hadn't been revealed.

I contemplated whether or not I wanted to start learning how to use a bow, since I'd been looking for some variety in how I fought. It weighed 1.4 kgs, so it would push me out of my current weight-class and lower my movement speed, which I wasn't sure I liked. Unlike the first time I'd looked at the item, I was now able to loot it, as though the go-ahead from my teammates had removed the restriction.

Just to test it out, I decided to equip the bow, and immediately it materialised on my back, along with a quiver on my lower back that was attached to my grey-blue sash. I twisted around to look at the quiver, and saw that it was made from the same kind of twisted, pale wood as the bow, and was stuffed to the brim with long, thin arrows also fashioned from that gnarled tree. The bow itself, with its uneven, thick limbs hung from my back on some kind of hook that had appeared on my cuirass and was hidden under the '*Raven-Black Cloak*', which spilled over it like a thick shadowy veil. I pulled it from its hook and felt the odd and slightly misshapen handle fit snugly into my palm. It was a lot lighter than it looked, which made me think the wooden limbs were hollow on the inside. Though I wanted to test-fire it, its string was gone, courtesy of the magical properties tied to its '*Dayflower*' trait. Maybe I'd try it out in the fight against Lord Suzaku, though I had no clue how it'd go, especially considering how weird the weight felt in my hand, compared to the weight of my '*Passing Breeze*', which was like an extension of my arm. Regardless, I didn't unequip it, just so I'd get more used to lugging around the extra weight. I wasn't sure how I was going to like fighting with a movement speed that was now only '*Modest*', down from '*High*', but having the ability to use a ranged weapon in concert with my sword, meant that I could perhaps save myself from a lot of injuries by approaching fights in a more strategical way.

We waited next to the Lady's body for hours. For almost the entire duration, I just watched how the amber lights of my Sight danced around on every surface, particularly on the lifeless form of Hayato. He looked almost peaceful in death, or rather, he looked relieved, perhaps he'd been seeking death and knew this time it would be final.

Eventually, the sounds of fighting across the battlefield completely died down, though no one entered the roofless tent where we rested, almost like it was sacred ground that none but us could tread upon.

When the first rays of light stained the sky, we all four got to our feet and readied our weapons. Over the next ten minutes tensions were high, as the darkness was banished from the land and the sunlight rolled across the hills like waves. But... nothing happened. The two dead bodies lay unmoving while the sun began baking their cold skin and dried blood. I almost felt foolish for expecting anything else than *this*, and yet, in this World, it was a legitimate fear that the dead might return.

"We should go," Fury said a few minutes later, and so we did. He tied the Lady's head to the waist of his crimson armour and the three of us followed behind him, like some kind of sick funeral procession.

¹⁹⁴ Written as 藍 in Japanese, meaning "Indigo".

As we left the roofless tent, the Azure camp's inner sanctum, we were greeted by Vermilion footmen and Samurai, who'd been awaiting us it seemed. They drew aside and let us pass, murmuring to each other as they spotted the severed head that bounced against Fury's leg with each stride he took across the blood-softened earth. The outer perimeters of the Azure camp had been dismantled and the spike traps filled, making our march towards the Vermilion General less of a treacherous journey. All along the way, Azure corpses were stacked high, though they were joined by an almost equally-staggering number of Vermilion bodies. The blood ran so thickly that pools of blood and pools of red rain were indistinguishable, and the earth had soaked it all up and taken on a crimson hue. I wondered what the grass here would look like once it started growing anew.

The rain from above hadn't stopped. But at this point, the incessant shower was like the background melody, unnoticeable unless you actually focused on it. Each of us were soaked through, and yet my armour and my jacket beneath didn't feel uncomfortable, and though my hair stuck to the sides of my face, I didn't think it was annoying. I didn't think much at all, truth be told. My mind felt strangely disconnected from my body. Perhaps it was due to the exhaustion, or perhaps it was due to the monotony of killing and my inability to even process how many people had died by my blade. I knew they weren't real, but at the same time, I couldn't focus on their deaths without feeling a terrible knot form in my stomach, threatening to rip me apart from the inside.

"Where has the Lord gone?" I heard Fury suddenly ask.

We were inside the Vermilion camp's roofless tent and only the Lord's vassals were present, the ones who'd survived anyway.

"Suzaku-sama has retired to his field of Higanbana," said one Samurai Lord with a square-set jaw, who was in the middle of polishing his helmet with a soaked-and-bloodied rag.

We followed Fury as he left the tent, and I recalled the sprawling Higanbana field that covered the eastern part of the vast open space, and which, from a distance, looked like a massive crimson pond. We saw the field immediately as we went east from the camp, but Lord Suzaku himself was hidden within, camouflaged by his bloodred armour.

"This will be the true test of our abilities," Fury told us. "Try not to get in each other's way."

The strange petals and tendrils of the Red Spider Lilies seemed to reach for me as I took my first step into the sprawling sea of them. It was impossible to see the ground below and the ominous flowers stretched out before me as far as I could see.

Though the flowers were trampled with our passing, there was no trace of the Lord having travelled the same path before us, but, despite having no footsteps to follow, we walked through the field of the clinging flowers as it naturally took us towards the edge of the horizon, where a cliffside led down to the sea beyond.

Dark clouds blotted out the rising sun, though a few rays of light seemed to break through just above the Azure camp to the west, as though they were blessed by it, while the Vermilion side was completely neglected and lay in shadow.

When the edge of the land was only fifteen metres ahead of us, a figure rose from out of nowhere as though emerging from the ground itself. He turned to us, his warrior's knot framing his angled face like a wicked arrowhead. Fury threw the severed head at the Lord's feet before he had the chance to address us. His eyes remained blank and unreadable as the head landed in front of him, the dead face

pointed straight at him. Lord Suzaku knelt low and gently picked up Lady Seiryū's head with both of his calloused hands.

The background melody came to a sudden halt and an eerie *Biwa* accompanied by a melancholic female voice filled the air. The strange cadence of her voice perfectly matched the eerie sound of the strings. Through song, she told the tragic story of two forbidden lovers that once met in the shade of an ancient tree, when the full moon dyed the lands silver.

“What have they done to you, my love? Where has your splendour gone?”

Lord Suzaku put his lips to those of the severed head and caressed the long ebony hair, then set the head down next to him and withdrew his twin swords, long and short, to each hand. He looked to the sky and rain fell down his face like tears of blood. The blades of his swords contrasted the black hilts and scabbards with their crimson steel, and pulsed in a steady rhythm as though matching the beat of his heart. The air became filled with the foul stench of old, dried blood.

The Lord looked down at his swords, addressing them in turn, “*Mozu*.¹⁹⁵ *Benisuzume*.¹⁹⁶ Let us dance the Dance of Blood!”

To all of our collective surprise, Suzaku plunged both blades into his gut and took up a fighting stance. A bloodthirsty aura exuded from him and I witnessed his eyes turn into a disturbing shade of red and start to glow like a demon's.

“Get out of the way!” Fury suddenly yelled, and I instinctively dodged sideways.

A second later, Suzaku pulled the blades free, shooting forth two horizontal crimson crescents that surged through the air and ripped through Ismail's flank, sending him to his knees with a cry. Verdugo, Fury, and I managed to avoid it just in time, but there was no time for us to formulate a plan, as the frenzied Lord started swinging his blades wildly, sending forth a dozen bloodred crescents that cleft the Spider Lilies around him and seemed ignorant of any armour we wore, as a passing crescent cut a chunk from the metal brim of Fury's helmet with ease.

I dropped to my stomach as one shot towards me with tremendous speed, and, as it passed overhead, I spotted another aimed for my new position, forcing me to roll sideways. With a leap I avoided another crescent directed at my legs, and then an idea came to mind and I charged straight for Lord Suzaku, sending forth a Quick Draw at the crescent he fired at me expectedly. My obsidian blade passed straight through the vertical line of blood and I was forced into an awkward sidestep to save my arm from being severed at the elbow, but my momentum had carried me close enough to the Lord that I could strike him, so I sent forth a Piercing Thrust. With a pass of his blades too fast for my eyes to follow, he deflected my thrust and carved into my abdomen with a counter, unhindered by my cuirass. I immediately fell back, clutching my stomach, but before Suzaku had the chance to send a crimson crescent at me, a healed Ismail jumped in front of me with a lunge of his Yari, burying the point into the Lord's unprotected neck, though, unsurprisingly, no blood spilled from the grievous wound. As with Nobushige, the blood was kept within his body thanks to the magic of his 'Blood Dance'.

¹⁹⁵ Named after the Japanese Shrike (*Akamozu*, 赤百舌鳥), literally “Red Hundred-tongued Bird”. A bird known to spear its prey on branches for later consumption.

¹⁹⁶ Named after the Red Avadavat (*Benisuzume* 紅雀), literally “Crimson Sparrow”. A tiny bird whose beak changes from red to black according to the seasons, and which is a carrier of certain diseases.

I pulled the last ‘*Weak Healing Potion*’ from its loop on my grey-blue sash with my free hand, while blood spilled through the fingers of my other hand as I tried to put pressure on my abdomen. The pain was sharp and nauseating, like I had a papercut across my entire stomach, but the sensation pulled me from the strange apathy that’d fallen over my mind during the long battle and made me focus. The potion took effect almost immediately, knitting shut the wound and replenishing my lost blood.

Just as I was about to charge back into battle, I saw Ismail commit a fatal error by overextending instead of falling back out of range, and, without skipping a beat, Lord Suzaku’s bloodthirsty Daitō descended on Ismail’s right arm, cleaving straight through it, just below the elbow, severing the bone and tissue with its frightening supernatural sharpness.

With a loud scream, Ismail fell to the ground, clutching the stump his arm had become and it was left to Fury to put pressure on the Lord, before he finished off our defenceless teammate. As Fury clashed swords with Suzaku, Verdugo joined in, and the two of them managed to occupy the Swordmaster’s attention, giving me the opportunity to drag Ismail away to a safe distance.

“Do you have any healing potions!?” I yelled at him, trying to break through the sound of his anguished howling. The sound of my voice brought a bit of sense back into him and he quickly scrolled his remaining hand through the air in front of him, while blood gushed from his ruined arm. He was crying, tears and snot dripping from his face, and his once-charming smile was contorted into a whimpering and pained expression.

A potion appeared in his hand, a Modest one I assumed. I pulled the cork stopper free and helped him drink it all, though a lot of it spilled onto his blue tabard and chainmail. We both watched the potion do its work, but, as it turned out, the limb didn’t fully regenerate, as only about half of his missing arm returned and was left a hideous mess of skin, flesh, and bone that didn’t even resemble an arm.

“Was that a Modest potion?”

“No... just... a weak... one...” he spat out in-between flashes of pain.

Selfishly, I didn’t offer up my only ‘*Modest Healing Potion*’. For all I knew I might need it soon. Besides, his arm was still healing, just *very* slowly. At the current rate, it’d take at least two or three hours before it would even look like an arm... I decided that if I hadn’t used the potion before the end of our fight, I’d offer it to him to expedite his healing process.

“Stay here,” I told him and ran to join up with Verdugo and Fury, both of whom were littered with wounds and had only managed to strike Lord Suzaku once on his upper leg.

I moved past them and sent forth a Helm-Splitter. The Lord tried to block it with both his blades, which opened him up for Verdugo and Fury to bury their weapons into his lower body. My katana pushed his swords down with the unblockable force of the attack and its obsidian edge settled into his skull, but only partially, as though something beneath the thick bone of his cranium held it at bay.

With an angry yell, Suzaku sent an explosion of his blood out of his body through his wounds, which flung us backwards, while also expelling our weapons trapped in his body and sending them clattering dully against the soft earth.

After recovering, I quickly ran to retrieve my katana and then pushed for the enraged Swordmaster again, who quickly sent forth a double crescent in the shape of an X that clipped my left shoulder as I jumped out of the way. The cut was shallow and I ignored the pain as I charged

forward with a Quick Draw that collided with his swords and sent shivers down through my handle and into my hands. I dodged backwards from his follow-up stab and then leapt at him with a Piercing Thrust, which he once again deflected with his supernatural speed, though this time I moved away before he could strike me. Verdugo stormed past me to put pressure on the Lord before he had a chance to fire off any further ranged attacks.

Given a quick respite, I fell back to where Fury was watching a few metres away, while letting my waning stamina refill. His chest was rising and lowering quickly, and it was clear that he was also running dangerously low on stamina, no doubt limited significantly by his burdensome armour.

“It’s not working,” he said. “We can’t kill him, but we have to keep his swords busy or he’ll just kill us from afar.”

“I have an idea. Hold him still as long as you can,” I told Fury and ran in the opposite direction of the Vermilion General.

When I was perhaps twenty metres from the fight, I spun on my heel and unhooked the ‘*Tsukikusa Longbow*’ from the back of my cuirass, feeling the unfamiliar weight as I palmed it with my left hand. The strange wooden handle that fit perfectly into my palm was smooth as though treated by an expert carpenter, and the twisted nature of it, with its lengthwise black fissures, provided a solid grip for my blood-slicked hand. Unlike the first time I’d held it inside the Lady’s camp, the limbs were strung with a strange cord of blue-petalled dayflowers that glowed as though some of the Lady’s magic still resided in them. The quiver on my lower back had, surprisingly, not gotten in my way during the fight, feeling almost familiar at this point, and, in that moment, I was sure that this wasn’t the first time throughout my countless lives in this realm that I’d used a bow, though it was obvious I’d never held *this* bow before.

From across the crimson field of Spider Lilies, Lord Suzaku suddenly fixed his eyes on me, or rather, on the bow in my hands. He roared and slammed Verdugo out of the way, but Fury pinned him with his two swords through his already severely-punctured stomach, and managed to slow down the enraged Lord, though he didn’t stop him completely and was slowly pushed backwards towards me, his boots ploughing the soft earth.

I plucked one of the gnarled arrows from the overflowing quiver and set it to the string, from which the residual glow spread onto the fletching, shaft, and the large, flat and barbed arrowhead, which had the image of the Twisted Tree on the hill beautifully rendered into its metal face. I wondered if each arrowhead was as exquisite as this, and felt almost remorseful that I’d be firing it like some mundane tool.

Suddenly Fury’s grip faltered and he slipped in the slick red mud underfoot, leaving his swords stuck in Suzaku’s body while he fell to the side. Immediately the Lord was only ten metres away and I was reeled back into the reality of the situation, and none of my reservations about firing the exquisite arrow remained as I instantly took aim, using my index finger as a reference for where the shot would fall, then pulled the string back past my ear.

The gnarled limbs creaked with pent-up power. Instantly, petals scattered into the air, along with tiny particles of warm yellow light, as the string fired the arrow with devastating speed. Lord Suzaku was stopped abruptly in his tracks by the projectile lodging itself deep into his shoulder with enough power that I heard his collarbone crack from where I stood. Most surprising of all, was the blood that flowed freely from the ruined shoulder, as though that tiny bit of the Lady’s remaining magic served

to undo the Lord's own. But it didn't kill him, and he continued towards me with lumbering steps, significantly slowed by all the wounds his Blood Dance worked to suppress. For some reason, he didn't use his special blood magic to strike me from afar, but just continued dragging himself forward towards me.

Then, all of a sudden, he was only five metres away and I had no time to drop the bow and draw my sword. Before he could strike me down, the bronze head of a spear emerged through his ribcage, and I saw both Verdugo and Fury holding on to the wooden haft behind him, doing their utmost to keep the Lord still for me.

I drew another arrow, nocked it to the string, pulled it back and fired, point-blank, straight into Lord Suzaku's heart, just next to where Verdugo's spear poked through his chest.

The effect was immediate, as the countless wounds on his body sputtered and started weeping crimson tears, and those red-glowing, hateful eyes remained fixated on me, slowly becoming void of life.

It was hard to believe he was dead. It'd seemed utterly impossible just moments before, and now, with only two arrows, the Lord was no more.

Verdugo ripped his spear from the body, which still remained upright as though beset by instantaneous rigor mortis. Fury too withdrew his swords, returning them to their sheaths with a flourish that scattered the Lord's blood to the wind.

All sound seemed to return, and I realised that my shoulder actually hurt quite a lot, despite the wound being only minor. Fury and Verdugo seemed to notice their own wounds as well, as we collectively came down from the adrenaline high. Behind us, Ismail was still whimpering and clutching his stump.

"I think we were meant to use the bow all along," Fury realised.

"Seems like it," I replied. "I'm not sure how else we could've killed him. Nobushige took quite a beating to kill by myself, but he wasn't even half as tough as Lord Suzaku."

"Mhmm," Fury hummed.

"Speaking of which," I started. "What happened to Nobushige in your version of this World?"

"He was killed by Jirō," Verdugo and Fury both answered, almost in sync.

"What's wrong with him?" Fury then asked, pointing at Ismail. "Did he not use a healing potion?"

"He did."

"But?"

"It didn't heal fully. He only used a Weak one."

"Christ," Fury sighed, nudging the bridge of his nose. "I've got a Modest one he can have."

Fury had taken all but a step towards Ismail, when Verdugo spoke. "The loot," was all he said, but it was enough to make him turn around.

"Eh, right, let's see what he dropped."

Is this really the time to worry about what items we got? I thought, though I also stayed, leaving our injured teammate to cry by himself for a little longer.

The three of us looked at the slain Lord, but there wasn't any wisp in sight and his body still stood upright, frozen stiff like a melting strawberry-popsicle.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁷ With an unpleasant metallic aftertaste...

“Isn’t he dead?”

I drew my sword and in a perfect arc with my Quick Draw, sent Lord Suzaku’s head flying back behind him, where it settled in a muddy puddle surrounded by Spider Lilies that had been trampled during the fight. The body fell to its knees and then onto its back, scattering the pool of blood that had formed beneath it.

“Now there’s no doubt,” I replied. Part of me wondered what would’ve happened if we’d just left him there. As the Lady had told me, the Vermilion Bird’s magic made them near unkillable, so it was possible Lord Suzaku would’ve been able to recover from an apparent state of death, though without his head I was sure that wasn’t possible, especially considering how decapitation seemed to be a sure-fire way to kill someone in this World who possessed magic that made them near-immortal.

A second later, a wisp appeared above the headless body and Verdugo was the first to poke his hand through it. Fury followed briefly afterwards, and then it was my turn. Just from the looks Verdugo and Fury gave me, they were both very interested.

‘Suzaku Twinswords: Mozu & Benisuzume’

-Melee Weapon-

Sword > Dual-Wielded > Uchigatana

“Blood falls like rain upon the fields of Kakon-Shi. The sorrow of widows echoes on the wind. Suzaku Kurenai marches east one final time. After being separated from his love for decades, his wish of being united with her in death finally came true in a field of Red Spider Lilies.”

Trait(s):

‘Bloodlust’

‘Blood-Soaked’

‘Corrupted Blade’

‘Versatile’

Equip

Discard

Weight: 3.1 kilos

(Mozu: 1.8 kilos / Benisuzume: 1.3 kilos)

Its traits read: *“The wielder becomes faster with every kill”*; *“The more blood the blades spill the sharper they become”*; *“Any strike from this blade, whether successful, blocked, or deflected, siphons stamina from the opponent to the wielder”*; and, *“The weapons can be used in different fighting styles: Dual-Wielded; Two-Handed; and One-Handed”*.

Overall, the Twinswords looked to be incredibly powerful, and, the fact that the blades drained stamina, explained why we were all thoroughly exhausted from the fight. I wondered if the alternate

version we'd just beaten was even possible to clear as a solo player... It seemed odd that Lord Suzaku hadn't utilised the Versatile trait of his weapons, though perhaps in the normal version of the Stage he did. Out of all the weapons I'd encountered thus far, these were clearly far above the rest, as they had no drawbacks to them. In fact, the Twinswords were so strong that I wasn't sure if I trusted them with anyone. Fury was probably the person most deserving of them, but how would he act when in control of such power?

I read through the flavour text, while thinking it over.

So, his name was *Kurenai*¹⁹⁸. Another whose name was revealed by the weapon they dropped. It was an interesting way of telling the story of the World, I thought, though I wondered how someone who hadn't acquired the same items would perceive this World, not to mention every other World in this realm. After all, I only knew the true story behind the Forlorn Kingdom because of the Greatsword dropped by Mírtvy.

It seemed that, to unlock the full story of a World in this realm, players were required to beat the alternate version of the last Stage. It made me think of what Fury had told us earlier: If we'd waited long enough, Lady Seiryū would've fled and the Stage would've been cleared, but we wouldn't have known the Lord and the Lady's true names nor their shared history, and we'd have acquired neither the Lady's longbow nor the Lord's twinswords.

Besides the Twinswords, there was another item:

'Red Rain Draught'

-Consumable-

Drink > Alcohol

"A certain man thought that perhaps the Red Rain was not necessarily an omen, but rather a boon. Such thinking led to the collection and distillation of the crimson rain, which, when mixed with the red Sake produced from the rice of the red fields, created a bloodred liquor that imbibes the consumer with a strong resistance to bleeding for a short time. Its patrons claim that the taste gets better with time and that the internal haemorrhaging, profuse bloody vomiting, and unbearable metallic aftertaste that persist for a week are easy to get used to. Lord Suzaku was a known patron of this Draught, and it is believed that much of his strength came thanks to his habitual consumption of this translucent crimson drink."

Use

Discard

¹⁹⁸ Written as 紅 in Japanese, meaning "Crimson".

Weight: 0.1 kilos

The item art showed a tall crimson clay bottle with a coarse jute rope tied around its neck, and its tag read: '*Consumable*'. Surprisingly, it had an extensive flavour text.

Unlike the Twinswords, I was able to pick up the Draught, so I did. It sounded like a useful item to have if I ever encountered someone like Red Rian again. Similar to the '*Box of Wolf Pellets*', the '*Red Rain Draught*' weighed only 100 grams.

I finally released my hand and looked at Fury. "They're very powerful weapons," I stated.

"I want them," was all he replied. He didn't argue that he deserved them for leading us all here, which I thought was admirable.

"You can take them."

Verdugo was standing over the whimpering Ismail a few metres away. He looked in our direction.

"No," he said, his face fixed in a blank and detached expression.

In an instant, he drew a hidden knife from his belt and buried it in the side of Ismail's neck. Then, like he was gutting a fish, he tore the blade through Ismail's throat, carving through his windpipe and jugulars, spilling blood everywhere. Verdugo released his grip on the boy's neck and left him to foam at the mouth while the life drained from his throat in a thick rush of blood.

I screamed something wordless and charged at him, sending forth a Quick Draw, which he caught with his spear just as he pulled it from his back, deflecting my blade and following it up with an immediate jab to my shoulder that pierced through my Katabira jacket, rending flesh and muscle beneath, and completely disabling my right arm, making me drop my sword. Fury was on him before my blade hit the ground, pushing the black-clad man away from me, while I fumbled through my inventory and found my remaining '*Modest Healing Potion*', which I deftly released the stopper from and emptied down my throat with one hand. Within seconds my destroyed shoulder had knitted itself back together and I felt the sensation return to the fingers of my right hand like tiny pinpricks all over.

With my arm returned to normal I ran to Ismail's side, but his body already lay lifeless among the Spider Lilies and the bleeding from his neck had slowed down to a trickle. I put my hand on his shoulder, and felt only cold emanate from him. Though Verdugo had been the one to kill him, I could've given him a fighting chance if I hadn't been so selfish in keeping my potion for myself. All I could do for him now was to avenge his death.

As I looked to see how Fury was faring, Verdugo backpedalled quickly and then lifted his right hand, thumb tucked in and his middle and index fingers extended like a gun. There was a sudden swirl of black air around his fingers and then he yelled, "*Lance Shot!*"

My hair whirled around with the air that followed the shadowy bullet as it flew past me. Ahead of me, Fury looked like he was about to collapse, and then I noticed the penny-sized hole punched through him between his shoulder joint and clavicle.

Before I could respond, he muttered something through gritted teeth, and I only belatedly realised he'd activated a Watcher Ability of his own. "*Numbing Injection*," he'd said. Starting at his head and surging down through his body, a fluorescent bright-blue light made every visible vein glow. Ignorant to the near-fatal wound in his shoulder, he ran towards Verdugo and the two clashed blades again.

Knowing that Fury was fighting on borrowed time, I planted my feet solidly in the soft earth and took up a balanced stance, before lifting my bow into the air. Void of any sense of urgency, I drew one of the exquisite arrows from its quiver and set it to the string of intertwined dayflowers. I pulled the string back behind my ear until it was taut and the gnarled-and-twisted limbs creaked with pent-up strength.

Up ahead, perhaps ten metres away, Verdugo noticed me and kicked Fury in the stomach, knocking him away, before quickly equipping his ruined, bronze-faced, hard-leather shield and raising it in front of himself, the terrible rend in its face threatening to snap it in two. Then he charged for me.

A shower of azure petals and glimmering daylight filled the air around me, and my beautiful arrow cleft the air with tremendous speed, the carvings in its flat arrowhead producing a strange whistle as wind passed through it.

Fury had regained himself and was chasing after Verdugo, just as the arrow from my longbow met his shield. The black-clad Executioner flung his shield out in an attempted deflection of the arrow, but, instead of punching the projectile of course, it just continued through the edge of his shield unopposed, then into his fist and out through his wrist, before hammering itself into his breastplate with enough leftover force to warp the surface and knock him off his feet with a spin, though the arrow itself didn't pierce through the darkened metal. Before he could get up, Fury levelled both his swords at his neck, threatening to kill him the same way he'd killed Ismail. Verdugo froze. His eyes remained on me as I returned the bow to its hook beneath my cloak and walked over to him.

"Why?"

"Because..." Verdugo started, pushing himself up with both hands, even as blood spilled from his ruined hand and the cold steel of Fury's blades pressed on the sides of his neck. His eyes were wild like a mad beast.

"Because, I am His executioner!"

I didn't have time to react as he pulled the knife from his hip and jabbed it at me. Thankfully, Fury hadn't dropped his guard and with a tug of his blades instantly severed both of Verdugo's neck arteries. The knife aimed at my side dropped to the ground as he went limp, though he continued staring at me with a disturbing grin, even as his blood flowed from him.

I must've stared into those hateful eyes for a long time, as Fury suddenly put a hand on my shoulder, startling me out of my fixed gaze. The bright-blue glow had left his bloodstream and he'd at some point healed his grievous shoulder wound.

"He's dead."

"I know," I replied.

Fury had returned his swords to their sheaths and was rubbing the bridge of his nose, a nervous tick I guessed. "I can't believe this just happened."

"Yeah..."

"I mean, I'd heard about people killing each other over loot, but I never imagined that I'd ever experience it."

"He didn't try to kill us because of the Twinswords," I replied. "He told you 'No', because it'd stop you from picking them up and giving you an advantage when fighting him."

“You think so?”

“He planned to kill us from the start. I’m sure of it.” It would explain a lot, that was for sure. The reason why he saved Ismail and I in the beginning of the Stage was likely to make us drop our guard around him, so that he could strike us when the best opportunity presented itself.

“But he had so many chances to do it earlier,” Fury argued.

“I’m guessing he didn’t want to die needlessly. His plan was probably to find another group to infiltrate after killing us. If he’d managed to deflect my arrow, he might have been able to seriously injure or kill us both.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because he belonged to the same group that tried to kill anyone who wanted to beat the Forlorn Castle. Who knows if we’re even the first group he joined for this Stage? He might’ve killed other players before us...”

“Hmm,” Fury hummed, contemplating my words. “How do you know he’s part of the same group as the Player-Killer in the Forlorn Castle?”

“They both wore black and they both referred to someone who ‘named’ them.”

“Shit...” he cursed, realising something. “Do you remember the Guilds I told you about?”

“I do.”

“Well, there’s one of them that’s known for their black attire. They all report to someone called ‘the Mentor’, who gives them names like ‘Trash’ and ‘Doll’ in their native languages. No one knows the actual name of the guy or what he looks like, but even the pros at the Frontier are scared of him.”

“Does this Guild have a name?”

“Yeah... ‘Iniquitous Vagabond’. They’re the worst of the worst, though I had no idea they resorted to tactics like *this* to stop people from progressing.”

I didn’t know what to say. The fact that this was my second encounter with a Player-Killer already, made me dread going to the next World. I tried to clear my head of any worries, but then my gaze fell on the lifeless body of Ismail and the floating white wisp above him. I couldn’t convince myself he hadn’t been real. And even though he was not fully dead and would awaken outside the Forgotten Village, the person he’d been was gone, erased along with the memories of the life he’d lost.

“We should bury them,” I said.

Fury looked at me with some concern in his eyes, but didn’t argue. He was no doubt feeling pretty terrible about the whole situation too, though he probably just knew how to hide it better.

Digging into the Red Spider Lily field was a simple task, as the ground was porous and utterly soaked with rain and blood. Forty minutes or so later, when our hands were covered in mud and our nails full of dirt, we’d managed to dig two fairly-deep graves, one for each of our deceased teammates. Though Verdugo had tried to kill us, I felt that he deserved to be buried nonetheless.¹⁹⁹ Once we’d lowered Ismail’s body into his grave last, we shovelled mud and broken Spider Lilies on top of their bodies with our hands, and put their weapons into the ground next to them as grave markers.

¹⁹⁹ I suppose that I felt that even a murderer deserved a burial. After all, I’d buried Mírtvy, so it would be kind of hypocritical if I didn’t also bury him, regardless of the fact that burials were obviously pointless here.

Afterwards, I looked around and saw that two wisps still hovered over the bloodstains where they'd died, as well as one further away, above Lord Suzaku's headless body.

"You should take the Twinswords, then we'll split their loot."

"Okay," Fury replied, somewhat dejected. The joy he should've felt from acquiring such strong weapons was tarnished by the bloody memory now tied to them. It would probably take a while before he'd be able to look at his new swords without associating them with Verdugo's betrayal and Ismail's pointless death.

"I wonder what memory I just gave away," he contemplated.

"Hopefully it wasn't horse-riding, because then we're fucked."

He chuckled, but there was no mirth in it.

When we searched through Verdugo's loot, after Fury had equipped his new weapons, we found that he had a '*Potent Healing Potion*' and two '*Modest Healing Potions*', as well as roughly seven Ryō in coins and two-or-three-days' worth of food. We split the loot between us, with Fury receiving the Potent potion.

"How on earth did he manage to get his hands on one of *these*? They normally cost a fortune."

"They probably have a sponsor, these bastards."

"That would explain his strange weapons, I guess."

"Oh, you noticed that?" I asked. For some reason, I'd assumed that I'd been the only one to notice. I felt kind of silly for underestimating Fury so much, after all he was very knowledgeable and fought well, albeit cautiously to a fault.

"Yeah. I even asked him about it, but he just said he bought the shield and spear in the Village..."

After divvying up Verdugo's loot, we moved on to Ismail's wisp. Unlike looting Verdugo's stuff, going through Ismail's things felt wrong. He hadn't deserved to die like *that*.

We both looked up at one another after searching through the things he'd left behind.

"You've got to be kidding me," Fury said, exasperatedly.

"I have no words."

"Damn it Ismail, you idiot..."

The majority of his inventory was food and there were barely any coins, perhaps a total of twelve Shu,²⁰⁰ and there were also no leftover potions, meaning the Weak potion he'd drunk to heal his arm had been his last one...

"I don't even know how someone can manage to be so poorly prepared," I remarked, utterly confounded.

"He could've just asked for coins if he needed to buy supplies."

"He might've been too proud," I guessed. After all, he'd seemed pretty quick to project his own insecurities onto me whenever I'd asked a question.

"I could've saved him if I hadn't been so worried about the swords..." Fury said, clearly blaming himself for giving in to temptation.

"You wouldn't have had to if I'd given him my '*Modest Healing Potion*,'" I replied.

²⁰⁰ It was almost like he'd been preparing for a camping trip or something, and it wasn't unthinkable with the amount of food he'd carried in his inventory that he'd spent most of his money on it...

“Without you, he would’ve died when we fought against the Lady. In fact, he would’ve died even earlier if Verdugo hadn’t stepped in to cover for him.”

“He was totally unprepared,” I repeated.

“I thought he was pretty experienced. After all, he talked an awful lot about how skilled he was with a spear. I think even Verdugo was convinced.”

“How did you even meet him in the first place?”

“Oh...” Fury replied as he suddenly realised something. “I met Ismail and Verdugo together. I think Verdugo must’ve *carried* him through the Stages or something.”

“That would certainly explain a lot,” I replied.

“He should’ve known better... PKers often form groups with new players to gain their trust and then strike when they least expect it.”

I had no real reply, so I just fiddled with my rain-soaked hair absentmindedly, trying pointlessly to squeeze the water from it. It was a depressing thought that you had to be so on guard because of people like Verdugo. It was bad enough that the trials set forth by the Watcher tried to kill you in a thousand ways while torturing your mentally the whole time, with player-killers added into the mix, it just felt unfair. But, unfortunately, it also seemed the Watcher actively encouraged player-killing, as there seemed to be no demerits, at least as far as I was aware.

“So, what now?” I asked after we’d been standing around in silence for a while.

“We still haven’t finished the Stage, and I need to return to the *Old Crone* who gave me the quest for the Alt-Mode.”

“Okay then, let’s go,” I said, wiping my mud-caked hands on my drenched trouser legs.

We retraced our steps back to the Vermilion camp, and, while we walked back, I snacked on one of the *onigiri* that Ismail had stuffed into his inventory. The rice had a strange red hue to them, and inside the rice ball was a sour plum that caught me by surprise, but it tasted great and was a filling snack that could hold me over until I returned to the city. I felt kind of silly for forgetting to buy any rations of my own, despite accurately predicting that the final Stage would be a long one.

When we entered the camp, it was desolated, though corpses still littered the battlefield around the twisted pale tree. For a moment, it seemed as though the survivors had left the field, but then we entered into the roofless tent and found it full of tied-up Vermilion soldiers, perhaps numbering somewhere in the eighties, and who were overseen by a score of fully-clad jet-black Samurai with an insignia of a white Magnolia flower. None of them wore helmets and all of them had their hair tied back in knots. I recognised one of them immediately, the blacksmith who’d fixed my cuirass and told me about the Tsukikusa. The tailor from the marketplace who’d sold me my jacket was also there.

A few of the Samurai wore a type of armour that seemed impenetrable, similar to the Tower Guard who I’d fought in the Tournament Stage, as it was comprised of carapace-like layers that left no visible gaps, except for their exposed heads.²⁰¹ Something peculiar about many of the Samurai, was the fact that they didn’t have the blackened eyes that marked pretty much every person of these lands, Fury and I included.

One man stepped forth to greet us. He had a brutal scar from his forehead to below his left cheek, which had destroyed his eye and given him a strange smirk.

²⁰¹ They were like turtles, basically. Minus the retractable heads of course.

“I am *Genbu Reimei*²⁰², head of the Black Tortoise clan. I have been awaiting you.”

“I thought your clan was wiped out.”

“It nearly was, but we of the Genbu clan are tough and not so easily defeated, despite outward appearances. We have been waiting for this opportunity for decades, and I understand we have you to thank for this.” I wondered if they’d been watching the battle from afar, waiting to strike down the Lord and Lady, only to find the two already defeated on their behalf.

“We only did what was right,” Fury answered stoically.

“Regardless, the region owes you their gratitude,” Reimei replied.

“What do you plan to do with your prisoners?”

“They will be executed, thereby ending the cycle of hatred with them. A new dawn will cast its light upon Kakon-shi and its environs, and the denizens of these lands will know peace once more.”

“What about the red rain?” I asked.

“It will cease. Its cause has been ended by your hands.”

“You mean the war?”

“No. The cause of the red rain was not the war itself, but its main actors, the three greedy clans with their corrupt powers that disturbed the balance of Life and Death. The red rain is the remuneration of their gifts. It is the lifeblood of the God who once gifted the three clans with their powers as a reward for saving his life. We, the Black Tortoise, were given the power to undo their gifts and restore the natural order to things, but we were usurped by the twisted Tiger and its silver tongue, which drove the Dragon and Bird to strike us down. Left to their own devices, the three clans warred for no other reason than their lust for power, and, using their gifts, drove the God to spill his blood onto the earth where it poisoned everything it touched and twisted the natural order even further. Given enough time, the people of this region would have gone extinct, as the corruption made them infertile and drove them mad with bloodlust. The execution of these Vermilion soldiers will be our offering to appease the exsanguinated God, and we hope that he will bless us with pure rain and cleanse our lands of the rot that has taken hold.”

This was quite a lot to process, and, again, I had to wonder how much players who didn’t complete the ‘true ending’ actually missed out on, in terms of World lore and achieving the best solution. Granted, human sacrifices didn’t sound like what Kakon-shi and its people needed, but it was perhaps a necessity to wipe clean the slate and begin anew.

Neither of us received a reward from the one-eyed Tortoise, but considering the weapons we’d looted from the Lady and the Lord, it wasn’t actually a concern, though a few coins for our trouble would’ve been nice, though again, we’d looted plenty from the inventory of our traitorous teammate.

When we found our horse inside the Vermilion camp and rode off towards Kakon-shi beyond the rainbow forest, the sun was already making its downward journey towards the horizon, but the rain had stopped.

A little before reaching the city, a ping sounded in my ear, alerting me of the skill point I’d earned for my troubles. At first, I assumed it was for my bow, as it was the first time I’d used it, but then I

²⁰² Written as 黎明 in Japanese, meaning “Daybreak” or “Dawn”. It was a peculiar name, but I guess his parents must’ve had high hopes for him. His last name, “Genbu”, followed the trend of all the clans, and meant “Black Tortoise”.

saw that my katana also had an upgrade, which I thought was strange, considering how I'd just acquired Piercing Thrust from beating Magami.

“Hey,” I said to Fury, directly into his ear as he sat in front of me on the saddle.

“What?”

“Do you know why I've already gotten another skill point for my katana?”

“Didn't you know? The last Stage of a World always rewards a skill point, regardless of when you got your last one. Normally it takes several stages to unlock a skill, and the amount varies based on what skill it is, with the latter ones sometimes requiring all the way up to six Stages to unlock.”

“Hmm. That makes sense I guess.”

For my katana's *'Level 7'* ability, I had three choices: *'Mantis Dance'*; *'Stallion's Fury'*; and *'Monkey's Guile'*. They read: *"Temporarily boost reflexes"*; *"Temporarily boost strength"*; and *"Temporarily boost speed"*. Neither of the three abilities were weapon skills, but were all momentary boosts to my base stats, so, augmentations basically. Though all of them were clearly extremely useful, I chose Mantis Dance, because I knew my lack of reflexes was a big weakness, since I could've saved myself from a lot of near-fatal wounds by simply being able to react faster. Further, giving myself a boost of reflexes would allow me some independence from my Dance of Death, which was my biggest crutch at the moment, and I knew that sooner or later I'd reach the limits of my muscle memory, and, not to mention, it hadn't helped me at all in the two Alt-Modes I'd now experienced, and both had been close calls.

After finding the *'Bow'* category, I selected *'Longbow'* and then further selected the *'Japanese'* variant, before seeing the branching path of my bow, which was currently on *'Level 2'*, giving me the choice between *'Barrage'* and *'Snipe'*, which read, in order: *"Fire three arrows into the air in quick succession with modest accuracy, which fall down from above,"* and *"Shoot a single highly-accurate arrow to strike a target at long range. Cannot be used at close-to-medium ranges."* Both sounded like very good abilities. Before I decided, I noticed that the *'Tsukikusa Longbow'* also had a bar for *'Familiarity Level'*, which was only about five percent full, or maybe ten.²⁰³

After thinking it over for a bit, I decided to pick *'Barrage'* as it seemed the more useful of the two abilities, though it was hard to deny that a long-ranged skill like *'Snipe'* wasn't a terrific choice. It was slightly nerve-wracking every time I had to pick a new ability, as I always felt like every option had its clear advantages, and I often feared that I'd end up making a choice I wasn't happy with. As far as I knew, there weren't any ways to change your decision, which left me no other choice than to follow my gut feeling and try to choose whatever suited my current style the most.

I put the menus away as the city slums came into view, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

²⁰³ Unfortunately, whichever idiot had designed the interface had not added any helpful numbers to the level bar, perhaps in order to keep it 'clean' or 'minimalist'... Personally I just found it to be totally unhelpful.

The.Old.Crone

I awoke to the sound of voices spilling in through the window that'd been left slightly ajar. A beam of sunlight streaked across the floor, illuminating the entire room. On the table in the middle sat a tray of food, the scent of which had filled my room and dragged me from my sleep nose-first. I sat up and scratched my face with a yawn.

Two knocks on the frame of the sliding door immediately followed.

“One moment,” I called, and quickly put on my kimono through my inventory menu. “Okay, you can come in.”

Fury slid open the door partially and elbowed it the rest of the way, carrying with him his own tray of food.

“Man, this place is great,” he stated excitedly. “I can see why you like staying here.”

He placed his tray on the table, opposite from mine, then sat down in a seiza on the tatami floor.

“How are you even able to sit like that?”

“Practice,” he replied. “It hurts at first, but after doing it every day for a few weeks you get used to it.”

“I bet you're really into playing the role of a Samurai.”

“Maybe,” he replied, bashfully. “It just seems kind of natural, somehow.”

“Hmm,” I hummed sceptically.²⁰⁴

“Anyway, we should discuss what we do next.”

“I haven't agreed to rock it as a two-man team yet.”

“Well, I just think that it'd benefit us both.”

I hadn't hated the idea when he brought it up to me after we'd returned here, but I got the feeling that our individual speeds would conflict, especially since I didn't want to waste more time than I had to.

“Don't you have to speak to this Old Crone of yours?”

“I do, but she lives on the outskirts of a tiny village really far away, so I was hoping we could hash this out over breakfast, since I'll have to leave soon if I want to get there before sundown.”

“Tell me what you're thinking then. I'll be eating while you talk though...”

“Fair enough.”

For the next twenty-or-so minutes, FrozenFury talked basically non-stop, while I methodically finished one dish after the other, starting with a large piece of charred fish, then a modest bowl of rice with a varied assortment of mushrooms, followed by a small bowl of soup, afterwards a fluffy omelette, and finally some root vegetables with unique flavours and aftertastes. At the end, I finished eating before he was done talking, but I let him wrap up his pitch nonetheless.²⁰⁵

He looked at me and said, “So?” with an expectant smile.

I looked into his frost-blue eyes. “No.”

²⁰⁴ I wasn't buying it. Fury was a full-blown roleplayer, no doubt about it.

²⁰⁵ It'd be too much work to recount it all, but, rest assured, it was a well-thought-out speech that considered all the positives I'd gain by staying in a group with him, though he neglected to address the issue of our conflicting preferences in regards to how fast we'd progress.

His whole body sagged with disappointment. “Can’t you just give me a chance? Just until we beat the first Stage of the next World? At the very least, won’t you accompany me to see the Old Crone? Knowing how to trigger the Alt-Mode would be worth a lot.”

I didn’t really care about the worth of such information, though I did want to sate my own curiosity.

“Fine, I’ll accompany you to see her, and then I’ll give you a proper answer when I’ve thought it over.” *Though it’ll probably still be a ‘no’...*

Fury cheered up a bit, and then seemed to suddenly realise that he hadn’t touched his food yet, which he proceeded to devour with gluttonous swiftness, stuffing his mouth so full that he looked like a human-sized hamster that’d gone nuts.²⁰⁶

From late morning to early evening, we rode across the length of the Nijigahara forest, which I realised stretched much further than just the few kilometres that I’d seen. At some point, we took a turn down a narrow path that split from the well-travelled main road and carved its way through the forest, while still remaining entirely shaded by the canopies above, making it feel like a strange tunnel with walls made of densely-populated trees. Thankfully, the path was deserted, as it would’ve been impossible for someone coming our way to pass without having to venture off the track and into the forest, where getting lost was as easy as taking ten steps off the beaten path.

After twenty-or-so minutes of following the path, which curved back-and-forth like a snake on crack,²⁰⁷ a village situated in a clearing suddenly broke into view. Considering how secluded it was, I was surprised to see more than forty wooden houses, and the streets, if you could call them that, positively thriving with activity.

Before I could even think about going into the village, Fury led us around the outer perimeter formed by the houses and we left our horse tethered at the edge of the clearing next to a tree that was slightly bigger than the rest. We proceeded to follow a tiny trail leading out of the clearing and into the forest, which was marked only by the downtrodden moss and leaves underfoot, and required a lot of focus to follow without losing my way.

A few minutes later, a tiny hut built in a European style, oddly enough, suddenly appeared out of nowhere at the end of the trail. It might have once been a quaint, slightly under-sized place to live secluded by oneself, but now it was nothing more than a ruined home, what with its caved-in front door, smashed-up interior, and blood-stained furniture. It seemed like the hut’s former resident had been chased out, and the blood that was scattered everywhere indicated that quite a struggle had occurred, though there wasn’t enough blood to suggest it’d been fatal to anyone.

Fury looked shocked. “What...” was all he managed to get out.

Before I could ask where the Old Crone was, he seemed noticed something within, and pushed aside the tattered bits of what had once been a door. I followed behind him and then noticed it as well. At the very back of the hut was a glowing wisp hovering next to a necklace draped over the back of a gnarled, wooden chair.

“What is it?” I asked, after he’d inspected the item.

²⁰⁶ Get it? Hamster... nuts... no?

²⁰⁷ Even if it’s logistically impossible for a snake to be on crack, it felt like the most fitting description.

“It’s a necklace called ‘*Heart of a Crone*’, but it doesn’t do anything...”

“What does the text say?” I asked, wondering if it hinted at something.

“It says: *It pays to have an Old Crone owe you a favour. Who knows, it might even save your life one day.*” He scratched his head. “What the hell does that mean?”

It might even save your life... That seemed like a pretty obvious explanation of its effect.

“It might protect you from dying or something,” I said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve never heard of an item like that. Everyone knows this place doesn’t give you second lives. It’s *Hardcore Mode* all the way.” He seemed pretty adamant about that, but I wasn’t so sure.

“Are you gonna keep it?” I asked.

“Why? Do you want to buy it?”

“If you’re not planning to use it, sure.”

Fury looked me in the eyes, perhaps trying to spot if I knew something about the item that he didn’t. “I’ll sell it to you for six Ryō.”

“That’s quite a lot,” I replied.

“Well, the Old Crone said she had a reward for me if I completed her task and returned to her. Since she isn’t here and it would seem *this* is all I’m getting, then I’d like to at least be well-compensated for my effort.”

“Alright, I’ll buy it then.”

“Hey, I was just kid—”

I pulled the six Ryō from my inventory and handed him the sack. “Here.”

Fury grabbed the coin purse by its strings without arguing, and in return handed me the necklace.

‘*Heart of a Crone*’

-Accessory-

Jewellery > Pendant

“It pays to have an Old Crone owe you a favour. Who knows, it might even save your life one day.”

Equip

Discard

Weight: 0.6

Sure enough, it had no traits, unlike my ring, and was listed as a ‘*Pendant*’, weighing 0.6 kgs. I took in its appearance as it lay in the palm of my hand. It was a small, rugged, and heavy, jet-black stone shaped like a flower petal and with a crude string of twine tied around a groove carved into one end. The black stone was strangely cold to the touch, and the design of the petal immediately made me think of the Azure Dragon clan. I wondered if the Old Crone had perhaps been a former member.

I wasn’t entirely sure whether I’d just made a great deal or wasted a lot of money, but something about the specific wording of the pendant’s flavour text just screamed: “*I need it!*”

With some manner of reverent ceremony, I carefully pulled the necklace down over my head and lifted my hair so that the coarse string could rest against the skin of my neck. The pendant itself settled just above my bosom and the edge of my cuirass. The black stone radiated its coldness through the layer of my Katabira jacket, so that I could feel it on my skin beneath.

“It looks nice on you,” Fury said.

“Thanks, I guess,” I replied, though I had to agree, it did look nice, despite the low quality of the string.

“So, explain to me how you first came to meet the Crone and discover the alternate mode,” I said.

“I told you how I had a lot of time to waste, right? And how I must’ve talked to every NPC at least twice.”

“Sure, I vaguely remember something like that.”

“Well, one of them told me about an old witch who’d been chased out of Kakon-shi, and now lived on the fringe of a secluded village called *Morinaka*²⁰⁸ *Village*. It was meant to be a warning not to venture too far outside the city on my own, but instead I went looking for the village, and, through talking to a few other NPCs, I learned of its location.

“Once I knew where the village was, tracking down the Old Crone was as easy as asking the villagers about her. Though, before I got to this hut, a group of Azure guards stopped me, and I had to fight them off. I can’t really say whether they were trying stop anyone from meeting her, or if they’d just figured out that I was in cahoots with the Vermilion clan. Either way, after defeating the guards, I followed the trail leading out of the village and met the Old Crone, who said she’d been expecting me, and that she had an important task for me. She told me about the weaknesses of both the Lady and the Lord, and said that if I could defeat them both, I would receive the greatest reward she could give me. I guess she might’ve been chased out of the village not long after that...”

“Hm,” I hummed, contemplating all of this. “It sounds very different from the Alt-Mode in the Forlorn Kingdom.”

“Really? How so?” Fury seemed extremely interested in this bit of information, even though he tried to hide it.

“Well, unless I’m misremembering something, it’s only possible to initiate the Forlorn King’s alternate Stage though a long series of tasks associated with each specific Stage, and missing any of them would probably make it impossible to accomplish.”

“That does sound very different,” he agreed. “One thing bugged me too.”

“Oh?”

“Yea, there was something strange about interacting with her. Like, you know how talking to NPCs has a certain strangeness to it, screaming ‘not quite real’?”

I nodded. I’d gotten more used to it after the first World, but it still stood out to me occasionally.

“Well, there was none of that with her. She answered every question I had, or well, she avoided quite a few, but not with the blank-faced stare you get from most NPCs. I think she might’ve gotten self-aware.”

²⁰⁸ Written as 森中 in Japanese, literally meaning “inside forest” or “forest centre”. A bit too on-the-nose, as far as names go.

“Don’t be ridiculous. If these fabricated people had the ability to become self-aware, don’t you think it would happen a lot more? Besides,” I started, stealing the words of Iberius, “the Worlds have rules that both the Creators and the Created must abide by, and I’m quite certain that self-aware NPCs is not on that list.”

“Well, how do you explain it then? It was like talking to a player, and she even asked me if I’d met someone called *Andrei*.”

“You’re sure of that?” I asked. “*Andrei* is not a name that’d make sense in the context of this World, whatsoever.”

“I know. It was super weird.”

Then realisation hit me. “I think I know what she is.”

“What?” he asked eagerly.

“I’m not completely sure, but she might be this World’s Architect.”

Fury looked at me as though I’d just pulled a rabbit ears-first out of my throat and then sprouted flowers from my nostrils. “A *what?*?”

I proceeded to explain my encounter with Iberius to him, and though he didn’t seem to fully believe me, he eventually accepted my guess as slightly more possible than one of the fabricated people of this World going rogue.

Half a minute passed in silence, until I then said, “So, do you know how to get to the next World?”

“I assume we need to go back to the city to find out.”

Crap. “I was afraid you’d say that...”

“We’ll have to wait until tomorrow though. It’s already getting dark, and the chance of *Emergent Encounters* goes up a lot during night time, so we shouldn’t leave the village.”

“Alright, let’s go see if they have a tavern or something.”

We made our way back into the clearing, and spent a little over an hour scouring the Morinaka Village for a place to stay, but ultimately came up short. However, we did manage to find an abandoned and decaying building, so, in lieu of any better options, we decided to spend the night there. I planted myself with my back against the wall directly opposite the front door, and coiled my cloak around me like a blanket. I wanted to be back in my room at the luxurious inn, have a bath, and finish off the night with a hearty meal. Instead, I spent the night in discomfort, and, just before I fell asleep, I realised that I’d never seen a Safe Zone banner pop up.

The.Wandering.Forest

The floorboards creaked as someone made their way towards me, and I basically jumped awake, my sword instantly in my hand, without me really knowing how.

“Mornin’ to you too,” I heard Fury reply.

“Fucking hell, you scared the shit out of me!” I realised a bit late that the point of my blade was hovering only a finger’s breadth from his exposed neck.

“You mind?” he asked, eyes dodging towards the cold obsidian still occupying the space between us.

I sighed and scabbarded *‘Passing Breeze’*. “I hate this place,” I complained, grumpy thanks to my poor sleep, growling stomach, and stiff neck.

“Here,” Fury replied, handing me an onigiri. “I still have some of the food Ismail left behind.”

The onigiri was the best thing I’d ever tasted in my life. The rice was perfect, and the contrast between the—

Okay, it was food, and I was hungry...²⁰⁹

“Our horse is outside, and we can leave whenever you want,” Fury stated, before I even had the chance to ask.

“Let’s leave now then.”

Our return trip to Kakon-shi was faster than the trip to the secluded village, though this was mostly due to my constant urging that Fury go faster. When the city finally came into view, the sun was halfway through its journey towards the horizon and the horse was frothing at the mouth from exhaustion. Had we ridden all the way to the Azure village, it would likely have collapsed somewhere in the middle of the forest. Granted, there was nothing waiting for me in the village anymore...

We left our horses with a shabby-looking stablemaster outside the city and, as we made our way through the slums, a messenger clad in lightweight jet-black armour, with the Magnolia flower on his chestpiece, ran up to us.

“The commander wishes to see you at the temple palace. It is urgent.”

“You got it, chief,” I replied in a lazy, uninterested tone. I wasn’t in any hurry to please the new master of the city, after all, I didn’t owe him anything. Fury gave me a bit of a stink-eye, to which I responded with a pointed tongue.

“You’re making a farce of this World’s story and characters,” he pointed out.

“It must really bother you.”

“It does.”

I smiled deviously, “Imagine staying partnered up with me and having to deal with it every day.”

“I’ve already mentally prepared myself for that.”

“Oh, I’ve only gotten started.”

²⁰⁹ Though, to be fair, it did taste like it had just been made a minute before I ate it, as though the inventory system was like the ultimate save-it-for-later leftover-food storage-box, which preserved everything in some kind of time-ignorant eight-dimension wormhole. So much for realism, ey?

He laughed, “Show me what you got.”

We decided to make our way to the palace formerly home to the White Tiger, though we weren't in *that* much of a hurry, since we'd just returned from a long journey and were quite exhausted. But, despite being tired, we both sought to wrap up this World.

Fury handed me another onigiri as we neared the end of the Noble District.

“Thanks,” I replied. “So, do you know what this is about?”

“If I had to guess? I'd say it's the prelude to the next World. Perhaps some kind of thing to establish the main premise of what we'll have to deal with. Like how Captain Tabian introduced *this* World.”

“Hmm.”

As we followed the bridge across the large pond, I noticed that new flowers had been planted in the water, and rather than just one flower, there were several, even white lotuses which were symbolic of the White Tiger. To say the inclusion was strange, would be an understatement. Likewise, the garden was overflowing with life in a myriad of colours. It was impossible to imagine that anything could've grown in the two days that the Black Tortoise clan had been in charge, but I simply took it as a very overt sign of the clan's healthy influence on the region. Besides, to quote the mysterious Ginko, Time was a convoluted entity in this realm of the Watcher.

At the end of the bridge two guards stood watch. They were fully clad in heavy jet-black armour with the carapace-like layers I'd seen the Samurai wear inside the Vermilion camp two days prior. I wondered if their exposed heads were meant to be a tribute of their clan's namesake animal or if it was perhaps a way for them to appear more human than if they'd worn demon masks and helmets adorned with horns like the Vermilion and Azure Samurai. It at least seemed quite different to the White Tigers, who, I was very sure, had remained helmless as a show of fearlessness.

“Afternoon,” the guards greeted us in unison, which was peculiar. Part of my cynical mind considered it a tad bit *too* friendly, bordering on the edge of being suspiciously so. I looked to Fury for guidance, but he seemed completely unfazed by it, though I could've sworn he'd puffed himself up a bit so that his armour seemed more impressive on his somewhat-slender frame.

“Lord Genbu awaits you within,” the guard on the right informed us.

When we passed through the bridge gate, they both stomped their tall, ornate black spears in the ground three times, likely to announce our arrival, or to spring the trap that I was fairly sure lay in wait for us. But... all that awaited us beyond the wall was a patrol of two guards stopping to bow their heads before continuing along their route. We crossed the courtyard that surrounded the palace itself, and I could still recall how the white stones had been slick with the blood of its defenders. Unlike that day, the massive wooden gate was flung wide-open, and though another set of guards watched its entrance, we weren't halted when we tried to pass through.

The interior, which had been almost entirely unfurnished during the assault, was filled with furniture and colourful partitions, which created small sections for cooking food, eating said food, sleeping, storing armour and weapons, etc. The walls too were brimming with ink paintings, banners, masks, and the like. Even though I knew the temple palace was the same that'd belonged to the silver-tongued Lord Byakko, it felt like an entirely different building.

We crossed the wooden floor to the centre of the palace, where the strange room still remained, but through its open door I saw that it was no longer a private prayer room and now instead functioned as a command centre, wherein Lord Genbu was receiving messengers and directing his forces through proxies. A messenger was finishing up his report just as we came to the threshold of the open door.

“... Lastly, we have located twenty-seven civilians in a hidden village, thought to be the former residence of the Azure clan.” The announcement of their discovery made my heart skip a beat.

“Good. Instruct the men to repeat the same procedure as with the Vermilion encampment and report back to me when you are done.”

“Yes, sir!” The messenger hurried from the room.

“Tying up loose ends?” I commented sharply. Executing hostile warriors was just how wars went, but slaughtering civilians was inexcusable.

Lord Genbu looked at me with not a speck of compassion in his eyes. “Yes. Non-combatants are integral to restoring peace and mending ties between the clans. They are often the ones most sympathetic to peace talks, due to them bearing first-hand witness to the atrocities committed by their kin.”

Well, damn, these are the good guys...

“You are doing a very admirable thing,” Fury said. I could tell he was very pleased with the outcome of all of this, and perhaps it alleviated any misgivings he might’ve had about turning his back on the Vermilion clan. I still wasn’t so sure. The sight of Hayato reaching for the Lady’s dead body, while he was himself dying, still haunted me. I knew the Azure clan hadn’t been good, but they had been *my* clan, whose respect and friendship I’d gained.

“I am simply following the guidance of my late grandfather. He is the architect behind this plan of great prosperity.”

“So? Why did you call for us?” I finally asked.

Reimei fixed me with those serious eyes of his. “I have a matter of great urgency that I must implore you to undertake. A research expedition is being launched into an old, faraway part of our territory with which we have lost contact. The expedition is led by an ally of my grandfather, who personally sought my assistance, however, as I currently have no capable men to spare, and you two are the most talented warriors I know, I would greatly appreciate it if you could lend your aid to this mission in my stead. The preliminary reports say that some manner of infestation has completely eradicated dozens of villages and that the people who return from there are no longer sane, as though a sickness have turned them feral. Worst of all is that this infestation is spreading and may soon reach our borders.”

I didn’t even get a second to think before Fury enthusiastically replied, “It shall be done!” He then looked at me like an eager puppy knowing it was about to go play outside.

“I guess we’ll do it...” I followed, apprehensively. I really didn’t like the word ‘infestation’, nor the idea that I’d have to fight people who’d gone ‘feral’...

“I am pleased to hear this,” the Lord replied, his face entirely void of emotion. If this was how he looked when he was pleased, I’d hate to see what his face looked like when he was angry...

“How do we get there?”

“Outside the southern part of the city a *Goshoguruma*²¹⁰ will await you.”

Fury looked at me with the same incredulity as shone visibly on my face, but neither of us protested it. He gave me a shrug and a confused smile, which I personally interpreted as, “*Par for the course with this nonsensical realm.*”

When we’d made our final preparations and the sun was painting the clouds in auburn, amber, and pink hues, we found ourselves at the southern outskirts of the city. I realised I’d never been to this specific area, but it was nothing of great interest, just another part of the Residential District. I had unsuccessfully tried to track down Sunflower, but, after looking at the map I saw that she was within the Koike Rakuen inn, and I was quite sure I couldn’t just waltz through the front door without paying, so I hoped she’d forgive me.

A tall wooden marker, similar to those found on gravesites, was planted solidly in the ground on the side of the large road that stretched to Morinaka Village and beyond.

A large raindrop slapped against the top of my head, startling me out of my distracted gaze at the marker. Then another partially collided with my nose, before suddenly a shower hammered down upon us, sending tiny gravel particles flying around our feet, and playing a simple backdrop that easily fit the ever-present melody of the Shakuhachi flute.

Despite the overwhelming volume of the rain, the approach of thunderous hooves was distinctly audible and, moments later, a tattered, perhaps-centuries-old *Goshoguruma* drawn by a dark-grey musclebound ox of freakish proportion skidded to a halt in front of us, ploughing a fifteen-metre-long skidmark in the road behind it. I found the lack of any guiding attendants to be rather ominous, but, nevertheless, Fury and I quickly got inside the tiny box-on-wheels, which might once have been hand-painted in elaborate patterns or decorated with an Emperor’s favourite bird, but now retained none of its former glory, as all but a few parts of the paint on the walls had peeled off. The carriage had only been made to fit one person, which made it quite claustrophobic with the two of us inside, but once we figured out a proper distribution of the available space, it wasn’t the worst seating-experience possible. Although, perhaps Fury did feel slightly undignified having to sit on my lap...

Just before we closed the decaying bamboo blinds, I realised that the puddles that’d formed from the rain were translucent and not the crimson that I’d come to associate with rain in this World. I was just about to point it out to Fury, when the blinds shut and that familiar rush and feeling of freefalling pulled any available air from my lungs.

While rainbow colours swam through the box, only to be extinguished by darkness, before reappearing seconds later, Fury turned and looked at me. He grabbed hold of my hand and was just about to say something, but then—

“*Now leaving World ‘The Fields of Red’.*”

²¹⁰ Translates to “Imperial Cart/Coach”. It isn’t exactly the sort transport that’s meant for speed nor long-distance travel, as it’s drawn by an ox that has to be guided by attendants. In Medieval Japan it was the only type of animal-drawn carriage in existence, as the idea of horse-drawn wagons wasn’t introduced until after contact with the United States were established. Also, this sort of transport was normally meant for the Emperor, Empress, or important Aristocrats, so it was strange to think that we’d be riding in one, but, it made more sense than a cross-country rickshaw...

The uncomfortable-and-yet-familiar void swallowed me, my consciousness ripped from my body and drawn to this place ‘between’ Worlds. Like a rising tide, a voice built all around me. It warbled as its volume ebbed and flowed, and I could’ve sworn a melody played with every spoken word:

You have rarely betrayed expectations and this is no exception. I have watched you and you have performed well. As promised, here is your reward:

I blinked my heavy eyelids open. “Beep” said the machine to my left. It repeated itself a moment after.

My back was sore, possibly from lying in this overly-soft bed for too long. But the entirety of my body was sore though, in the way that a fever makes you ache all the way down to your bones.

I swallowed once, my throat feeling incredibly dry and my tongue adhering to the inside of my cheek like Velcro. My vision was a slurry of colours and lights at first, and my body felt as though it was floating, even though I knew I was grounded in this bed.

My vision stabilised shortly after, and I started flexing the fingers of my right hand, where silvery-white criss-cross scars marring the forearm rolled with the motion of my tendons. The mind-addling drugs in my system were making even the use of my fingers a difficult task.

I carefully swivelled my head left, to my other hand to repeat the exercise.

Oh.

Bandages and ugly stitches covered everything from below the palm of my hand to the hollow of my elbow. I tried to move the fingers, but they didn’t respond to my command.

A hand settled on my right leg, or maybe it’d been there the entire time and I just now noticed. I looked up, tracing the arm to its owner.

“...Shinohara-sensei...?” My voice was crackly and wispy. I could really use some water, I thought absently.

Shinohara looked up at me, her usually-stern expression traded-out with one of concern, but with a glimmer of hope twinkling in her eyes. Or maybe they were tears.

Behind her, through the window in the wall, snow was lazily drifting down to earth, and the sky was dark.

“You’re in a hospital,” she explained matter-of-factly. “You were lucky I found you before it was too late.”

I looked back to my left hand and the mess it’d become, realising what’d happened.

Oh.

I batted a mosquito from the air, feeling the clammy humidity coil around me like an unwanted blanket in the heat of summer. In front of me, a party of people were walking through what looked like a jungle, and I didn’t really question where I was or who they were, even though, now that I thought about it, I couldn’t really say.

Then a rush of air flooded my ears and nose, like some kind of strange wind only I could feel, and I dropped to my knees with a gasp.

“Holy shit.”

I looked around in panic. “Where the hell am I??”

My party didn’t seem to notice, but just continued trudging through the jungle.

“FURY!?” I yelled.

No response.

“Fuck.”

I opened my ‘*Friendlist*’ and saw that Fury was still on it, and, from the location available, I saw that it said: “*The Wandering Forest*”. The ‘*Show on Map*’ button showed him almost exactly on top of my own marker, though I couldn’t see him. Lastly, ‘*Group Functions*’ revealed that we were still in a group together. *This doesn’t make any sense... why can’t I see him?*

Then I remembered the reward I’d been given. I instinctively looked to my left forearm and then my right, imagining the silver scars that would’ve been there in the real world. This memory hurt more than the first, because I vividly remembered how no one but my homeroom teacher, Shinohara-sensei, had been there in the hospital. Neither my mother nor my father, nor any of my classmates for that matter, had come to see me. But Shinohara, she had been there for me when no one else was.

From that memory sprouted other ones, as if it was a lamp in the darkness that clouded my recollection of the past, casting light on things nearby. I’d gone on to study to be a teacher because of Shinohara, because I had wanted to be there for students struggling just like I had. She had been a major pillar in my life as a high school student and young adult. My major in university had been history, but apart from that, I couldn’t recall anything about my job as a teacher.

He’s saving that for later... I realised with dismay. Only two of my core memories returned to me and I already knew the pattern of the Watcher. He would hold on to the worst memories I had and return them to me when it would hurt the most.

Alongside the memory was also another Watcher Ability, which appeared in the third tab of my progression menu. It was called ‘大姫蜘蛛’²¹¹ and its description read: “*You can sense the presence and movement of anyone within a radius of thirty metres for a minute.*”

The ability was definitely strong, but now that I knew the memory sacrificed to use one of these abilities was permanently lost, I felt it didn’t matter how strong the abilities were, since I could unintentionally gimp my entire fighting style if I forgot how to wield a sword, or walk, or whatever other necessary skill the Watcher found it amusing to rob from me in exchange.

For a while I stood there, within the dense jungle, wondering why on earth my new ability had such a mundane name, but then I put two-and-two together and realised it was a twisted way of saying I was like a house spider: an unwanted pest in a home, in this case my parents’ home. I mattered as much to them as something that lived in the corner of the ceiling and ate flies.

This bastard Watcher sure doesn’t hold any punches...

As I looked up ahead, I saw that the train of people had moved quite far and, afraid of being abandoned in the jungle on my own, I ran to catch up to my party. I immediately noted how they were bringing a ridiculous amount of supplies with them, not to mention animals such as dogs, and even chickens in cages. I’d figure out how to meet up with Fury again, once I came to a city, and part of me wondered if this was actually by design, and if I was meant to be introduced to this new World on my own.

After a few minutes, the party stopped, and I moved to the front of the train of people to see what was going on. A stout man, probably in his late fifties, with a thick greying moustache, tanned skin,

²¹¹ Pronounced “Ōhimegumo”, literally meaning “Large Princess Spider” but translated as “Common House Spider”.

and clad in very European-styled buttoned-up white-and-black-striped shirt, durable woollen pants, a beige *pith* hat,²¹² and round glasses, was addressing the crowd, who slowly gathered around him. Behind him was the remains of a house that looked strangely Japanese in style, though with clear influences from other cultures too.

“Senhoras e senhores, finalmente estamos aqui,” he announced in Portuguese.²¹³ I realised this man was the leader of this exploration, and the one who’d sought assistance from Lord Genbu.

The assembled crowd cheered, and the air was suddenly filled with the pleasant melody of a guitar playing a wondrous tune that to me emanated the desire to explore the unknown and chart the depths of this jungle within which I now found myself.

“Now entering World ‘The Wandering Forest’.”

²¹² I know, very jungle explorer cliché, but it didn’t look half-bad.

²¹³ *“Ladies and Gentlemen, we are finally here.”*