

The Hamlet

The following morning, I stopped by the blacksmith to return the *‘Iron Katana’* and pick up my *‘Passing Breeze’*, which had been expertly repaired. I didn’t ask how, but I could tell the smith himself was very pleased with the results, so it must have been difficult to achieve, after all, who makes a blade out of glass?

Next, 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.

As I was heading towards the entrance of Gothershall to procure transport back to the Village, a man came running towards me with an urgent look on his face. From his chainmail armour, helmet, and tabard, I immediately recognised him as belonging to the Army.

“Traveller!” he called, forcing me to wait as he rested his palms against his knees to catch his breath.

“What is it?” I asked. “I have somewhere to be.”

“Please... it’s urgent!”

“Well, then hurry up and tell me.”

“The Captain said I should find you before you left town, since you’re the only one strong enough to save *the Lieutenant*.”¹

“Who?”

“I’ll tell you the details on the way. Come on, I’ve got a horse waiting outside the walls!”

I followed the Messenger outside of the wall, where a jittery Pinto with a terrified look in its eyes was struggling against its hitching point next to a stable.

The Messenger spent a couple minutes talking quietly to his mount, which managed to settle it down somewhat, although it still looked very frightened. I wasn’t overly keen on finding out *what* had spooked his horse, but as I climbed up behind him and we set off north of Gothershall, I instinctively knew I was about to discover exactly that...

The sun made the scenery around the town look idyllic and charming, what with its many small farms and tilled fields that covered the slopes of the rolling hills, but, as we rode by a few on our way to whatever destination my Chauffeur had in mind, I realised that they were anything but idyllic. Many were splintered and broken shells, with their interiors in a total disarray or just straight-up missing. Several old stains also told of the gruesome struggle that had taken place at most of them,

¹ He said the final word in a strange way that I hadn’t heard before: something like *lef-tenant*.

and I couldn't help but notice that nearly ever farm had a nearby gravesite with hastily-erected crosses or monuments next to several disturbed patches of soil.

“So, are you gonna tell me what this is about?”

The Messenger seemed to snap out of some train of thought, and quickly replied, “Yes, sorry, of course!

“*Lieutenant Sean* and his contingent of twenty men, of which I am part, were pursuing a group of Red Runners that had escaped justice following the raid on the Forgotten Village. We eventually came to an abandoned hamlet north of Gothershall after tracking them for a couple of days.”

It hasn't even been a couple of days since the raid... I thought to myself. It seemed fairly obvious that I'd somehow fast-tracked my way through the Stages and the game was struggling to adjust.

“Did you find them there?”

“Oh, we found them, all right.” He shuddered at the memory.² “They had been torn to shreds by arrows in a way than no human archer would be capable of doing. As we were investigating the bodies and what could have killed them, arrows suddenly flew from a ruined tower in the centre of the hamlet. In the confusion, half of our contingent was killed. The rest of us sought shelter in one of the buildings, but any attempt to escape was met with a barrage of pinpoint arrows. We were down to seven men, when the Lieutenant managed to give me a diversion to escape on our last horse.”

“So, you went to Gothershall for help. Why not go straight to your camp near the Village?”

“It would be too far, and I knew that the tournament was being held, so I hoped... I didn't realise another *one* was there too.”

“Another one? What do you mean?”

“The one who killed my friends and those Red Runners, it was a Royal Knight.”

Great...

Just as the sun was nearing its zenith, we went up and over a hill, and the Messenger exclaimed:

“There! The hamlet!”

We continued down the hill until we came to a large oak, where we dismounted. Only moments after reaching the relative safety of the thick oak, we heard an oppressive *woosh* hurl through the air and felt the powerful reverberations of something striking the tree on the other side once, twice, thrice, before halting.

“We have been spotted,” the Messenger whispered, the blood quickly draining from his already-pale face.

Suddenly, he was pulled to the ground, as the Pinto tugged fiercely at the leather reins in his hand. As he faceplanted into a hefty root of the large tree, his grip faltered and I was unable to catch the reins before the horse ran back the way we'd come. It made it about halfway up the hill, before another *woosh* sounded overhead and a ballista-sized arrow struck it directly between its shoulder-blades, pinning it to the ground with enough force to shatter its spine and bend its legs out to the sides. It was instantly dead.

“Fuck...”

² Or at least that's what I assumed he did, considering that I was sitting right behind him and couldn't really tell. Basically, I just heard his chainmail jingle weirdly on his body, but that doesn't sound quite as compelling as “shuddered at the memory”. Anyway, why am I telling you this...?

“Now entering Stage ‘Shadow over the Hamlet’.”

A haunting violin melody reframed the sunny day and green hills into a scene from a horror. As we hid behind the reassuring oak’s protection, a female choir joined the tune and, in Latin, kept repeating the phrases *“It listens”* and *“No escape”* over and over in a kind of hush, while filling the spaces between with drawn-out and warbled notes that sounded as though they were the refrain of a tragic funeral song.

I took a quick peek around the corner of our cover, and spotted at least eight decimated and caved-in houses surrounding a tower missing its top and part of its stone wall. I saw neither the Forlorn Marksman nor Lieutenant Sean and his company.

“Which house are they in?” I asked my companion, who was sitting with his back to the oak, nursing his bruised face. He had a look of doom on his face and his eyes looked distant.

“Hey...” I nudged his shoulder. “Which house are they in?”

“... I am going to die...” he mumbled. “I should not have come back...”

I sighed.

Guess it’s the hard way then...

With my left hand on my scabbard and my right on the hilt, I surged out from the tree and towards the nearest building some thirty metres away. My heart was pounding in my ear with the adrenaline that inhabited every fibre of my being. This was way more terrifying than anything I’d encounter so far, despite the fact that I couldn’t even see my opponent. Or maybe that was what made it so nerve-racking?

The *woosh* sounded again as I was just over halfway to the house, and, for some reason, I felt a tug in my body, as though I was being pulled by a string. I let this feeling drag me to the side, and a second later, an enormous arrow broke the grass next to me in a shower of dirt, close enough that the impact sent my hair and cape fluttering.

The surprise sent me into a frantic slide that left me short of the relative protection of the house’s flimsy walls, so I panickingly crawled on my hands and knees, reaching the building’s shadow, just as another arrow slammed against the other side, poking its fist-sized tip through before stopping.

What I was leaning against was honestly less of a building, and more like a collection of firewood stacked to one side, following what I could only assume was some freak storm that’d uprooted most of its foundations and shattered its roof and east-facing wall. Not surprisingly, the east was directly where the tower stood, but powerful as his shots might be, I doubted the unseen Marksman was capable of reducing a house to rubble in such a way.

Before another pinpoint arrow could seek me out, I ran around the corner of the ramshackle house and down the east-going street, where I dove headfirst into the alley between two houses on my left, just when another arrow tore through the loosely-packed street stones.

I scanned the house behind, before peeking through a wide gap in the wall of the one in front of me, but neither held the Lieutenant and his crew. From what I had picked up so far, I placed the Marksman shot interval at about every twelve seconds, at least when he had a mark on my position. So I waited:

Nine, ten, eleven—

Woosh came the arrow, slamming into the roof directly above my head at a steep angle that sent the roof tiles and top-wall crashing down on me. I shot out from the alley before it could hit me and

went further down the street. The tower lay about five houses further down, but for the moment I was mainly focused on finding the Lieutenant.

Just before the next twelve seconds were up, I went right, finding cover in an alleyway on the opposite side of the street from before. The arrow this time had an even steeper angle and managed to find the gap between the rooftops of the two houses in-between which I stood. As it descended, it made less of a *woosh* and sounded more like a bomb dropped from a plane. I had more time to get out of the way than before, but it still nearly caught me, snagging on my cape and yanking me back as it lodged itself into the ground with a heavy *thump* that made my ears ring.

Maybe wearing a cape isn't such a great idea... I considered, as I spent the next ten seconds tearing myself free. Fortunately, the cape was miraculously unscathed; unfortunately, the next arrow sounded far above me.

I ran out of the alley as it shattered the rooftop of one of the houses and scattered street stones where I'd stood just a moment before.

"Over here!" I heard someone call from my left as I was nearing the tower.

I followed the sound of the voice and leapt into a mostly-intact house that stood two houses from the tower and its rapidly-diminishing shadow. Within the house, which retained all four walls and only had a handful of holes in its ceiling and floor, I laid eyes on a group of five soldiers, clad in their chainmail and tabards, though all seemed to have discarded their helmets and only two still carried their weapons. One was injured in his leg, from where, presumably, one of the ballista-sized arrows had bit a chunk of his thigh, though missing any vital spots and just leaving a nasty, albeit relatively safe³, fist-sized gouge.

That disturbing dropped-from-a-bomber-type-of-*woosh* sounded again, as an arrow slammed against the roof with enough force to shake loose every last bit of dust trapped in the rafters of the house.

"I told you to leave her!" one of the soldiers grumbled in a whisper, as dust particulates rained down around us. Each of the men had a harrowed and starved look on their face, not to mention several-litres-worth of blood on their clothes and a healthy smearing of dirt and dust.

"I will remind you, *Matthew*, that I am still your superior," whispered the one I presumed to be Lieutenant Sean. He had light-brown hair and hazel-brown eyes, as well as tan, freckled skin. He was handsome in that homegrown-sort-of-way. However, he lacked the aura of authority that Tabian embodied, mostly owing to the look in his eyes that seemed as though he questioned his own actions.

"How did you find us, Stranger," he asked me, as another *thump* against the roof shook loose the handful of dust motes that'd stubbornly clung to the rafters the first time.

"We don't have time for this!" grumbled Matthew. "Another few arrows and this house will cave in too."

"He's right," I concurred. "Tell me your plan quickly so I can help you."

Sean was about to speak, when Matthew cut him off, "This fool wants us to fight that Forlorn up there! As if the few of us would be capable of such a feat!"

"Matthew..." Sean warned, but he wasn't having it.

³ Granted, if this was a true-to-form medieval setting, all manner of afflictions might take up hold in his exposed flesh. Heck, you didn't even need to be cut very deep to die of something a few days later. Really brings to mind the wonder that is antibiotics.

“I knew following you would get me killed,” he said, “So I might as well go out on my own terms.”

Sean tried to grab him, but was too slow, as Matthew ran out the door and back the way I’d come.

“Over here you piece of shit!” we heard him yell a couple moments later.

There followed a crash of wood shortly after and we thought him dead, but then he piped up again, this time from further away:

“Try again!”

“We shouldn’t waste the opportunity he’s granted us,” I advised.

“You speak the truth,” Sean conceded. “If we make it out of here alive, I’ll have to thank him, then punish him for his disobedience.” He then looked to his men and nodded once. They all returned his gesture, but then he whispered, “*John*, you stay here. If I signal you, you need to make a lot of noise.”

John, the wounded of the three, looked dismayed for a moment, but probably realised he wouldn’t be of much use anyway, unless he wanted to be target fodder for the Marksman.

As mentioned, only two men carried weapons: Sean had a hand-and-a-half sword and a buckler shield; and the other just had a shortsword. The last one quickly picked up the broken leg of a chair and then we all moved from the house towards the tower. In the distance, Matthew was still screaming his head off, miraculously surviving three arrows thus far.

While running towards the tower, we passed by the sight of what had led the soldiers here: the Red Runners. Their bodies were torn apart by the large projectiles, but a few also had strange gouges in them that were unexplainable. It seemed they had attempted the same thing we were about to try, but that realisation didn’t really hit me until I heard rumbling from the top of the tower, followed by a shadow leaping from its broken wall. As it descended towards the ground, a bolt of darkness shot out from its hand, lancing through the shoulder of the guy with the shortsword, who immediately fell dead to the ground. The soldier with the chair leg club quickly retrieved the sword from his comrade’s dead hand, just as the figure landed on the street before its tower.

Like the Forlorn Intruder in the tournament, the Marksman wore a smattering of rusted and damaged Royal Knight armour, however, he was lacking the top part of his helm and his face was covered in a thick shadow, likely owing to some prior damage he’d suffered. His right arm was licked by tendrils of darkness and over his shoulder he carried a ballista that’d been torn from its mounting point and secured to him using the unnatural darkness. Yes... a fucking ballista!

A ball of shadow started forming in his left hand as he raised it towards us.

“Watch out!” I yelled, and the two soldiers leapt aside, as it tore through the air and eventually fizzled out after travelling for five metres or so.

I secured my grip on my scabbard and blade and surged towards him, while his focus remained on the soldiers, but as soon as my boots struck the ground, his body shifted towards me, and he fired the ballista bolt that was loaded into his shoulder-mounted weapon, using his right hand to deftly aim it precisely where I was going to be.

In a move that I have no recollection of consciously activating, I sent my blade from its scabbard at a forty-five-degree angle, somehow catching the head of the bolt with my edge and deflecting its course off to my left where it tore through a building.

Before the Marksman could lift his left hand again, I moved forward with the momentum and drove my blade down through his hand, splitting it between the index and middle finger, while continuing forward and dragging my blade onward through his arm, spilling his vile-smelling blood onto the earth and stones underfoot. I tore my blade free just as I was about to pass him and then spun around and carved a deep cut into his left flank. A moment later, the Lieutenant and the remaining soldier buried their own weapons into the Forlorn, stabbing him over and over.

With a flourish and a backwards hop, I returned my blade to its scabbard and jumped forward while simultaneously releasing a Quick Draw that bit into the Marksman's neck, nearly cutting all the way through his chainmail and flesh. As his head lolled backwards, it took his entire body with him, crashing armour and all, with the ballista on top caving in his chestpiece as the darkness that held it faltered and its weight came to bear upon him.

I wiped the foul blood from my blade using the Marksman's faded royal-blue tabard, then waited for the little wisp to appear.

And I waited.

And waited.

But after staring at the corpse and its steadily-growing pond of purple-ish rotten blood for over a minute, no wisp appeared. I felt pretty cheated.

"We did it..." the Lieutenant announced, looking at the corpse in disbelief. "We have to alert Gothershall so we can get rid of this body before it reanimates, but first, I need to find Matthew. I owe that kid a thrashing."

I looked at the two soldiers as they headed back up the street.

No reward? You're fucking kidding me...

After a long walk back to Gothershall, and indeed no reward⁴, I found a carriage heading through the Forgotten Village, and 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.

⁴ Although both Matthew and the Messenger had survived, not that their lives meant anything to me. I would have preferred a weapon or maybe some armour to be honest...