DGM – 4000

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**The Present – Act 1**

A brisk dreary fall evening cascades through the mountainous region of the American Midwest onto a small boarder town built for an age long forgotten. Here lies a quiet forest just outside the qualms of modern society. Within its winding curling embrace, there lives a rickety well-forgotten bridge waiting for its companion to return.

Its companion is an old gentleman shrewd from his many years working in an iron factory. His head is wrinkled with the many waves of time that have flown over him. Adorning his body is a rugged, well-worn pair of denim overalls fastening his favorite baseball jersey to his speckled bleached skin. Namely, what attracted this bridge to his companion the most was his callused dry hands that often graced its hand rails, along with his heavy lumbering boots that made his presence clear.

However, it has been quite some time since we last heard from the man. His last visit was over 12 years ago. Back then he used to visit quite often giving the bridge a light sanding or a couple of spare nails. Although his final visit was quite peculiar. This time the man came empty-handed.

“It is always a wonderful day out in the fall around this time.” The man said. “I wonder how my favorite bridge is doing today.”

As he walked his usual route, he came upon the single bridge perched above a ten-foot drop overlooking a roaring river. It had become a tradition at this point for the man to stop and admire the bridge for a time. First, he would admire its subtle expanse in the cold blue overcast light. Next, he would inspect its many rivets and nails ensuring that everything had a tight fit. Finally, after a thorough inspection, he leaned over the side of the bridge to absorb the soothing sounds of the churning splashing river.

As he opened his eyes and looked down into the depths of the river, he noticed something peculiar. There he saw a small crimson bell off the shore of the river, glimmering in the dimly lit ramparts of the forest. The man stared at the bell for a moment and spoke to himself as if someone were listening.

“Who could have left litter in a fine place like this?”

Upset the man crossed the bridge and slowly made his way down the sharp jagged incline that lines the river bank. One by one he took step after step slowly descending the rocks avoiding their razor-sharp edges. After many excruciating minutes of maneuvering down the slippery slopes, the man finally reached the bell.

“It’s quite a shame too that someone would throw this out. It is quite a lovely bell.”

Leaning down the man picked up the bell in one hand and admired its glossy chrome finish. However, at that moment the sky turned black. A massive swirl of chilling air created a column of dense ethereal purple smoke in front of the man over the now frozen river. Startled, the man fell onto his back sheering his arm up against a rock ripping his shirt to shreds. In a panic the man grasped his arm and began bellowing out into the distance his cries of pain. Reaching its pinnacle and thoroughly filling the air the smoke dissipated to reveal a large figure cloaked in an elegant black and purple dress. Stunned the man looked up in horror as the figure spoke.

“I see you have found my little red bell.”

Soaked in an emanating fog, the figure smiled with a burning red fire. It looked down at the man as he tried to run away. Looking for any way out, the man exasperatedly clutched at the wet rock failing to find any proper hold.

“The devil has come to take my soul!!!” The man shouted.

“Devil? No… I am but a conjuror.” The figure paused as it reviewed the mans failed attempts to climb the slope. After a moment of thought, the figure raised one finger to its mouth and spoke. “Although… I’d be more than happy to be your devil if that is what you wish. I simply couldn’t let you leave empty handed for returning my bell.”

With a fluid motion of its hands, the figure waved its arms and enveloped the man in a cloud of black smoke. Screaming the man writhed as the smoke consumed his being. Finally, the figure gave the man one last look with a smirk on its face.

“If you really don’t want my present then you’ll have to retrieve my bell once more. I’ve hidden it within your final destination if you have the gall to refuse my generous work. Good luck young man. You will need it where you are going. HAHAHA!!!”

A bright flash of light enveloped the forest returning it to its prior state. Water continued to flow, birds continued their song, and the bridge maintained its solidarity. Still screaming and grasping his arm the man awoke to find no blood and no figure. In a panic, the man stood up to get his bearings surveying his surroundings. As he soon came to realize he indeed was not in the same world anymore.

**Act - 2A**

Confused the man darted around taking in his surroundings. He was in a forest not unlike the one he travels through every day. A deep blue light fell through the bristles of the trees onto the debris coved floor. What just happened to him didn’t seem real. Pausing for a moment the man thought to himself. “Have I just been transported to another part of the forest?” By instinct the man grasped his arm again to find that his shirt was still very much ripped.

“Did that really just happen?” he asked himself.

A sharp pain seared through his head pulsing from end to end. Grasping at his temple he fell to his knees onto the soft blanket of leaves that lined the forest floor. Wrenching at his pain the man writhed as images of the sorcerer flashed through his mind. Standing, the man could feel horrible remnants of the pain still stricken through his mind as the pulsing began to slow. Feeling inebriated, the man bobbed back and forth as tried to get his footing.

“That must have been real… I’ve never felt a pain like that before…And these trees do look similar but they’re very different. Ahhhh… My head still hurts. Whoever that sorcerer lady was I have to find her and that crimson bell. I can’t stick around here and find out what kind of things she considers to be devilish.”

“HHHEEEeeeyyyy…”

A woman’s voice could be heard grazing the open air. Turning around the man tried to find where it was coming from. Only to find the empty cold forest greeting him. Frightened the man began to run. “Where the heck am I and who’s screaming at me!”. Finding an opening to the forest along the path he began to slow down.

“Hey!”

Another voice cried out. Sounding very similar to the first cry the man jumped as a hand grabbed his shoulder from behind.

“You seem lost friend.”

Turning to face the shrill noise that greeted him the man faced a peculiar sight. It was a man dressed in puffy clothing draped with yellow bands of cloth. Putting on a broken smile this peculiar man lifted his hand and spoke.

“I’m Jonsho I sell all kinds of trinkets, carvings, and anything else you can think of!”

Snapping his head, Jonsho let go of the man. Thoroughly perplexed the man starred at Jonsho for a moment as he began to continue his pitch.

“Sir, I can tell you are quite the traveler yourself what with that foreign apparel you wear. You must be looking for something quite unique coming all this way. So what’s your poison? Do you need something to give the missus? Do you seek artifacts? Or are you a modest kind of man who might like some traveling supplies like a candle or a bell?”

Leering toward Jonsho and grabbing his shoulders the man exasperatedly began to spill his words in a type of slur.

“B…Bells! Wha…What kind of bells do you have!”

With a glimmer in his eye, Jonsho jumped back and began rummaging through his large leather bags bulging from all manner of strange items.

“Oh, I have many bells, gold, silver, small, large you name it and I’m sure I have it! What might you be looking for? My biggest sellers are ones that ward off creatures and beasts.” the salesman cheerfully answered, hopeful to make a sale.

“Would you happen to have a red crimson bell? One just about the size of my palm.” the man asked. The salesman stiffened up and turned back towards the man.

“A crimson bell?” the salesman asked, his once cheerful voice turned dark and broody. “That’s a bell that only the cursed are looking for. I cannot do business with you. Although… I pity what kind of position you might be in. If you leave me alone I can offer you this.” The salesman turned back toward his cart and reached into a cubby along the side. He pulled out a rolled-up piece of parchment fastened with a worn velvet ribbon and threw it at the man.

“Here is a map, I won’t need it anymore, I am never coming back to this cursed region again. You like all the other poor depraved souls that live here are more than welcome to pray to that sorcerer on the mountain. Just leave me out of it!” The salesman went back to his cart and loaded up all the bags of assorted items and started to push it down the road into the forest. Puzzled, the man unrolled the map and looked at its scribbled drawings, trying to decipher where he should go next. As the man began to make his way toward the city in the distance a woman was also trying to come to terms with her new reality as well.

The last of the smoke curled around her feet as the sun started to shine through the trees once again. The woman was in a strange place very different from where she was before, along a road similar to where the beggar once stood.

Looking around she could see a multitude of strange trees with leaves that curled and rolled up as she got closer to inspect them. All around her, menacing chirps and howls sounded off as she slowly made her way along the road.

‘I shouldn’t have helped him! Helping beggars never turns out well,’ she thought to herself. The woman turned and started to walk toward an opening that lead to a city, but the thought kept nagging at her, she must find that bell. As she thought more and more about the bell and the interaction she had with the beggar a sharp searing pain came over her head pulsing back and forth forcing her to the ground. ‘Why!’ She thought ‘Why is this happening to me!’ As she writhed on the floor the image of the interaction played out like a movie in her head.

The beggar had called her over and asked for money, as she was looking through her bag a small sound came from the ground as a little red bell hit the dirt. She reached down to pick it up, and as she went to hand it back to the beggar his face had turned into another, his smile looked as if it were on fire. Smoke filled the air and a strange cloaked figure stood before her laughing as she became enveloped with smoke.

‘I should have never picked up that bell’ she thought to herself. ‘There’s not much choice I have now though.’ After the images stopped she stood up confidently and pressed toward the city being rudely passed up by a troubled man dressed in yellow. Searching for answers about the bell she pressed on.

The man walked along the road, following the map that had been given to him by Jonsho. This world was different than his own, it seemed like everyone he met knew about this conjurer, and each one of them gave him conflicting clues about where to find this little red bell.

It had been weeks following clues from deranged individuals and the jagged lines that filled the map. For the man, the journey had not been an easy one. Every night he would experience the same torturous pain followed by images of the sorcerer. After many long days of travel and long nights of pain he found himself at the base of a trail that led up the mountain. This was where the map stopped. He only had clues left, and they weren’t very specific either. All he could go on was the scrambled clues he gathered and the ominous mention of the mountain he gained from Jonsho.

Suddenly mist started to curl around his feet and gathered a couple of yards in front of him on the trail. The mist formed into a pillar, out of which the conjurer stepped.

With a chuckle the sorcerer spoke “You have made it this far? Most people give up and live in that wretched city praying to me, begging for me to relieve them of their pain.” boomed the voice of the conjurer that stood before him.” Tell you what, I’ll make the search for my bell even more interesting and fun for you. I’m going to destroy this mountain a few days from now. You see I have gotten quite bored with the fact that no one has shown up here in the last 40 years. So, I’ve decided to move onto other fun things. If you find the bell, I will let you return home, but if not, you’ll be buried beneath thousands of tons of earth. Doesn’t that sound like fun?”

**ACT - 2B**

Cackling the conjuror disappeared back into the thick layer of dark smoke. Distraught the man fell to his knees as a tear fell down his cheek. Looking up at the mountain the man thought to himself ‘Where am I going to find a tiny bell on this huge mountain…’ Becoming angry the man pounded the ground with his fist.

“What cruel game is this! Ever since I arrived I have been getting nonstop headaches and now I have only days to search a huge mountain to find a small red bell!”

Furious, the man stood up and began marching up the mountain head.

“That blasted bell must be at the top of this stupid mountain. It has to be! I can’t think of a crueler thing to do, it must be where she hid it!”

Initially, making his ascent up the mountain was rather easy. However, the path became steeper and rockier as he made his way up the trail. As he climbed further up he noticed small things that were unnatural. Part of the path would be broken off and he would have to dangerously dangle over the edge. Other parts of the trail had dips filled with sharp rocks placed at ankle height that would jump out without warning. Exhausted from the constant barrage of traps the man sat down and looked at the sky. It was now past sunset and was getting very dark. Peering up at the murky red moon he decided he was going to quit for the night. After finding an overhang he decided to get some sleep. Here he could at least avoid any rain that might roll in.

Covered in dirt and scratches the man curled up into a ball as he watched the moon rise into the sky. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out the last of the food he was able to gather in town. A small canvas bag filled with nuts emerged from his frayed denim overalls. Eating the last of the nuts he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Gradually opening his crusty eyes, he looked out into the horizon. Short on breath from the altitude he struggled to focus his vision. After rubbing the dirt and grime from his face he marveled as a huge thunderstorm crashed over his head. Huge black billowing clouds danced with speckles of lighting as the man got to his feet. In shock he stepped out into the rain stunned at the sudden arrival of the storm. Looking around in the thunderous rain he spotted the top of the mountain. Petrified the man spoke to himself attempting to calm his nerves.

“Well, I should at least be able to reach the peak in the next couple hours at least. That’ll leave me a little time to look around if I don’t find the bell up there.”

A roar of thunder broke the man’s concentration. Looking around him he couldn’t find where the sound was coming from. In that moment the man could hear a faint noise approaching him. It was the sound of footsteps. Quickly the footsteps got closer and closer as they began to hunt the man down trailed by something louder and more substantial. He turned around to see a woman running toward him in a sprint. The path behind her was collapsing.

“Run!” The woman screamed.

Without overthinking the situation, he turned to face the trail once more and belted out into the fastest sprint he could muster. It wasn’t easy to navigate up the trail. Sharp rocks littered the path while others fell from above. Mindlessly he ran scratching up his legs in the process as he hobbled up the path.

The woman desperately trying to escape the rampage of rocks eventually caught up to the man and ran past him. Watching her run past him made the man lapse as he looked behind himself to find the crumbling path inch closer and closer to his feet. Terrified the man screamed as he strained every last muscle in his body in an effort to go faster.

However, his troubles weren’t over yet. Peering further up the path he could see a sizeable gap in the trail. With no other options he had to make the jump. Reaching the gap first, the woman fluidly bounded over the gap adjusting her gait as she made a hard landing. After she got her bearings the gap began to break apart even further leaving the man to make his leap. Huffing as if his lungs were filled with smoke the man desperately launched himself over the gap slamming into the ledge grabbing onto whatever he could find.

“Help!” He screamed.

Hearing his cry, the woman paused and turned around. After a short hesitation she began running up to the ledge and grabbed his hand with both arms. Yanking him up onto the cliff edge the man and woman stopped as they gasped for air. Turning around the two noticed that the trail had stopped its rampage. Shocked and relieved the woman fell to the floor rolling onto her back to catch her breath.

“Th…tha…thank..you…” The man panted in gratitude.

“Don’t thank me too much. I thought for a moment that you were with the sorcerer, so I considered letting you fall.” The woman exclaimed. She continued to struggle to catch her breath as the man replied.

“With that crazy evil woman?! Heck if I had the chance I’d throw her off this mountain right now! Putting me through all the stuff she has, making me find some silly red bell!”

“Red bell?... So, she has you trying to find one too then huh?”

The man immediately sat up and widened his eyes. He exclaimed, “Yes! That’s why I am here. I am searching for it too!”

After they caught their breath the man and the woman then began to exchange stories of how they ended up so far away from home. All the while the woman tended to the man’s shredded ankles. Lifting him up the woman began to walk with the man slowly up the mountain as he hobbled from all the pain.

Finally, after an excruciating walk on a broken foot the man and woman came upon the peak of the mountain. Covered in a light blanket of snow an eerie cave entrance could be found gapping open the side of the cliff’s edge. A loud hollowing tone could be heard whistling through the entrance into the black looming cave. Stepping cautiously into its hearth, the two slowly made their way through the dim damp cave inching along the ice-covered floor.

“What’s that?” The man grasped, his head looking into the distance to see a small wooden box with elaborate carvings perched upon a pedestal of ice.

Suddenly, the ceiling of the cave began to collapse in. Very quickly the cave filled with rubble and debris. Trapped between two piles of rock the man and woman sat as they couldn’t believe how close they had gotten to the bell.

A mist began to form, and the conjurer appeared before the two devastated travelers. In a chuckle, she said, “Ho ho! The both of you have done exceptionally well to make it all the way to the bell! But I can’t have you just get the bell so easily. I have been doing this for 40 years and no one has dared climb this mountain. I want to see you two really work for it! No one has had the gall to challenge me and my gift like the two of you. I worked hard to get you here and it takes a lot of energy to give you headaches every night. Now then, if your truly determined to return my gift then go right ahead! But keep in mind this mountain will soon collapse and you’ll be buried together forever! Also, I forgot to mention, there is only one bell in that box. So only one of you can leave here alive! HAHAHA!” Cackling the conjurer disappeared back into her cloud of smoke.

**ACT - 3**

In a panic the woman stood and began to move the debris, rock after rock was pulled from the pile as she threw them aside. Taking a deep breath, the man sat and watched the woman as she frantically moved the rocks.

“I don’t even know your name you know.”

She stopped and turned to face him.

“What? Why would you need to know that? We have to get out of here!” she responded.

“Well I figured since I’m about to die I might as well know.” Scratching his face and burying his head into his chest the man took another deep breath.

Pausing the woman dropped a rock and sat down in the rubble.

“It’s Sharla… But why do you…”

Raising his hand, the man spoke again with a tear in his eye.

“I know I told you about how I got here right? About the bridge and the bell? I didn’t tell you how I really got here though. The real reason I’m here is because I couldn’t let go of the past… When I was a boy I visited the forest on my own. I was upset at my mother for taking away my toys from me, so I rebelled and went out into the forest. There I saw a broken destroyed bridge with a little girl crying over its edge. I thought that she looked kind of cute, so I tried to get closer to her and talk. But then she ran away from me screaming and crying. I never forgot the moment. So, each day since I visited the bridge to try and find the girl again. I was so desperate to meet her again that I even got a little attached to the bridge, personifying it as if it were that little girl. Slowly but surely, I fixed the bridge up. I thought by fixing the bridge I could fix whatever made that little girl cry. That’s why I picked up the bell to begin with. I thought someone had littered from it and it made me upset…”

Welling up with tears the woman turned around and began slowly removing the rocks. One by one her tears fell as the rocks began to move. Eventually she was able to create a hole at the top of the pile from which the two could climb out. Realizing the bell was now within grasp the two sat silently for a moment.

“You know just about every year I take flowers to a bridge out in the forest. They don’t last long as the wind blows them into the river. Although I can’t help it. It was that bridge where my parents first met and where their ashes were spread…” Sharla said with a soft voice.

“I’m sorry…” he replied.

“Well, at least I can die knowing that I was able to get away from that bridge and help someone in a difficult situation. Even if it wasn’t that little girl…”

Getting to his feet the man hoisted the woman up onto his shoulders and pushed her though the hole in the rubble.

“My name is Luis by the way… When you get back do you mind etching my name into the bridge? I figure I won’t get the chance myself.” Luis said in a hoarse voice.

“I will!... And I’ll bring some extra flowers too!” Sharla replied choking on her words as tears continued to fall from her face.

Smoke quickly filled the cavern, and the conjurer appeared. “So, he let you live didn’t he.” Chuckling the sorcerer flew to the box and brought it over to Sharla.

“Go ahead take the bell then.”

Looking over its glimmering sheen Sharla eyed its splendor as she began to reach for the bell. Hovering over the velvet lined box she stopped. Retracting her hand she stood there quietly refusing to take the bell.

“I can’t.” Sharla said.

Breaming with a large fiery smile the sorcerer reeled back and began laughing.

“HAHAHA!!! And why is that little girl? Did you finally decide that my gift was worth keeping?!”

Clenching her fist Sharla stood in silence as the sorcerer continued to laugh. Looking up at the sorcerer Sharla spoke.

“No, it’s because I found a way for us both to leave!”

Stopping mid laugh the sorcerer looked puzzled at Sharla. As she leaned in to get a better look at her face Sharla grabbed the box and slammed it shut. Climbing up and over the rocks, she fell into the section of cave that Luis was in, breaking her arm in the process.

“Quickly! Grab the bell at the same time I do!” Sharla shouted.

Stunned Luis grabbed the box and opened it to reveal the bell. He held Sharla’s hand as the as the bell fell between both of their clasped hands. Holding on tightly the bell sounded as the two were enveloped in a white smoke.

“NOOOOOOOOO!!!” The sorcerer screamed as she pushed away the rubble.

Bit by bit the cave began to collapse pinning the sorcerer underneath a boulder. Echoing out into the distance the sorcerer could be heard cursing the couple as the last bit of white smoke began to fade. In that instance the mountain collapsed entirely, flooding the valley with stone and rubble.

When they awoke, both were lying on the bridge. They looked at each other as they noticed that their wounds were healed. Happily, the two stood up and began jumping for joy over the expanse of the bridge. Looking over at Luis Sharla jumped forward and hugged him. Stepping back, she offered her hand.

“I was the little girl you met on the bridge. This bridge is the same bridge that my parents met on. I can imagine the day you saw me was the day after their ashes were spread. I was so upset after the ceremony that I ran away and came to the bridge to morn.” Sharla now smiling with tears running down her face looked into Luis’s eyes.

“So, I really did get to help the girl after all… Although I don’t think I have been able to stop you from crying this whole time.” Laughing with a tear rolling down his face the two hugged each other as the sun began to set. An orange hue began to envelope the air as the two walked off into town leaving the bridge to its solitude once more.

Thereafter, the following year, Sharla and Luis returned to the bridge with flowers and tools to repair and decorate its expanse. Bringing along a picnic they recounted the horrifying events surrounding the defeat of the sorcerer and how they solved all the obstacles that befell them; together. With a hearty goodbye the two etched their names into the bridge as they walked off. After their excursion to the bridge, the two packed all their belongings as they set out back toward the city holding hands excited for their ceremony the following week. However, on their way back Luis noticed a little azure bell laying on the side of the road. Perplexed he bent down and picked it up.

“Who could have left this here?”